THE 'WORK GROUP': REDRESSING THE BALANCE IN BION'S *EXPERIENCES IN GROUPS*

Abstract

The intention of this paper is to explore and develop Wilfred Bion's theory of groups, and to contribute to its wider application across the social sciences. Bion suggested that groups operate simultaneously in two strictly contrasting ways, based on distinctive mental states, which he called 'basic-assumption mentality' and 'work-group mentality'. He believed that these mentalities determine a group's capacity to achieve its purposes. However, the development of these ideas has tended to focus on the regressive tendency in group functioning – on basic-assumption mentality. This paper attempts to redress the balance by ascribing equal importance to the notion of work-group mentality. Firstly, it extends Bion's framework, developing the concept of the 'work group' in parallel with the 'basic assumptions'; secondly, it considers the dynamic relationship between these two mentalities, in order, finally, to explore the application of Bion's ideas via a case example.

Bion's *Experiences in Groups*

In the decades immediately following the Second World War, Wilfred Bion was a key figure at a significant moment in the development of theories of group and organizational dynamics. Foundational contributions at this time included: the spread of psychoanalytic thinking, accelerated and shaped by the emigration of Freud and other pioneering psychoanalysts to the UK and to North America; the establishment of two influential institutes, the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (and *Human Relations*; see Loveridge et al., 2007) and the National Training Laboratories at Bethel in Maine; and the development of group analysis and the first therapeutic communities.

Our concern here is with the particular contribution of Wilfred Bion to this 'moment' through his writings on groups. In 1961, he published in one volume, 'without alteration' (p. 7), his papers on groups, written between 1943 and 1952. This book, *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers*, is generally referred to as *Experiences in Groups*, after the central seven chapters, first published as a series of papers in *Human Relations* (Bion, 1948a, 1948b, 1949a, 1949b, 1950a, 1950b, 1951). It also contains a 'Pre-View' (Bion & Rickman, 1943) and a theoretical 'Re-View' (Bion, 1952/1955[1]).

Experiences in Groups has been described as 'a landmark in thought and conceptualization of the unconscious functioning of human beings in groups' (Lawrence et al., 1996: 28). Over more than 50 years, it has proved influential in the development of academic and applied approaches to research, consultancy, executive coaching, group work, and management and leadership development. It has contributed to the evolution of socio-technical systems theory, critical management studies and psycho-social studies, and to approaches variously termed the Tavistock tradition, group relations, systems psychodynamics, and socio-analysis.

Despite the continuing influence of *Experiences in Groups* in these fields, however, Bion's work has never become an established part of mainstream social scientific approaches to the study of human relations in organizations and society. This failure to expand beyond particular, semi-specialist fields may have roots in three areas. In the first place, Bion himself shifted his primary focus of interest from group dynamics to psychoanalysis. In a letter to one of his children, for example, he described *Experiences in Groups* as, 'the one book I couldn't be bothered with even when pressure was put on me 10 years later' (Bion, 1985: 213, cited in Armstrong, 2005: 11). Secondly, psychoanalysis itself has had – and continues to have – a chequered and always contested reception in professional and policy fields, as well as in public perceptions (Eisold, 2005a).

The most significant factor, however, may be that Bion's ideas have primarily been taken up and developed by psychoanalysts and psychoanalytically oriented consultants and academics[2], familiar not only with *Experiences in Groups* but often with Bion's later work too. They tend to share Bion's belief that psychoanalysis – 'or some extension of technique derived directly from it' (Bion, 1961: 154) – offers a key 'lens' for understanding the dynamics of groups and organizations, and also his fascination with the dark undercurrents of human interaction. However, the danger of attempting to work 'below the surface' in this way (Huffington et al., 2004) is that the work of integration with other perspectives is not done (see Jaques, 1995).

Bion himself, however, never saw his work as telling the whole story about group or organizational functioning. Although his underlying aim was to support the healthy functioning of groups, he believed that there were already 'many techniques … in daily use' (Bion, 1961: 154) for understanding successful group functioning. His particular interest lay in the recognition that the life of groups is always pervaded by, and under threat from, phenomena which distract them from their purpose. We believe that a reinterpretation of Bion's framework may make a small contribution to broadening the dialogue with other approaches to organization studies.

Bion's framework

In *Experiences in Groups,* Bion developed a theoretical framework in which he proposed that groups operate in two, strictly contrasting ways. These he called, 'work-group' and 'basic-assumption' mentality and functioning. These terms refer to fundamental ways of thinking and feeling – or avoiding real thought and true feeling – which he believed determine the ability of group members to relate and to engage, both with each other and with the purpose for which the group has formed.

'Work-group mentality' (Bion, 1961: 173) describes the disposition and dynamics that characterize the life of a group, to the extent that its members are able to manage their shared tensions, anxieties and relationships, in order to function effectively; the outcome is a 'capacity for realistic hard work' (p. 157). 'Basic-assumption mentality' (p. 173), by contrast, describes the state of a group that is taken over by strong emotions – anxiety, fear, hate, love, hope, anger, guilt, depression (p. 166) – and has, as a result, lost touch with its purpose, and become caught up in an 'unconscious group collusion' (Eisold, 2005b: 359); the outcome is 'stagnation' (Bion, 1961: 128).

Two immediate areas of confusion appear in the literature on Bion's writing on groups. The first arises from his double use of the word 'group': firstly, in an everyday sense, to describe *an actual group of people*; secondly, to describe these two *group mentalities*. He was at pains to emphasize that the terms 'basic-assumption group' and 'work group' do not signify people, but 'facet[s] of mental activity in a group … only *mental activity of a particular kind, not the people who indulge in it*' (pp. 143-4, italics added). However, the potential for misunderstanding is inevitable. In an attempt to address the ambiguity, we will not follow Bion's use of the noun 'group' to describe mental activity; instead, we will use the phrases 'basic-assumption mentality' and 'work-group mentality' throughout. In this, we agree with such writers as Armstrong (2005; see discussion below), Neri (1998: 21-7) and Stokes (1994: 20), who all read Bion's work as being based on the notion of 'mentalities'.[3]

The second area of confusion arises from the binary structure of Bion's framework – 'basic-assumption mentality'/'work-group mentality' – which can create the impression that each could exist in a 'pure' form without the other. Bion was clear that the two always co-exist in human interaction – 'work-group functions are always pervaded by basic-assumption phenomena' (Bion, 1961: 154) – but that one tends to dominate at any particular moment. The implications of this relationship, both conceptually and for practice, are a central focus of this paper.

In Bion's original writings, the nature and importance of basic-assumption mentality is highlighted whilst leaving the notion of work-group functioning rather sketchy. Most of the substantial body of work, which extends and applies Bion's ideas on groups, reflects a similar bias. In this paper, we seek to address this imbalance, building on the work of Armstrong, a notable exception to this tendency, who has argued that:

> the concept of the basic assumptions has been a continuing focus of attention, curiosity, and puzzlement … that of the "work group" has, in my view, tended to be taken for granted, as if it were quite evident and unproblematic. Or as if its role were simply to get the much more intriguing theme of basic-assumption functioning off the ground. (Armstrong, 2005: 140.)

Bion certainly devoted more space to the description of basic-assumption mentality than to work-group mentality. In his final *Re-View*, for example, he starts with three pages on work-group mentality (Bion, 1961: 143-6), before turning to the basic assumptions to which he devotes some *twenty* pages.[4] Our intention in this paper is to contribute to redressing the balance by looking at the relationship between work-group and basic-assumption phenomena, emphasizing aspects that tended to be given less attention by Bion, 'one-liners' sometimes, or 'throw-away' remarks of the seemingly obvious.

In this development of Bion's work, we begin with a summary review of his ideas on basic-assumption and work-group functioning. Based on this we propose a framework which allows us to look more closely at the relationship between the two. Finally, we propose a tentative methodology for operationalizing this extended framework, illustrated with a case study from our experience.

Basic-assumption mentality

However complex Bion's ideas on group phenomena may be in detail, they are based on a relatively simple observation: some groups 'work' and some do not. Or, more accurately perhaps, no groups work to optimum effectiveness all of the time, but neither is any group entirely dysfunctional.

Sometimes, therefore, a group works sufficiently well to be able to manage both its tasks and its own dynamics and relationships, internal and external. At such times, it is work-group mentality (W) which dominates the functioning of the group. At other times, however, group members devote their energies to various forms of dispersal. These distractions, or 'obstructions to work-group activity' (Bion, 1961: 145-6), Bion called 'basic assumptions' (ba). He suggested that they 'appear to be fairly adequately adumbrated by three formulations, dependence, pairing, and fighting or flight' (p. 188).

TABLE 1 HERE

Basic assumptions	Work-group mentality
Dependence – 'baD' Pairing – 'baP' Fight-Flight – 'baF'	'W' [5]

Table 1

In phases dominated by basic-assumption mentality, group members allow themselves to be diverted from their purpose, apparently avoiding the issue or putting it to one side. As Bion observed, in his first description of this state: 'At this point the conversation seems to me to indicate that the group has changed its purpose.' (p. 31.) However, it gradually emerged that this apparent *change of* purpose was, in fact, a change *away from* purpose. Indeed, an observer can find it hard even to tell just what a group caught up in basic-assumption mentality is there for.

This group phenomenon is reminiscent of the way individuals can convince themselves of the need to clear their room or make a 'to do' list, before starting to work – as if only then can the 'real work' begin. However, they may never actually start the work, which the 'clearing' was intended to foster. In Bion's terms, a group operating in this way is in the grip of basic-assumption mentality. Group members may be very active and may *seem* to be getting 'work' done, but they are no longer demonstrating 'work-group' mentality, precisely because the group has turned its back on its original purpose. Without realising it, they have shifted attention to an *assumed*, new purpose – although *non*-purpose, even *anti*-purpose, might be more accurate terms, because, as with the individual energetically clearing their clutter, apparent purposefulness masks the reality of an unconscious shift off-purpose. In *Experiences in Groups*, Bion offers ample evidence of this group forgetting and, importantly, of the way in which members of a group dominated by basic-assumption mentality are unlikely to recognise that they have changed anything at all.

This lack of reflexive awareness is central to Bion's analysis: the adoption by the group of a new [anti-]purpose is 'tacit' (p. 94); it is adopted *unconsciously*. Thus, the

decision to shift off-purpose is not the result of deliberation, of a consciously approved process, but is reached 'as if in response to some unexplained impulse' (p. 188). It is somehow agreed by the group without being aired, so that the decision is not likely even to be noticed, let alone negotiated. Indeed, in the normal sense, no decision is in fact taken; instead, the response is 'instantaneous, inevitable, and instinctive' (p. 153).

The impact of this 'as-if' decision is all the greater for being instinctive and unprocessed, because it then guides group behaviour in line with the unacknowledged issues that group members seem to believe they must deal with before being able to fulfil their original purpose. This belief or assumption is 'basic', precisely because all group thinking, experience and activity is now based on it, although the group as a whole remains unaware of the emotional state being avoided. Such a group does indeed appear to be of one mind, and ideas about their new focus – anti-purpose though it is – are likely to appear obvious and correct to group members: 'invested with reality by the force of the emotion attached to them' (pp. 146-7). The group's behaviour then makes it look as though what has actually been *assumed in fantasy only* has been *agreed in reality*: 'It is at this point that I say the group behaves 'as if' it were acting on a basic assumption.' (p. 101.)

This characteristic, but paradoxical, feature of basic-assumption mentality means that the associated 'emotional state proper to a basic assumption' (p. 93) is unpredictable. Although 'not wholly pleasurable' (ibid.), it can, nonetheless, *feel* as if this 'work' is going well. Indeed, Bion observed that it can even feel as if the group is working *better* than before: 'The first thing that strikes us is the improvement that has taken place in the atmosphere.' (p. 30.) The unconscious motivation behind the assumption of a *different*, as-if purpose is precisely captured here; namely, to avoid or cover up difficult emotions. Bion emphasized that because it is hard even for 'sophisticated individuals' (p. 147) to step outside basic-assumption mentality, the new way tends to be left untested by group members. Anyone who manages to spot the pattern of avoidance, and then dares to challenge the assumption, is likely either to be attacked or simply ignored.

Work-group and basic-assumption group mentalities contrasted

Central to what follows is the idea, already referred to above, that these two mentalities always co-exist: 'there is no Work Group without some kind of Basic Assumption Group running concurrently' (Gosling, 1994: 5; his capitals). As a result, neither is stable, let alone permanent, and there is always the potential for movement in a group's emotional life. Bion argued that this movement can occur at two levels. In basic-assumption mentality, 'shifts and changes from one [assumption] to another' (Bion, 1961: 160) are sometimes rapid, with 'two or three changes in an hour', but at other times spread out, with 'the same basic assumption ... dominant for months on end' (p. 154). At this level, therefore, individual basic assumptions 'alternate' (p. 96) or 'displace each other' (p. 188) – but the underlying basic-assumption state remains unchanged. At a more fundamental level, however, there can also be a shift in the dominance of one mentality over the other, that is, a shift from basic-assumption mentality to work-group mentality, or the reverse.

It is important, however, not to allow these analytic distinctions to obscure the fact that basic-assumption and work-group mentalities are only separable in theory. Without this clarity, the human tendency to add a value judgment, when presented with an apparent dichotomy of this kind, is almost inevitable: 'I noticed that what crept into my discourse was a faint suggestion of: "Work Group – good; Basic Assumption Group – bad".' (Gosling, 1994: 1-2.) Although it is necessary to separate these two mentalities for heuristic purposes, there is a risk, inherent in exploring ideal types, that the paradoxical tension between them is flattened out, giving the comforting illusion of simplicity. The situation is reminiscent of the way that shifting the focus of a camera lens from foreground to background sharpens one, but blurs and obscures the other; in the meantime, of course, the scene being photographed remains unaltered and unified (see Bion, 1961: 48). Working with Bion's framework requires constant attention to this paradoxical tension, always recognising that these mentalities 'are co-dependent, each operating as a silent, unconscious complement to the other' (Armstrong, 2005: 145).

The result of the constant co-existence of these two mentalities is that they are 'always in interplay' (ibid.: 140); there is an unavoidable tension or 'conflict' between them (Bion, 1961: 96). However, shifts between these states reflect the in-the-moment dominance of one over the other, rather than a developmental progression: they 'do not constitute a sequence' (Neri, 2003: 141). Bion argued that work-group mentality can never exist in a pure form: it is always 'pervaded by basic-assumption phenomena' (Bion, 1961: 154); but also that work-group functioning is not, as one might expect, always 'obstructed' or 'diverted' by basic-assumption mentality. There are also occasions when it can be 'assisted' (p. 146) or 'furthered' by the basic assumptions (p. 188). Miller, for example, suggest that 'fight-flight may be appropriate for a sales team and dependency for a hospital; any other basic assumption would interfere with the task and generate a dysfunctional group culture.' (Miller, 1998: 1504; see also Gosling, 1994; Stokes, 1994: 25-6.)

As for the basic assumptions, Bion believed that only one can dominate at any one time: 'The emotional state associated with each basic assumption excludes the emotional states proper to the other two basic assumptions' (Bion, 1961: 96). He described the excluded or 'inoperative' basic assumptions as 'the victims of a conspiracy' between work-group mentality and the 'operating basic assumption' (p. 102). Alternatively, a group may become caught up in what Bion called the 'dual' of the basic assumption, where, for example, a dependent group behaves as if it is now the leader who is dependent on them: 'I do not nourish or sustain the group so they nourish and sustain me' (p. 120).

Bion offers few direct descriptions of the facet of mental activity which came to be called the 'work group' (p. 98)[6]. One of these, early in the *Re-View*, includes the following reference to co-operation in work-group mode:

> Participation in this activity is possible only to individuals with years of training and a capacity for experience that has permitted them to develop mentally. Since this activity is geared to a task, it is related to reality, its methods are rational, and, therefore, in however embryonic a form, scientific. (p. 143.)

The problem with this description is that in emphasizing the rational it obscures the role of unconscious, emotional factors in work-group functioning, as if these were the domain of the basic assumptions only. The overall impact of the way work-group functioning is generally described, by Bion and in much of the literature on his ideas, is that it 'makes the work group sound something like a purely intentional object, created for a specific purpose and structured in accordance with rational principles to do with the relation between means and ends.' (Armstrong, 2005: 141.) In part, this stems from Bion's use of the term 'scientific', an idea which he does not define, which is itself susceptible to change (Hadot, 2006; Kuhn, 1970), and whose meaning is often used uncritically. Grotstein (2007: 141) suggests that what the word 'scientific' denotes in Bion's work is 'a respect for the undeniable'.

The impression of a consciously rational approach is reinforced when Bion writes that the 'work group' meets 'for a specific task … to be achieved by sophisticated means … [with] rules of procedure … usually an established administrative machinery operated by officials who are recognizable as such by the rest of the group, and so on.' (Bion, 1961, p. 98.) Here, Bion appears to have been misled by his own terminology into using the term 'work group' – that is, work-group mentality – to describe *an actual group of people* and the way they organize, rather than 'only mental activity' (p. 144).

Despite identifying rationality, task and scientific method as differentiators of work-group mentality, it seems that Bion did, in fact, assume the presence and impact of unconscious factors *at all times* in the life of a group. For example, his definition of the co-operation that characterizes work-group functioning is 'the capacity for conscious *and unconscious* working with the rest of the group' (p. 116, italics added). It is not the presence or absence of strong emotions or unconscious motivations, which distinguishes basic-assumption functioning from work-group activity. Rather it is the way in which any actual group of people copes with these factors; that is, whether they have the capacity to contain emotional tensions, conscious and unconscious, well enough to avoid work-group mentality from being flooded by basic-assumption mentality.

Truth and development in work-group mentality

The basis for the differences between these two modes of functioning lies in the group's relationship to reality: 'The *W* group is necessarily concerned with reality' (Bion, 1961: 127). In this context, the notion of 'reality' has two dimensions.

On the one hand, because 'every group, however casual, meets to "do" something' (p. 143), reality relates to the demand for action inherent in that underlying purpose: 'work-group function must include the development of thought designed for translation into action' (p. 145). For example, work-group mentality is rooted in a realistic awareness of time: 'In work-group activity time is intrinsic' (p. 172). However, the '*as-if*' character of basic-assumption mentality means that, for a group caught up in it, something else appears to be – is 'assumed' to be – more 'real' than time-related, purposive action: 'in basic-assumption activity it [time] has no place.'

On the other hand, 'reality' also refers to *emotional truth*; that is, to the matrix of emotional experiences generated both by the group's purpose – 'the *psychic reality* of the task' (Armstrong, 2005: 145, italics in original); and by relationships – what Hinshelwood (2003: 192) calls 'the really important reality' for human beings, which is 'the reality of other people'.

Central to Bion's exploration of both these levels of reality is his association of 'reality' and 'truth'. For example, he brings these notions together in his first description of the vigour and vitality which can be mobilised in work-group mentality:

> It is almost as if human beings were aware of the painful and often fatal consequences of *having to act without an adequate grasp of reality*, and therefore were aware of *the need for truth as a criterion* in the evaluation of their findings. (Bion, 1961: 100, italics added.)

He does not develop these thoughts at this point. However, the Symingtons argue that, for Bion, the central 'motivational principle' in human affairs is 'the emergence of truth and a desire for emotional growth' – or simply 'truth' (Symington & Symington, 1996: 6-7). Grotstein goes so far as to suggest that Bion's work implies the existence of a 'truth drive' – or instinct or principle – underpinning human motivation at the deepest level. This is reflected in Bion's frequent use of such phrases as 'the quest for truth', 'concern for truth', 'truth function', and 'regard for truth' (see references in Grotstein, 2007: 141): 'It is my conjecture that the concept of a truth drive (quest, pulsion) may serve as an organizing principle through a major portion of Bion's episteme.' (Grotstein, 2004: 1082.)

These observations are made in relation to Bion's clinical work as a psychoanalyst, rather than to his group framework. However, the idea that 'truth is growth-promoting and anti-truth psychically debilitating' (Symington & Symington, 1996: 114) – that 'healthy mental growth seems to depend on truth as the living organism depends on food' (Bion, 1965: 38) – could be read as a summary of this framework. Work-group mentality tests itself against truth – or against reality – even if this implies postponing pleasure and accepting pain; it also 'necessitates a capacity for understanding' (Bion, 1961: 161). Basic-assumption mentality, by contrast, resists the new insights that arise from exposure to truth: 'The crux of the matter lies in the threat of the new idea to demand development and the inability of the basic-assumption groups to tolerate development.' (p. 156.) As a result, work-group functioning is a 'developmental achievement' (Armstrong, 2005: 142), whereas basic-assumption mentality is rooted precisely in resistance to development; it represents 'the hatred of a process of development … a hatred of having to learn by experience at all, and lack of faith in the worth of such a kind of learning.' [7] (Bion, 1961: 89.)

The capacity to engage with both these dimensions of reality – the reality of action and the psychic reality of group life – is, therefore, the key defining characteristic of work-group mentality. Development, rooted in the drive for truth, is central to work–group functioning and to human nature: humans are 'hopelessly committed to a developmental procedure' (p. 89); we have 'a compulsion to develop' (p. 161). This commitment-compulsion is explored in detail by Armstrong, who shows development to be pivotal in differentiating basic-assumption from work-group mentalities. It is the

foundation for his radical re-expression of Bion's ideas; namely, that work-group mentality is just as 'basic' as the 'basic' assumptions: 'the work group [is] an aspect – one might almost say, a *basic* aspect – of human mentality' (Armstrong, 2005: 146, his italics). It represents the 'thirst for truth', which Bion saw as an essential element of our inheritance as group animals and which was the basis for his view that 'despite the influence of the basic assumptions, it is the *W* group that triumphs in the long run.' (Bion, 1961: 135.)

This contrasting relationship to development in the two mentalities echoes as a fundamental theme throughout *Experiences in Groups*:

> … basic-assumption mentality does not lend itself to translation into action, since action requires work-group function to maintain contact with reality. (p. 157.)
>
> All [three basic assumptions] are opposed to development, which is itself dependent on understanding. The work group, on the other hand, recognizes the need both to understand and to develop. (p. 160.)
>
> There is neither development nor decay in basic-assumption functions, and in this respect they differ totally from those of the work group. (p. 172.)
>
> The leader of the work group at least has the merit of possessing contact with external reality, but no such qualification is required of the leader of the basic-assumption group. (p. 178.)

Thus, work-group mentality gains its particular resonance from *engagement with truth*; that is, the readiness and the capacity to face the psychic realities of group purpose and group membership, and the tension between shared intention and individual differences. As Lawrence et al. (1996: 30) suggest, the major 'inputs' to the establishment of work-group mentality are 'people with minds who can transform experiences'; the resulting outcomes are insight, understanding, learning, growth, and development.

The actual dynamic of any particular group is, therefore, determined by the capacity of its members to negotiate, consciously and unconsciously, the tension between these two opposed tendencies – the tension between the 'developmental push' of work-group mentality and the 'regressive pull' of basic-assumption functioning (Armstrong, 2005: 145). Work-group mentality provides a creative space, in which ' "thoughts" in search of a thinker' (Bion, 1967: 166) can be found and formed. Basic-assumption mentality, by contrast, is deeply resistant to new thinking, so that individuals often complain that they 'cannot think' (Bion, 1961: 95). Bion described this atmosphere vividly: 'Mental activity becomes stabilized on a level that is platitudinous, dogmatic, and painless. Development is arrested and the resultant stagnation is widespread.' (p. 128.) Indeed, one of the ways in which basic-assumption mentality may be identified *in experience* is the sense one can have of being unable to think or to find a new thought in the moment.

Finally, Bion was impressed by the radically different ways in which vitality is manifested in the two states. He writes of 'the vigour and vitality which can be mobilized by the work group' (p. 100), enabling sustained development over time:

> In my experience the psychological structure of the work group is very powerful, and it is noteworthy that it survives with a vitality that would suggest that fears that the work group will be swamped by the emotional states proper to the basic assumptions are quite out of proportion. (p. 98.)

Basic-assumption mentality, by contrast, produces only a *pseudo*-vitality, an illusory, as-if *feeling* of purposefulness and energy not matched by actual outcomes, because its underlying motivation is to avoid the pain of development: 'adherence to the [basic-assumption] group will not demand any painful sacrifices and will therefore be popular' (p. 128)[8]. Thus, when a group gives in to the wish 'to prevent development', by allowing itself 'to be overwhelmed by basic-assumption mentality', Bion notes that the compensation for this shift off-purpose 'appears to be an increase in a *pleasurable feeling of vitality*' (p. 159, italics added), or 'a flicker of synthetic animation' (p. 144). Similarly, the action that results might be called pseudo-action. Basic-assumption fight-flight, for instance, leads to *behaviour*, to activity, but without reflexivity. This is different in kind to reality-oriented work-group functioning, where action is dependent on thought and thought on action.

Questioning the undifferentiated nature of work-group mentality

It was our work with leaders[9] that first led us to question the presentation of work-group mentality as an apparently undifferentiated state; that is, simply as *W*, in contrast to the elaboration of the basic assumptions into *baD*, *baF* and *baP*. (See Table 1.)

For example, we have often observed cases of basic-assumption dependence, where it has seemed as if people did indeed depend on the leader to provide 'nourishment, material and spiritual, and protection … a kind of group deity … one who [knows] the answers without need to resort to work' (Bion, 1961: 147-8). However, we have also observed cases where dependence on a leader led not to 'stagnation' or to 'platitudinous, dogmatic, and painless' thinking, but to productive work. In such cases, dependence did not seem to be experienced as a distraction from the group's purpose but rather the opposite: leader and group members together maintained a focus *on* their purpose, and the leader was authorised by the group to lead. In addition, leadership tended to be evident more widely in the group or organization with some leaders actively working to 'downplay' (French et al., 2006) any fantasies of infallibility projected onto them by followers. While such leadership interventions still represent a form of dependence, it is dependence *in the service of*, not in conflict with, the group's purpose.

Our suggestion is that if basic-assumption, *pseudo*-leadership is to be called basic-assumption dependence, *baD*, then work-oriented leadership of this kind could be called 'work-group dependence' or *WD*.

A similar argument could be made with regard to 'pairing'. Bion described baP mentality as characterised by 'an air of hopeful expectation' (Bion, 1961: 151), a sense that from a pairing in the group something positive will emerge – a longed-for 'Messiah' (p. 152), who will save the group from its unacknowledged internal conflicts and tensions. As with baD, however, the group's hopeful investment in the pairing is illusory, inevitably leading to disappointment, because group members lose their concentration and focus on the group's purpose; they pin their hopes on the pair, while becoming passive themselves and uninvolved in the work. Thus, although investment in the pair may help the group deal with fundamentally problematic feelings of hatred, destructiveness and despair, it is unconsciously designed not to address, but to distract from or avoid, both these feelings and the shared purpose which has helped to stimulate them.

Once again, however, our own involvement with organizations has demonstrated situations in which a pairing has, by contrast, made a significant contribution to the group's purpose, so that the 'hopeful expectation' generated by the pair was translated into action by 'realistic hard work' (p. 157), not lost in denial or avoidance. Gilmore has described this phenomenon as the 'productive pair'; that is, a form of purposive pairing, in which 'good interpersonal chemistry' and 'intellectual understanding' are mobilized not for personal advantage or pleasure but 'in the service of the mission' (Gilmore, 1999: 3). Such pairings can help group members to face the truth, in a way which grounds their 'hopeful expectation' in reality. By valuing each other's areas of expertise, for example, trusting each other and speaking frankly to one another, new ways of thinking, relating and acting together (Gilmore, 1999) can emerge. This theme of the cohesive impact of pairings in social contexts has a long history in the western friendship tradition – friendship as 'social glue' (Pahl, 1997) – in which friendship was thought of not primarily as an emotional state but rather as a *hexis*, a 'disposition' or 'state of mind' (French, 2007), or, to use Bion's term, a 'mentality'.

These observations reinforced an emerging hypothesis: that for each form of basic-assumption mentality it might be possible to identify a parallel 'work-group' state – in this case 'work-group pairing', *WP*. The hypothesis could be expressed as follows (*Table 2*):

TABLE 2 HERE

Forms of basic-assumption mentality	Forms of work-group mentality
baD	WD
baF	WF
baP	WP

Table 2

As Menzies-Lyth observed, 'If it's a sophisticated use [of basic assumption behaviour], it W, it's Work. But that doesn't mean you can't have dependence, fight-flight or pairing. In other words, these can all be Work.' (Menzies-Lyth, 2002: 29).

Changing the focus

As we explored the hypothesis that work-group mentality might manifest in the same forms as basic-assumption mentality, we noticed a parallel shift in the focus of our attention, when working with groups and organizations. We realised that we often noticed the *form of interaction* – dependence, pairing or fight-flight – before becoming aware of which *mentality* appeared to be dominant. For example, if our attention was drawn to a dependent relationship, we learned not to assume automatically that this was an instance of *basic-assumption* dependence. Instead, we would try to assess the evidence – from observation of behaviour and from our own experience – in order to understand whether this dependent relationship pointed to *basic-assumption* or to *work-group* functioning. (We are aware that this statement oversimplifies the experience. 'Assessing the evidence' assumes a capacity to remain in contact with reality, at the different levels described above, which is precisely the capacity that is restricted by basic-assumption mentality. We recognise that as a group member, and even in an 'outsider' role, such as organizational consultant, one can be caught up in the group dynamic in a way which makes any 'assessment of evidence' problematic or, in extreme instances, impossible.)

This change of focus is based on the idea that the forms of interaction Bion identified as basic assumptions may be fundamental to 'the social capacity of the individual' (Bion, 1967: 118; see also Miller, 1998). As humans, we have to interact the way humans do: we pair (P); we take a lead and we depend on others (D); we also fight with or run from them (F). What Bion's insight allows us to do is to recognise that these key interactions can manifest in basic-assumption *or* in work-group mentality. This could be represented as follows (*Table 3*):

TABLE 3 HERE

Form of basic-assumption mentality	***Key Interaction***	*Form of work-group mentality*
baD ←	**D**	→ WD
baF ←	**F**	→ WF
baP ←	**P**	→ WP

Table 3

Presenting the framework in this way is intended to highlight the three key elements we have discussed: the constant co-existence of basic-assumption and work-group mentalities; the possibility that work-group mentality also manifests in the form of dependence, fight-flight or pairing; and, thirdly, the possibility that one might gain as much insight into the state of a particular group or organization from observing the form of interaction as one can from trying to ascertain which mentality is dominant.

The co-existence of, and tension between, these mentalities mean that although one may dominate for a while the situation is never stable. As Gilmore observes in relation to productive pairs: 'At one stage of a lifecycle a pair might be productive, yet later on the role might become stifling or antidevelopmental' (Gilmore, 1999: 3). The complexity of the factors involved – conscious and unconscious, individual,

group and organizational, internal and contextual, structural and dynamic, task- or person-related – means that while states of mind may shift with great speed and regularity, they may also become culturally embedded and long-lasting.

While our suggested reframing remains tentative, it may provide the basis for a more developed description both of the key interactions and of the forms that work-group mentality might take. The following table (*Table 4*) adds some descriptive categories to the basic forms of interaction and to the ways in which these can appear in basic-assumption and work-group states:

TABLE 4 HERE

Form of basic-assumption mentality	**Form of interaction**	**Form of work-group mentality**
baP e.g. idealized pair the source of hope	Pairing: influence from two people/ groupings	WP e.g. friendship as a foundation for thinking together
baD e.g. idealization of the 'knowing' leader	Dependence: a single leader plus follower/s	WD e.g. leader authorised to guide group thinking process; role clarity
baF e.g. projecting anxiety onto an out-group	Fight-flight: us and them	WF e.g. fierce struggle with an imposed challenge; active engagement with difference

Table 4

Operationalizing the framework

In relation to his own observations, Bion noted that 'it is much easier to believe one can see these phenomena in groups from which one is detached than in a small group in which one is actively participating', adding, 'It is this latter experience which is the important one.' (Bion, 1961: 126.) We believe that the amended framework proposed here may offer practical opportunities for operationalizing his ideas; that is, for 'seeing these phenomena in groups' and for developing ways in which work-group mentality can be supported or a shift from a basic-assumption to a work-group state fostered.

Observation and experimentation in our organizational and consultancy roles have led to a hypothesis in relation to application: that attempts to support work-group functioning may be more effective if they focus on a form of interaction that is *different to* the dominant basic-assumption. In a group which is caught up in basic-assumption fight-flight (baF), for instance, it can seem constructive to intervene in a way that is intended to support *work-group* fight-flight (WF), thereby directing the undoubted energy generated by fight-flight towards the group's purpose. However,

such an intervention is likely either to reinforce the currently dominant basic-assumption mode of baF, or to slip rapidly back into baF, as if to a 'default' position. In such circumstances Bion observed that 'emotional reactions proper to this type of basic group are immediately evoked, and the structure of sophistication sags badly.' (p. 79.)

By contrast, an intervention into a baF group which evokes or supports dependence or pairing may have a containing or appropriately challenging effect. The result can be to reduce the hold of the emotions underpinning the basic-assumption fight-flight response, allowing some of the energy from an 'inoperative' basic-assumption to be mobilized. This could be one of the 'occasions' Bion refers to, where 'work-group activity' is 'assisted' rather than 'obstructed, diverted' by a basic assumption, and the potential outcome may be the development of work-group mentality in the form of WD or WP.

Case Example: from baF to WP

One of the first issues that the new Director of Inter-faculty Programmes (Faculty A of a UK university) faced on taking up his new role was an ongoing conflict between his own staff and members of Faculty B, with whom they were collaborating in the delivery of a Masters degree. On investigation, it transpired that the previous Director had pressed ahead to establish this joint degree, despite resistance from another programme manager within her own faculty (A). Although the new degree had run relatively successfully for two years, there had in that time been three programme managers and considerable tensions had developed. The story was rich with episodes of individuals storming out of meetings, the refusal to talk to members of the other faculty, tears, and so on. Different individuals were blamed for the problems – the only consistent message being that it was the fault of 'the other faculty'. This was a group caught in baF mentality. The new Director eventually concluded that attempts to determine the source of the problem were futile.

Within the first months of taking up the role, however, it became apparent that the new Director was developing a good working relationship with his equivalent in Faculty B. They began to collaborate effectively on other projects, which combined the strengths of both faculties. The working relationship was easy and became increasingly productive. They talked freely about the problems that existed and eventually decided to try to improve the working relationship between their respective colleagues. The joint programme managers from both faculties were invited to a review meeting. The meeting turned out to be open and good-natured, leading to a free and direct exchange of ideas. Within half an hour the agenda for the meeting shifted radically from one of review to one of planning a significant redesign of the programme. This redesign was not new but in line with the original aspiration of Faculty B, which had been thwarted by the fragile working relationship. The proposals were taken back to senior managers within the respective faculties, and were supported and taken forward with unusual speed. In time for the next academic year, a new degree had been designed, validated and marketed with such success that it immediately became one of the largest postgraduate programmes in the two faculties. The scapegoating and name-calling between the two faculties diminished, although without disappearing altogether. Bi-monthly meetings of senior managers from both faculties were established to review and progress a growing number of inter-faculty collaborations.

An additional contextual factor, supporting this change in the working dynamic between the two faculties, was that there were further changes in personnel. One of the 'hostile' programme managers in Faculty A moved to another role and, even more significantly, a third programme manager, also in Faculty A, was appointed only shortly before the new Director. Neither of the new managers had been party to the ongoing 'fight' with the other faculty, and both proved to be much more positively disposed to the collaboration.

Discussion

We believe that these events illustrate some of the complexities in Bion's thinking, in particular the tension between the purposive vitality of work-group mentality and the dispersal of energy that accompanies work-group mentality – and the potential for movement between these states. Our experience in this case example was of a clear shift in dominance from basic-assumption mentality to work-group mentality. As a result of this shift, the original purpose re-emerged and work could be done, replacing the group's inability to face the reality of the situation; namely, that a supposedly collaborative project was blocked by non-cooperation. A work-group pairing (WP) emerged between the new Director and his equivalent in Faculty B, which led the problems of fight and flight (baF) to dissolve, without solution or resolution. This in turn mobilized the work-group capabilities of both parties and allowed for the emergence of a new culture of collaboration.

We also believe that this shift in the *form of interaction* – the withdrawal from fight and the concurrent emergence of pairing – may have been the key which released the group from the basic-assumption state in which it was trapped. The pairing intervention appears to have had the effect of calming or containing the emotions that fuelled the dominant fight mentality, thereby loosening its hold over the group. In Bion's terms, the emotions 'proper to' or 'associated with' pairing had, up to this point, been excluded by the 'operating basic assumption', baF (Bion, 1961: 102). The result of the shift to pairing was to provide a context in which thinking and development became possible, the truth/ reality of the situation could be accepted, and the fundamental challenges of collaboration could be worked with.

In trying to move the group away from baF, it would be tempting to think that WF should be the target: "If only we could take up the challenge and *really engage* with the differences in the group, we could make progress…" However, by shifting attention away from F to another form of interaction – in this case, P – it becomes clear that the real target was not WF, but rather W, *work-group mentality itself*. Indeed, as fight was already dominant, then baF was likely to be the ever-present default position; it was the emergence of a different form of interaction, which seemed to enable work-group mentality to be mobilized.

In addition, pairing might be seen as an appropriate relationship for a collaborative project of this kind, just as Miller (1998) suggested fight may be appropriate for a sales team and dependence for a hospital. As a result, any pull towards baP, which a focus on pairing could stimulate, may even have assisted work-group functioning, rather than undermining it.

Finally, it should be remembered that although Bion's primary interest lay in investigating the unconscious dimension of group interaction, he did not underestimate the importance of those conscious, planned aspects of group and organizational functioning which Jaques was to call 'requisite' structures (Jaques, 1989). In this case, the Director 'pair' did not abandon the existing 'rules of procedure' or 'established administrative machinery' (Bion, 1961: 98). Had they done so – in the belief, perhaps, that the group was so dysfunctional that they alone would have to "sort things out" between them – then the outcome might indeed have been the replacement of baF with baP. In that situation, the unconscious assumption would have been that if the pairing itself could be worked out, then all would be well – without the need for 'realistic hard work' and with no 'demand for painful sacrifices'.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to provide a way of thinking about Bion's *Experiences in Groups* which may contribute to redressing the imbalance in the attention given to the basic assumptions compared to the work group. We have also suggested a way in which this change of emphasis may open up additional possibilities for application in group and organizational contexts.

We believe that Bion's group theory can help to further our understanding of group, organizational and societal dynamics. However, although his ideas have been adopted and developed within the field of group relations, there is limited awareness, let alone use made, of these ideas in mainstream fields of organization studies and of group and organisational development. As a result, they remain the preserve of a relatively small number of specialist consultants and academics and, except in isolated instances, have not made the transition they deserve to a wider practitioner group. Our own work with leaders and managers has led us to believe that the potential exists for a fruitful dialogue with other academic perspectives.

We believe that placing the focus of attention on *work-group mentality* and on *forms of interaction*, rather than on the basic assumptions, is in greater accord with mainstream theories of group behaviour and so likely to be more accessible to a wider academic and practitioner audience. However, we would also argue that this emphasis is not contrary to Bion's thinking, merely something which we believe he took for granted or chose not to focus on, as his attention turned more fully towards psychoanalysis itself.

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[1] Bion published 'Group relations: A re-view' on three occasions, 1952, 1955 and 1961, making changes in 1955, which reflect his psychoanalytic work. For analysis of these changes, see Sanfuentes, 2003.

[2] For the development of Bion's ideas on groups and their application in a variety of organizational and educational contexts, see for example, *Human Relations*, special issue on integrating psychodynamic and organizational theory, 1999, 52(6); Armstrong, 2005; Colman & Geller, 1985; Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004; Fraher, 2004; Gould et al., 2001, 2004; Hopper, 2003; Lawrence, 1979; Lipgar & Pines, 2003a, 2003b; Palmer, 2000, 2002; Pines, 1985; Trist & Murray, 1990. For a full bibliography of Bion's work and secondary literature, see Karnac, 2008.

[3] We also follow Bion's use of 'basic assumption' and 'work group' without hyphens when used as nouns, and with hyphens when used as adjectival phrases – 'basic-assumption mentality', 'work-group mentality' – despite discrepancies in the literature on Bion, and even occasionally in his own work: 'a part of basic assumption mentality' (Bion, 1961: 159).

[4] This imbalance is reflected in the proliferation of work on the basic assumptions. For example, two recent volumes, *Building on Bion* (Lipgar & Pines, 2003a, 2003b), include 90 references to basic assumptions but only 14 to the work group. The three *Group Relations Readers* (Colman & Bexton, 1975; Colman & Geller, 1985; Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004) have between them three times more references to basic assumptions than to the work group; and Pines (1985) has 42 references to basic assumptions but none at all to the work group. Similarly, in the recent *Dictionary of the Work of W.R. Bion* (López-Corvo, 2003), the entry for 'Basic assumption' is twice as long as that for 'Work group', and there are separate entries for each of Bion's three assumptions, as well as a further entry for 'Oscillations of Dependent basic assumptions'. More striking than the sheer weight of references, however, is the fact that the basic assumptions have been extended in a way that simply has not occurred with the work group. Bion himself describes three basic assumptions, pairing (baP), dependence (baD) and fight-flight (baF), while leaving work-group mentality (W) undifferentiated, as an apparently unified state. A fourth assumption has been identified, differently described as basic-assumption Oneness (baO) by Turquet (1974), and as basic-assumption Incohesion: Aggregation/ Massification (baIA/M) by Hopper (2003); and a fifth by Lawrence et al. (1996) – basic-assumption Me-ness (baM).

[5] In the literature, there is some variation in the use of abbreviations; here we follow Bion (1961: 105): baP, baD, baF and W.

[6] The description early in *Experiences in Groups* of seven qualities making up the 'good group spirit' (Bion, 1961: 25) might be taken as a preliminary sketch of the characteristics of work-group mentality.

[7] For the importance of the idea of learning by experience in Bion's work, see Bion, 1962, 1967. See also Levine, 2002.

[8] This group state is reminiscent of 'the phenomenon of not learning' in individual analysis, described by Riesenberg-Malcolm; an 'as-if' response, which she suggests is unconsciously intended 'precisely to avoid any emotional learning.' (Riesenberg-Malcolm, 1999: 125-6.)

[9] It may not be surprising that it was in the context of work with leaders that we first had these thoughts. Bion asserted that: 'All three basic assumptions contain the idea of a leader.' (Bion, 1961: 160.)