

## Learning from experience

*During the second world war a group of army psychologists and psychiatrists worked together for the War Office to find better ways of selecting officers for military service. These colleagues were known as 'the invisible college' which later formed the core staff of the reformed, and transformed, Tavistock Clinic and the associated Tavistock Institute after the war.*

*At the same time two senior members of that group, the medical psychoanalysts Wilfred Bion and John Rickman created a therapeutic community for troubled soldiers. Although it only lasted for a few weeks it led to further innovations in group consultation and training that are still operating and evolving today.*

*Both projects generated new theoretical concepts of human functioning in groups.*

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## Leadership and authority

Early in 1942 Bion was transferred to Edinburgh to serve in a new scheme for selecting officers, no 1. War Office Selection Board (WOSB), where he began to apply some of these ideas.

*After the fall of France a large land army had to be raised and officered by individuals drawn largely from outside the customary officer class. Many of these fought shy of putting themselves forward as candidates for officer training as they feared class prejudice on the part of the colonels who would interview them and who felt less secure themselves in making judgements outside their own social bounds. They were overlooking good candidates and sending forward too many poor ones (Trist, 1985: 6).*

Bion's method was new to the British Army. Over thirty candidates would spend almost three days together, living as a community. In addition to conventional individual interviews and psychological tests the men were put into groups where they had to introduce themselves, followed by a free discussion on a subject of their choosing. The psychiatrists, psychologists and military testing officers did not intervene but observed and took notes. Men were then given military problems to discuss and a practical group task to perform, such as building a temporary bridge together (Trist, 1985: 7). As Bion put it, the selecting officers could 'observe a man's capacity for maintaining personal relationships in a situation of strain that tempted him to disregard the interests of his fellows for the sake of his own' (Bion, 1946: 77)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> from Kraemer, S (2011) 'The dangers of this atmosphere' a Quaker connection in the Tavistock Clinic's development *History of the Human Sciences* 24: 82-102 <http://bit.ly/1GrShkl>

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What emerged from this remarkable exercise was the realisation that social class, education and athletic ability were less important for leadership than the capacity of the individual to attend to others in the group. Instead of a traditional authoritarian with an impressive voice and moustache, the better officers were sensitive to social process: “the conflict for each individual candidate was that he could demonstrate his abilities only through the medium of others” (Murray, 1990: 55). Up to that time the concept of authority had been implicitly associated with patriarchal notions of hierarchy and class. These pioneering social scientists had discovered that an exploration of differences within a peer group can lead to emotional learning about one’s own part in it. This has to include a sense of attentive concern – a maternal function, perhaps. Authority then becomes a power within oneself to relate to others, rather than to control them. Individuals who had to direct fighting men at the front line were selected on the basis of their capacity to manage *themselves* in this role. <sup>2</sup>

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The prevailing culture of front line – education, health, social services and emergency – services is based implicitly on a military notion that once trained, you can do the job, if necessary by following instructions from a protocol. These are orders which are given in the absence of one who has authority. When there are new skills to learn, new instructions can be issued. Authority then exists only in the management, not in the worker. <sup>2</sup>

### **Collective daydreams: basic assumptions**

Bion’s papers on groups begin in an ironic tone, suggesting that the very idea of therapy was bizarre: ‘It was disconcerting to find that the [Tavistock Clinic Professional] Committee seemed to believe that patients could be cured in such groups as these’ (Bion, 1961: 29). But he was also very scholarly, bringing – besides psychoanalysis – anthropology, philosophy, theology, ancient history and social science into his argument. Bion coined a new term for unconscious group process: basic assumptions. These are elements of ‘a proto-mental system in which physical and mental activity is undifferentiated’ (Bion, 1961: 154) and might be described as embodied collective daydreams. The larger the group the more primitive are the distractions from the primary work task, as if we become like toddlers who forget what they are meant to be doing. Basic assumptions are subliminal fantasies that demand various kinds of leader – an aggressive commander (“fight/flight’), an all-providing parent (‘dependency’) - not necessarily suitable for the task in hand. The

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<sup>2</sup> from Kraemer, S. (2015) Anxiety at the Front Line, In: D. Armstrong & M. Rustin (Eds.) *Social Defences against Anxiety: Explorations in a Paradigm*, Karnac <http://bit.ly/10yKcfl>

third of these, which Bion called 'pairing', is a sublime variation on the theme of reproduction and breeding. He noted how two people who are getting into deep conversation in a group can excite hopeful fantasies in the other members. 'My attention was first aroused by a session in which the conversation was monopolised by a man and a woman who appeared more or less to ignore the rest of the group' (Bion, 1961: 150). Bion describes an unwarranted optimism that then infuses the group, as if the two (who need not be of opposite sexes) are about to produce a saviour for them. 'For the feeling of hope to be sustained it is essential that the 'leader' of the group... should be unborn. It is a person or idea that will save the group..' (Bion, 1961: 151.)<sup>3</sup>

### **Group Relations<sup>4</sup>**

The institution of Tavistock group relations training conferences from 1957 onwards refined methods of experiential learning directly derived from wartime experiments (Miller, 1990; French & Vince, 1999; Armstrong, 2005). Similar events now take place around the world and are attended by people from industry, voluntary and public services, churches, trades unions and other fields. The aim is to learn about how one can play a part, more or less successfully, in an organisation. Meeting over several whole days (sometimes in residential settings) study groups of different sizes, from 8 to around 60 members with one or more facilitators, are invited to explore the process of the group as it happens. The 'here and now' is all there is.

This is a paradoxical and disturbing task. Conference members soon discover that a genuine wish to work together on the primary task is repeatedly undermined by rivalry, envy, ganging up, bullying and mockery, omnipotent fantasies and persecutory anxieties, visceral upsets such as pain or nausea, sexual desire, swings of mood from hilarity to despair, and a regressive pull to let someone else do the thinking that can be as powerful as an irresistible urge to sleep. It is chastening to discover how a group of educated and thoughtful people can so quickly become mindless under the sway of basic assumptions. Here is living evidence of usually unconscious forces that inform all groups, from professional networks unable to focus on child abuse in their midst (Kraemer, 1988) to governments that fail to reflect on the proper causes for war. What is almost always taken home from these events is a shocked appreciation of just how foolish and dangerous, yet also how productive, a group of people can be: 'one can see both the strength of the emotions associated with the basic assumption and the vigour and vitality which can be mobilized by the work group' (Bion, 1961: 100)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Kraemer 2011

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.tavistock.org/what-we-offer/group-relations/>

<sup>5</sup> Kraemer 2011

Putting a group of professional adults in a room to discuss their relationships with each other is an alarming thing to do. Anyone who has participated in a group relations reflective study group will recall the almost inescapable anxiety of their first moments with mostly unknown others. How are we to get on? Do I have to be nice to everyone, or can I risk having a go at saying what I actually think? A group gathered for no other purpose than to explore its workings generates a remarkable paralysis of decision making. This is living anthropology. Any attempt to take over the group is both welcomed and undermined. Relief at having someone in the lead is accompanied by varieties of attacks on assumed authority. A request, say, to visit another group elsewhere in the conference is slowed down by others who provide a variety of reasons for this not to happen: that “we must all stay together because there is some work to do first”, that “we should be clearer about the reason for the visit”, that the selected person is “not the right person” to go, and so on<sup>6</sup>.

### **Organisational consultancy**

Consultancy in the Tavistock tradition tends to amplify the ‘containing, as opposed to the controlling, function of the role of manager’ (French & Vince 1999: 9). While there has been continuous innovation (Menzies Lyth, 1988; Hughes & Pengelly, 1997; Obholzer & Roberts, 1994; Hinshelwood & Skogstad, 2000; Hartley & Kennard, 2009) these approaches nowadays have to compete with others that demand relatively little new thinking by staff. ‘Working below the surface’ (Huffington et. al., 2004) is more demanding. As Bion and Rickman discovered to their cost [in 1942 at Northfield Hospital, their revolutionary – the first – therapeutic community], unless senior managers are actively involved in setting up an experiential programme or have themselves had enlightening experiences in confidential peer groups, there will be suspicions when ‘staff support’ is proposed. Workers may assume that they are being sent to a ‘shrink’ to sort out organisational problems not of their making, while managers could perceive the staff group as plotting against them. Self-righteousness and ‘trades union’ issues (often valid) rapidly emerge. Without repeated rehearsal of the primary task – ‘why we agreed to do this’ – meetings soon wither from enthusiasm to pointlessness (Bolton & Zagier Roberts, 1994; Milton & Davison, 1997). As at Northfield most people in a new group will in any case blame someone else before any exploration of their own authority becomes possible; “..one of the first things the group does is roundly to attack the person they have called in to help them” (Rickman, 2003: 155).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kraemer 2015

<sup>7</sup> Kraemer 2011

### **The circle of chairs: work discussion**

Work discussion is a method of learning which depends on the shared reflections of members, exploiting the tensions that Rickman and Bion had put to work in wartime. While the conventional classroom set-up promotes a dependent group, all looking towards the teacher, a seminar in a circle of chairs has all members, including a facilitator, facing each other. Someone presents material from his or her work followed by comments from others. The facilitator holds back to allow members to engage with one another, to experience rivalry, to experiment with authority and take risks with their imagination. "What did it feel like to listen to this case? How do we understand these differences in perspective?" Silences are tolerated. Every contribution is regarded by the facilitator as presenting different but equally valid aspects of the case or theme. As Rickman reported from Northfield, 'Each individual member is valued for his contribution to the group..' (Bion & Rickman, 1943: 681).

The usual view in a class is that some students are better and their comments more useful than others. Here, in contrast, the facilitator resists the group's tendency to overrule a minority, instead accepting that any contribution – however inarticulate or annoying – has a point. Each person brings a partial perception of the whole, which is better understood when all the bits are put together. Work discussion has become a principal method of teaching in the Tavistock Clinic (Rustin & Bradley 2009). Klauber writes 'The experience of being part of a work discussion seminar is one of the elements to which former students allude as something that *has changed their lives.*' (italics in the original, Klauber, 2008: xx). Without reference to the War Office selection boards (WOSB), Martha Harris (1919–1987) one of the pioneers of child psychotherapy training at the Tavistock, refers to a selection process that takes place in training groups. 'Students .. need support to bear the exigencies of the work, but sometimes also towards selecting themselves out if the burden seems likely to be greater than the pleasure and profit derived from it. The attitude of the teaching group can surely do much to promote or discourage honesty in the individual' (Harris, 1981: 654)<sup>8</sup>.

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While the modern public service setting does not seem fertile soil for reflection, there are promising developments. The structured procedure of Schwartz rounds (Goodrich & Cornwell, 2012, Pepper, et al 2012), in which hospital staff are gathered for a monthly lunchtime meeting to discuss selected case presentations, may seem inflexible compared to psychoanalytical approaches, yet the anxieties arising in a reflective group are contained by this method sufficiently to keep the process going. It is regulated and

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<sup>8</sup> Kraemer 2011

facilitated by individuals who have been trained in it, in effect a manualised form of work discussion, and widely praised by participants. The text by Hartley and Kennard, *Staff Support Groups in the Helping Professions* (2009) though much less prescriptive, can be read as a handbook for group facilitators, offering practical yet sophisticated guidance for many of the familiar challenges of this work. A reflective method of teaching medical students to think about narratives of serious childhood illness has been running successfully in London for several years (Kraemer, 2016). A randomized controlled trial (Maratos, Tanner et al., *unpublished*) of staff support groups in mental health yielded encouraging results. The continued use, and effectiveness (Yakely, et al., 2011), of Balint groups in GP and psychiatry training is evidence of a commitment to horizontal learning in preparation for front line service. In social services an innovative method of peer support – dubbed ‘the pod’ – has been operating in the London borough of Hillingdon with encouraging effect:

*groups of between six and eight practitioners, each responsible for an individual caseload ... meet weekly to discuss their cases and provide support to each other. Whereas, in the past, staff were responsible for either the initial assessment process or longer-term care, now each member takes on a case from the start and sees it through to the point when it is closed. [Cole, 2013]*

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Horizontal work relationships are fragile, easily overcome by the prevailing hierarchical paradigm of corporatised public services, where using your authority can readily be taken as an abuse of someone else’s. Yet if an organization is genuinely prepared to support them, staff may feel secure enough to relax their guard and find their voices. However it is to be achieved, that security is promoted by a model of attentive leadership rooted in the systemic discoveries of seventy years ago, working at the intersection between the vertical and the horizontal where conflicting sources of power meet: “to keep alive in one’s experience the reality of the person, the group, the organization and the wider society” (Trist & Murray, 1990: 37)<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Kraemer 2015

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