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## Chapter 2

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# The unconscious at work in groups and teams

Contributions from the work of Wilfred Bion

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Our experiences of being and working in groups are often powerful and overwhelming. We experience the tension between the wish to join together and the wish to be separate; between the need for togetherness and belonging and the need for an independent identity. Many of the puzzling phenomena of group life stem from this, and it is often difficult to recognize the more frequent reality of mutual interdependence. No man is an island, and yet we wish to believe we are independent of forces of which we may not be conscious, either from outside ourselves or from within. At times we are aware of these pulls within ourselves; at other times they overwhelm us and become the source of irrational group behaviour. While most obvious in crowds and large meetings, these same forces also influence smaller groups, such as teams and committees. This chapter will focus on groups at work, and how they are affected by unconscious processes.

The psychoanalytic study of unconscious processes in groups begins with Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921). Essentially, Freud argued that the members of a group, particularly large groups such as crowds at political rallies, follow their leader because he or she personifies certain ideals of their own. The leader shows the group how to clarify and act on its goals. At the same time, the group members may project their own capacities for thinking, decision-making and taking authority on to the person of the leader and thereby become disabled. Rather than using their personal authority in the role of follower, the members of a group can become pathologically dependent, easily swayed one way or another by their idealization of the leader. Criticism and challenge of the leader, which are an essential part of healthy group life, become impossible. (This is further discussed in Chapter 4.)

### **WILFRED BION AND BASIC ASSUMPTIONS IN GROUPS**

A major contributor to our understanding of unconscious processes in groups was the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, who made a detailed study of the processes in small groups in the army during World War II, and later at the Tavistock Clinic. On the basis of these, he developed a framework for analysing some of the more irrational features of unconscious group life. His later work on psychosis,

thinking and mental development (Bion 1967, 1977) has also contributed much to our understanding of groups and organizational processes and is referred to elsewhere in this book (see Chapters 1, 7, 12 and 18). Bion himself wrote little further on groups as such, preferring to concentrate on the internal world of the individual. In fact, as he himself argues, the group and the psychoanalytic pair of psychoanalyst and analysand actually provide two different 'vertices' on human mental life and behaviour. Each is distinct but not mutually incompatible, just as, for example, physics and chemistry provide distinct levels of understanding of the material world. Indeed, the whole matter of the relationship between the individual and the group is a central theme throughout both Bion's work and his life (Armstrong 1992 and Menzies Lyth 1983 – for a further understanding of Bion's work see Anderson 1992; Meltzer 1978; and Symington 1986; Chapters 26 and 27). This chapter concentrates solely on some of the implications for understanding groups and teams based on the ideas contained in Bion's *Experiences in Groups* (1961).

Bion distinguished two main tendencies in the life of a group: the tendency towards work on the primary task (see Chapter 3) or *work-group mentality*, and a second, often unconscious, tendency to avoid work on the primary task, which he termed *basic assumption mentality*. These opposing tendencies can be thought of as the wish to face and work *with* reality, and the wish to evade it when it is painful or causes psychological conflict within or between group members.

The staff of a day centre spent a great deal of time arguing about whether or not the clients should have access to an electric kettle to make drinks with. Some were strongly of the opinion that this was too dangerous, while others were equally adamant that the centre should provide as normal an environment as possible. While there was a real policy issue, the argument was also an expression of the difficulty the staff were having with their angry and violent feelings towards their clients, who were behaving in ways that frustrated the staff's wish that they 'get better'. The fear of the clients' scalding themselves also contained a less conscious and unspoken wish to punish them. However, it was too painful for the staff to face these feelings. Instead, each time the ostensible problem was near to solution, some new objection would be raised, with the result that the group was in danger of spending the whole of its weekly team meeting on the matter of the kettle. An interpretation of this problem by the consultant enabled a deeper discussion of the ambivalent feelings, and a return to the group's work task: the exploration of working relations and practices in the centre.

In work-group mentality, members are intent on carrying out a specifiable task and want to assess their effectiveness in doing it. By contrast, in basic assumption mentality, the group's behaviour is directed at attempting to meet the unconscious needs of its members by reducing anxiety and internal conflicts.

## THE THREE BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

How groups do this varies. According to Bion, much of the irrational and apparently chaotic behaviour we see in groups can be viewed as springing from *basic assumptions* common to all their members. He distinguished three basic assumptions, each giving rise to a particular complex of feelings, thoughts and behaviour: *basic assumption dependency*, *basic assumption fight-flight* and *basic assumption pairing*.

### Basic assumption dependency (baD)

A group dominated by baD behaves as if its primary task is solely to provide for the satisfaction of the needs and wishes of its members. The leader is expected to look after, protect and sustain the members of the group, to make them feel good, and not to face them with the demands of the group's real purpose. The leader serves as a focus for a pathological form of dependency which inhibits growth and development. For example, instead of addressing the difficult items on the agenda, a committee may endlessly postpone them to the next meeting. Any attempts to change the organization are resisted, since this induces a fear of being uncared for. The leader may be absent or even dead, provided the illusion that he or she contains the solution can be sustained. Debates within the organization may then be not so much about how to tackle present difficulties as about what the absent leader would have said or thought.

### Basic assumption fight-flight (baF)

The assumption here is that there is a danger or 'enemy', which should either be attacked or fled from. However, as Bion puts it, the group is prepared to do either indifferently. Members look to the leader to devise some appropriate action; their task is merely to follow. For instance, instead of considering how best to organize its work, a team may spend most of the time in meetings worrying about rumours of organizational change. This provides a spurious sense of togetherness, while also serving to avoid facing the difficulties of the work itself. Alternatively, such a group may spend its time protesting angrily, without actually planning any specific action to deal with the perceived threat to its service.

### Basic assumption pairing (baP)

BaP is based on the collective and unconscious belief that, whatever the actual problems and needs of the group, a future event will solve them. The group behaves as if pairing or coupling between two members within the group, or perhaps between the leader of the group and some external person, will bring about salvation. The group is focused entirely on the future, but as a defence against the difficulties of the present. As Bion puts it, there is a conviction that

the coming season will be more agreeable. In the case of a work team, this may take the form of an idea that improved premises would provide an answer to the group's problems, or that all will be well after the next annual study day. The group is in fact not interested in working practically towards this future, but only in sustaining a vague sense of hope as a way out of its current difficulties. Typically, decisions are either not taken or left extremely vague. After the meeting, members are inevitably left with a sense of disappointment and failure, which is quickly superseded by a hope that the next meeting will be better.

### RECOGNIZING BASIC ASSUMPTION ACTIVITY

The meetings of a group of psychologists to which I consulted would often start with a discussion of their frustration at decisions not having been implemented. At one meeting, the main topic for a considerable time was the previous meeting, whether it had been a good meeting or a bad meeting – it being entirely unclear what this meant. When I pointed this out, there followed a lengthy debate about the relative merits of various chairs, seating arrangements, and, finally, rooms in which to hold the meeting. Various improved ways of organizing the meeting were proposed, but no decision was reached. I suggested there was a fear of discussing matters of real concern to the members present, perhaps a fear of conflict. At this point it emerged that there was indeed considerable controversy about a proposed appointment, some favouring one method, others another. Eventually a decision was almost reached, only to be resisted on the grounds that one significant member of the team was absent.

When under the sway of a basic assumption, a group appears to be meeting as if for some hard-to-specify purpose upon which the members seem intently set. Group members lose their critical faculties and individual abilities, and the group as a whole has the appearance of having some ill-defined but passionately involving mission. Apparently trivial matters are discussed as if they were matters of life or death, which is how they may well feel to the members of the group, since the underlying anxieties are about psychological survival.

In this state of mind, the group seems to lose awareness of the passing of time, and is apparently willing to continue endlessly with trivial matters. On the other hand, there is little capacity to bear frustration, and quick solutions are favoured. In both cases, members have lost their capacity to stay in touch with reality and its demands. Other external realities are also ignored or denied. For example, instead of seeking information, the group closes itself off from the outside world and retreats into paranoia. A questioning attitude is impossible; any who dare to do so are regarded as either foolish, mad or heretical. A new idea or formulation which might offer a way forward is likely to be too terrifying to consider because it involves questioning cherished assumptions, and loss of the familiar and predictable which is felt to be potentially catastrophic. At the prospect of any

change, the group is gripped anew by panic, and the struggle for understanding is avoided. All this prevents both adaptive processes and development (Turquet 1974). Effective work, which involves tolerating frustration, facing reality, recognizing differences among group members and learning from experience, will be seriously impeded.

### LEADERSHIP AND FOLLOWERSHIP IN BASIC ASSUMPTION GROUPS

True leadership requires the identification of some problem requiring attention and action, and the promotion of activities to produce a solution. In basic assumption mentality, however, there is a collusive interdependence between the leader and the led, whereby the leader will be followed only as long as he or she fulfils the basic assumption task of the group. The leader in baD is restricted to providing for members' needs to be cared for. The baF leader must identify an enemy either within or outside the group, and lead the attack or flight. In baP, the leader must foster hope that the future will be better, while preventing actual change taking place. The leader who fails to behave in these ways will be ignored, and eventually the group will turn to an alternative leader. Thus the basic assumption leader is essentially a creation or puppet of the group, who is manipulated to fulfil its wishes and to evade difficult realities.

A leader or manager who is being pulled into basic assumption leadership is likely to experience feelings related to the particular nature of the group's unconscious demands. In baD there is a feeling of heaviness and resistance to change, and a preoccupation with status and hierarchy as the basis for decisions. In baF, the experience is of aggression and suspicion, and a preoccupation with the fine details of rules and procedures. In baP, the preoccupation is with alternative futures; the group may ask the leader to meet with some external authority to find a solution, full of insubstantial hopes for the outcome.

Members of such groups are both happy and unhappy. They are happy in that their roles are simple, and they are relieved of anxiety and responsibility. At the same time, they are unhappy insofar as their skills, individuality and capacity for rational thought are sacrificed, as are the satisfactions that come from working effectively. As a result, the members of such groups tend to feel continually in conflict about staying or leaving, somehow never able to make up their minds which they wish to do for any length of time. Since the group now contains split-off and projected capacities of its members, leaving would be experienced as losing these disowned parts. In work-group mentality, on the other hand, members are able to mobilize their capacity for co-operation and to value the different contributions each can make. They choose to follow a leader in order to achieve the group's task, rather than doing so in an automatic way determined by their personal needs.

### THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAM

I wish now to look at the effects of the interplay between work-group mentality and basic assumption mentality functioning in a particular situation – the multidisciplinary team. Such teams are to be found in both public and private sector settings. For example, a health centre may be staffed by several doctors, a team of nurses, social workers, counsellors, a team of midwives and a number of administrative staff. In industry, management teams will consist of individuals from production, marketing, sales, audit, personnel and so on. In universities and schools, teams consist of staff teaching a range of subjects, the heads of different departments, together with administrators and others.

Teams such as these often have difficulty developing a coherent and shared common purpose, since their members come from different trainings with different values, priorities and preoccupations. Often, too, team members are accountable to different superiors, who may not be part of the team (see Chapter 20). This is an important and yet often ignored reality which leads to the illusion that the team is in a position to make certain policy decisions which, in fact, it is not. Considerable time can be wasted on discussions which cannot result in decisions, instead of exploring ways the actual decision-makers can be influenced in the desired direction.

The meetings of such teams typically have a rather vague title such as 'staff meeting' or 'planning meeting'. Their main purpose may well be simply for those present to 'meet' in order to give a sense of artificial togetherness and cohesion as a refuge from the pressures of work. The use of the word 'team' here is somewhat misleading: there may be little actual day-to-day work in common. Indeed, because of a lack of clarity about the primary task (see Chapter 3), confusion, frustration and bad feeling may actually be engendered by such meetings, interfering with work. The real decisions about work practices are often made elsewhere – over coffee, in corridors, in private groups, between meetings but not in them. Furthermore, such decisions as are taken may well not be implemented, because it is rare for anyone in the group to have the authority to ensure they are carried out.

Task-oriented teams have a defined common purpose and a membership determined by the requirements of the task. Thus, in a multidisciplinary team, each member would have a specific contribution to make. Often, the reality is more like a collection of individuals agreeing to be a group when it suits them, while threatening to disband whenever there is serious internal conflict. It is as if participation were a voluntary choice, rather than that there is a task which they must co-operate in order to achieve. The spurious sense of togetherness is used to obscure these problems and as a defence against possible conflicts. Even the conflicts themselves may be used to avoid more fundamental anxieties about the work by preventing commitment to decisions and change.

### BASIC ASSUMPTIONS IN DIFFERENT PROFESSIONS

So far I have referred to basic assumptions as defensive or regressive manifestations of group life. However, Bion (1961) also refers to what he termed the *sophisticated use of basic assumption mentality*, an important but lesser-known part of his theory. Here, Bion suggests that a group may utilize the basic assumption mentalities in a sophisticated way, by mobilizing the emotions of one basic assumption in the constructive pursuit of the primary task.

An example of such sophisticated and specialized use of baD can be found in a well-run hospital ward. An atmosphere of efficiency and calm is used to mobilize baD, encouraging patients to give themselves over to the nurses or doctors in a trusting, dependent way. BaF is utilized by an army to keep on the alert, and, when required, to go into battle without disabling consideration for personal safety. In social work, BaF supports the task of fighting or fleeing from family, social and environmental conditions or injustices which are harmful to the client. BaP finds a sophisticated use in the therapeutic situation, where the pairing between a staff member and a patient can provide a background sense of hope in order to sustain the setbacks inevitable in any treatment.

In trying to understand some of the difficulties of multidisciplinary work, it is helpful to understand the different sophisticated uses of basic assumption mentality adopted by the various professions or disciplines that make up a team. Fights for supremacy in a multidisciplinary team can then be viewed as the inevitable psychological clash between the sophisticated use of the three basic assumptions. Each carries with it a different set of values and a different set of views about the nature of the problem, its cure, what constitutes progress, and whether this is best achieved by a relationship between professional and client involving dependency, fight-flight or pairing. Furthermore, individuals are drawn to one profession or another partly because of their unconscious predisposition or *valency* for one basic assumption rather than another. As a result, they are particularly likely to contribute to the interdisciplinary group processes without questioning them (see Chapter 12).

Put another way, one of the difficulties in making a team out of different professions is that each profession operates through the deliberate harnessing of different sophisticated forms of the basic assumptions in order to further the task. There is consequently conflict when they meet, since the emotional motivations involved in each profession differ. However, conflict need not preclude collaboration on a task, provided there is a process of clarifying shared goals and the means of achieving these. However, difficulties in carrying out the task for which the team is in existence can lead to a breakdown in the sophisticated use of the various basic assumptions, and instead *aberrant* forms of each emerge. Examining these can illuminate some of the frequently encountered workplace tensions in teamwork.

For instance, medical training involves an institutionalized, prolonged dependency of junior doctors on their seniors over many years, from which the



medical consultant eventually emerges and then defends his new independence. This can degenerate into an insistence on freedom for its own sake. The doctor may then operate from a counterdependent state of mind, denying the mutual interdependency of teamwork and the actual dependency on the institutional setting of hospital or clinic. This can extend to other professionals, each arguing for their own area of independence, with rivalry and embittered conflict impeding thought and work on establishing shared overall objectives for the team.

By contrast, the training of therapists – whether of psychological, occupational, speech or other varieties – tends to idealize the pairing between therapist and client as the pre-eminent medium for change. Aberrant baP can lead to collusion in supporting this activity, while refusing to examine whether or not it is in fact helping, or how it relates to the team's primary task. Indeed, therapist and client may remain endlessly 'glued' together as if the generation of hope about the future were by itself a cure.

In social work, the sophisticated use of baF in the productive fight against social or family injustices can degenerate into a particular kind of litigious demand that justice be done, and on 'getting our rights'. Responsibility for improvement is felt to rest not at all with the individual, but solely with the community. Projecting responsibility in this way then disables the client and social worker from devising together any effective course of action: it is only others that must change.

These are examples where the capacity for the sophisticated use of basic assumption activity has degenerated, and the professional's action and thought becomes dominated by its aberrant forms. Each then produces a particular group culture. Aberrant baD gives rise to a *culture of subordination* where authority derives entirely from position in the hierarchy, requiring unquestioning obedience. Aberrant baP produces a *culture of collusion*, supporting pairs of members in avoiding truth rather than seeking it. There is attention to the group's mission, but not to the means of achieving it. Aberrant baF results in a *culture of paranoia and aggressive competitiveness*, where the group is preoccupied not only by an external enemy but also by 'the enemy within'. Rules and regulations proliferate to control both the internal and the external 'bad objects'. Here it is the means which are explicit and the ends which are vague.

## CONCLUSION

In a group taken over by basic assumption mentality, the formation and continuance of the group becomes an end in itself. Leaders and members of groups dominated by basic assumption activity are likely to lose their ability to think and act effectively: continuance of the group becomes an end in itself, as members become more absorbed with their relationship to the group than with their work task. In this chapter, we have seen how the functioning of teams can be promoted by the sophisticated use of a basic assumption in the service of work, or impeded and distracted by their inappropriate or aberrant use.

An understanding of these phenomena of group life, perhaps best obtained through the kind of group relations training programmes described in Chapter 4, can greatly assist both the members and managers of multidisciplinary teams, committees and other working groups.