

The group situation is constantly shifting, yet the continuous movement which can be observed does not occur haphazardly. Instead a certain underlying orderliness can be identified.

(Whitaker & Lieberman, 1964, p. 243)

Discuss with reference to the theories of group process developed by Wilfred Bion and by Dorothy Whitaker and Morton Lieberman.

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1. Introduction

Wilfred Bion, Dorothy Whitaker and Morton Lieberman demonstrate by their writings their beliefs that: "the group situation is constantly shifting, yet the continuous movement which can be observed does not occur haphazardly. Instead a certain underlying orderliness can be identified."(Whitaker & Lieberman, 1964, p. 243)

In particular the basic assumption states of dependence, fight and flight and pairing as described by Bion (1959) are reviewed as are other underlying group characteristics. These include the position of the individual relative to the group. The central focal conflict theory of Whitaker and Lieberman (1964) is also summarised with reference to disturbing and reactive motives. Both theories will be demonstrated to evoke unconscious states in group members which allows groups to follow orderly lines, observable to an analyst, beyond the knowledge of group members.

2. Shifts Constantly Occurring in Groups

In spite of the intelligible orderly design inherent in groups, both Bion (1959) and Whitaker and Lieberman (1964) accept the shifting of the group situation as groups evolve over time. Bion (1959) does not formally define the stages but implies the existence of a formation stage in which group members are uncomfortable and get to know each other. Emphasis appears to be on the role of the group leader in this phase.

Whitaker & Lieberman (1964) refer to an involvement or organisation stage which provokes conflict because of the pursuit by members of their self-interests and unwillingness to self-disclose their real interests. Both Bion (1959) and Whitaker & Lieberman (1964) imply a cohesive task oriented working phase in which problem solving occurs. Bion's (1959) focus is on how groups are diverted from this phase. Whitaker & Lieberman (1964), in contrast, examines how this phase operates through negotiation of

solutions within the framework of focal conflict. Both authors also recognise the shifting emphases and emotions involved with group termination.

The main emphasis of both writers, however, is not the shifts inherent in groups, but their continuity.

3. Bion

Bion's definition of a group is a number of individuals meeting together for a purpose (Bion, 1959; Rioch, 1970, p. 19). There is a common recognition of a joint purpose, group boundaries, a capacity and willingness to absorb new members, and a valuing of members for their contributions. Bion's definition of a group fits most task oriented groups and is typical of most group definitions.

Such a group is perceived by Bion as containing two metaphorical parts, which he calls 'the work group' and 'the basic assumption group'. The work group represents a group performing its real task, such as planning a conference. The structure of the group is determined by its purpose and task. Such a group is cooperative, rational and mature and is oriented towards completing its task as efficiently as possible. The members of such a group work together harmoniously, with each contributing to the fulfillment of the task. An example of such a group might be a school finance committee or a school senior staff meeting working together to allocate the funds of the school.

Bion (1959) suggests that many groups are detoured from their task orientation by frustration and breakdown of the work processes. Because a group may be unable to complete a task effectively a state of insecurity and anxiety is aroused. This frustration with the incomplete and troublesome task releases regressive emotional drives. The comparison is Freudian in the sense that the group wishes like a young child to return to a dependent primitive state.

Thelan (Pines, 1985, p. 146) refers to these unfortunate drives as the group's "heart of darkness" reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's novel by the same name. The comparison is apt because Conrad suggests that every man harbours the seeds of his own innate evil, which like the tempting apple before Adam and Eve, leads to temptation, commitment of evil and ultimately to man's downfall. Similarly, the possibility that all groups may regress to primitive states destroys their effectiveness as rational task oriented bodies.

3.1 Basic Assumption States

The drives are termed 'the basic assumption groups' meaning that members in groups will behave as if certain assumptions were true. The group's adherents tend to participate in mass action, in an unconscious way that is only coherent and understandable if viewed from the perspective of an assumption shared by its members.

A better analogy is culture. A culture is an accepted way of doing things which is characteristic of the group. Yet in Bion's (1959) sense the group is bound by a culture which is transparent and unknowable to its members. Bion (1959) refers to the group as an organism, implying that all group members like heart, lungs and liver of a homo sapiens, are functioning together to fulfill some unknown overriding purpose. Like the analogy to the body's organs, the common purpose may not be apparent to the group members.

Bion (Pines, 1985) refers to a proto-mental state which is a prototype of the basic assumption. This postulate is a matrix in which physical and mental elements are undifferentiated in human beings. His system prepares individuals for life in groups, but the theory conflicts with their abilities to function as individuals. Bion does not examine individual functioning.

Sanders (1984) suggests that an experience of problem solving and functioning in groups is essential for normal development. Otherwise frustrations will lead to the basic assumption states.

Bion's (1959) assumptions underlying the group process remain constant during the life of the group and do not deviate. Consequently, the group can be perceived to be struggling in a characteristic way throughout all its meetings and its life to meet some unmet requirement.

These assumptions are vaguely outlined as dependency, fight or flight responses and pairing. Bion (1959, p. 77) notes that a group will "...easily and spontaneously ... structure itself in a manner suitable for acting on these basic assumptions...." Bion (1959, p. 160) notes that these assumptions are all anti-intellectual, anti-individual and are opposed to change and development.

3.1.1 Dependency State

The dependency state is described by Bion as one in which the group seeks security and protection by a strong leader who will meet their needs almost magically (Bion, 1959, p. 74). Group members are perceived as helpless, immature and weak in contrast to an omnipotent dominating leader.

Because a leader cannot live up to expectations, the leader may be deserted by the group for a more extreme or disturbed leader (Pines, 1985). There is greed of group members and conflict between their needs, but the leader is unrealistically expected to solve all their problems. The dependent group is exemplified by a doctor-patient relationship or a religious group in which exegesis of a written work may replace the actual leader.

Perhaps an example of such a group would be the Jones religious group which committed mass suicide on the command of its leader in Guyana. These group members looked to its leader to meet all their needs including the needs for security, food, shelter, and higher needs such as social belonging, self-

concept and self-actualisation. When the leader was threatened by outside intervention as exemplified by the visit of the American congressman, the group may have been prepared to abandon Jones. Instead, the more extreme or radical solution of mass suicide was adopted. This move fits Bion's (1959) prediction that groups will accept more radical leaders or solutions when current leaders are unable to meet their needs.

3.1.2 Fight-Flight State

The fight-flight assumption suggests self-preservation as the goal, realised by fighting an enemy or running away from danger. The group member is subordinate to the group in this assumption state. The leader is seen as a military officer who can mobilise action for fight or flight, recognises danger and inspires sacrifice. Action replaces introspection in this state. The army represents an example of this type of basic assumption group.

Perhaps an example of a leader of this type of group is Saddam Hussein of Iraq. He has been accepted by a country which is prepared to be aggressive in meeting its needs for wealth and security. Saddam entitles himself as king. The very notion of a King is anachronistic in a democratic age and suggests regressive tendencies by the group. The King's involvement in a ten year war with Iran demonstrated the leader's ability to mobilise his country on a military footing.

His current negotiations with Iran and the signing of a peace treaty illustrates his opposing trait, a willingness to retreat in order to protect the country. Hussein's frequent threats to use chemical weapons and his assertion that his soldiers are ready to die suggest his ability to inspire self-sacrifice. This type of country is characterised by impulsive action such as demonstrated by the invasion of Kuwait, rather than rational planning.

3.1.3 Pairing State

Pairing states refer to dyad discussions by group members which are looked upon by other group members as preliminary attempts leading to sex, reproduction and growth of the group. Once again a Freudian analogy has been utilised by Bion, who was a Freudian psychiatrist by training. The state represents optimism and hope which must not be realised to be effective (Bion, 1959, p. 152). Pairing is seen as a method to preserve and to renew the group through the metaphor of birth. An aristocracy represents an example of this type of assumption group.

This group is less common and may be characteristic of therapeutic groups. Because of the lack of structure and insecurity caused by unmet needs, group members tend to share their concerns in pairs. Other group members may watch and listen to pairs in discussion. In a metaphorical sense, members place their optimism in these pairs to resolve their problems. Nevertheless, the trust in pairs is based on hope for some illusory future rather than an understanding of the interaction which is occurring in pairs. In this sense, pairing is anti-intellectual.

3.2 Submergence of Rationality and the Individual

All basic assumption states are similar in their irrational, anti-intellectual, inward, and fantasy nature. The assumption states look backward as if through a car's rear vision mirror and resist change and knowledge. This basic conservatism may be identified as another unvarying characteristic of group life in the basic assumption state.

Another common characteristic of Bion's theory is the characterization of individual members being subordinate to the group throughout the group life. Unlike democratic theory which suggests that every member should maximise his or her potential as a person, Bion's (1959) members are inferior to the group. In the fight-flight group, in particular individuals are easily sacrificed for the benefit of the whole.

Bion (1959) suggests that on the positive side, basic assumption states may be controlled and utilised rationally such as occurs in churches, or armies. Yet the process is undertaken by a leader in a Machiavellian fashion by hegemonic exploitation of the basic assumption states of his cohorts in order to achieve an ends.

Bion (1959, p. 116) coins the chemical term valency to represent the attraction of a group's basic assumption for an individual. All individuals have some valency towards at least one predominant assumption state. In essence Bion (1959) is suggesting that we carry within us the seeds of our own irrationality which may grow with poisonous malignancy within the hothouse climate of the group.

For effective functioning, a group must be in its task state but harness the underlying basic assumption state to work in conjunction with the task. In doing so Bion believes that groups may be successful (Rioch, 1970, p. 29). Pines (1985) also suggests that by examining how groups avoid their tasks with assumption states, they may be redirected back to their task.

4. A Focal-Conflict Model

Whitaker & Lieberman (1964) suggest that groups possess coherence amidst their diversity because of shared underlying feelings. Like Bion's (1959) groups, this underlying element is most difficult to detect when a group is working on a task. It is more apparent in therapeutic groups which lack a clear task orientation. In addition members of therapeutic groups are frequently insecure, anxious and may be under stress. What is reacted to by the group is based on members expectations, the group structure and the group composition and becomes an emerging and common group concern.

This concern becomes a means for members to reduce anxiety and to allay underlying conflicting feelings, wishes and fears. Whitaker and Lieberman (1964) term this shared aspect as a 'group focal con-

flict'. The shared concern is a conflict because each member possesses a wish or disturbing motive and a fear or reactive motive which absorbs their energies. Group solutions are attempts to resolve this conflict and to reduce anxiety as much as possible. A group theme is a series of focal conflicts linked by common wishes. These linked themes represent group culture.

As was apparent with Bion's basic assumption states, Whitaker's and Lieberman's (1964) group members are unaware of the underlying focal conflict. They enter with a cultural baggage of habitual and sometimes maladjusted personal solutions which they are desperately attempting to implement. Group discussions threaten the individual by challenging these solutions as incompatible with the group solution. Members may recognise the direct, observable and attractive nature of solutions to barely understood conflicts or they may choose to withdraw from the focal conflict.

Conflicts of solutions lead to a choice of a shared solution which reduces fears and anxiety. Members may influence the group prior to the adoption of a group solution or block the group in its choice of solutions.

Solutions may deal only with fears in a reactive sense or may also satisfy the disturbing motive. The group focal conflict life span extends from the initial fear to its resolution in a group solution.

The focal group conflict emerges slowly during a group's life in a series of steps or shifts in equilibrium with every remark relevant to either the disturbing or reactive motive or the solution. Whitaker and Lieberman (1964) illustrate this phenomena by analysing a transcript of a therapeutic group meeting to demonstrate how the comments of each group members fits the moves by the group to resolve the underlying focal conflict. Shifts occur in individual stances as each seeks to meet wishes or react to fears, negotiating to persuade the group to adopt their favourite solutions.

The movement of the group represents the sum of individual moves. Feelings of anxiety and

attitudes vary based on the relationship of group to private concerns. The degree of exploration relates to the degree that a solution satisfies fears or anxieties. The higher the degree of anxiety, the less the willingness to take risks.

Movement to a new theme by a group occurs with expression of a solution which meets most needs and the expression of new disturbing motives. Yet in spite of this apparent movement forward, themes reoccur during both the formative and established phases in a recidivist manner.

The process of groups begins with emerging themes in the formative phase which are marked by restrictive solutions. These solutions express anger at therapists, project sexual feelings, imply group similarity and disguise disturbing motives. The group becomes committed, and achieves solutions for these initial focal conflicts. This marks the established phase in which themes reoccur and are resolved with restrictive or enabling solutions.

The client learns in groups by actively discussing core focal conflicts in safety. These are issues with which his habitual solutions have not worked. One learns that these frequently used modes of response are not necessary by group feedback, self-questioning, exposure to new information and examination of the positions of others. For instance, a member who frequently uses sarcasm to put down other ideas and to obtain a desired objective, may be told of the technique and its effect on other group members. In this way the member may learn to explore other techniques.

Whitaker's and Lieberman's (1964) focal group conflict with its disturbing and reactive motives is more explanatory than Bion's (1959) model in explaining how individuals benefit and change in groups. The model allows room for growth in individual understanding and behaviour as opposed to reversions to basic assumption states. The model suggests progress of a group to a win-win situation in which a rational solution will eventually be adopted which benefits all group members.

5. Conclusion

The lack of conscious awareness of the group in addressing the central focal conflict is reminiscent of Bion's (1959) approach. As individuals may be dominated by the unknown forces of the superego and id in Freudian psychoanalytical terminology, so are both models implying that groups are guided by unknowable unconscious forces which provide underlying continuity to the group process. The basic assumption states of dependency, fight-flight and pairing have been replaced by Whitaker and Lieberman (1964) with an underlying but unconscious focal conflict which members both wish and fear to resolve. In both models groups demonstrate an underlying orderliness as members unconsciously accept assumptions or react to conflicts.

As a psychoanalyst explains the behaviours of a client, so may an observer show knowledge of the group culture and make the behaviours and discussion of the group explicable. If the theories are to be viewed as scientific, however, the observations of the behaviour of a group must be not only explained but also made predictable. Observations compared with predictions about behaviour must demonstrate congruence. Such congruence may demonstrate the degree of veracity of the theory.

A review of three major bibliographic indices, ERIC, Psychological Abstracts and Sociofile covering every major educational, sociological and psychological journal worldwide has failed to reveal any such research or much of any research having occurred in the last ten years. Perhaps the failure of these theories to inspire research rests on their non-scientific nature. This nature is also apparent in Freudian theories from which they stem.

There are no operational definitions derived from the theories which may be measured. Scientific theories can be proven false. These theories cannot and are by definition, non-scientific. The theories suffer from a lack of definiteness, fit facts to justify theory and use *ad hoc* premises. It is easy and non-scientific to examine groups after they have operated and select facts which appear to confirm basic

assumption states and focal conflict.

The challenge is to identify a newly formed group and to identify⁵ the underlying orderliness the group will demonstrate in advance. Both Bion and Whitaker have failed in this task.

6. Bibliography

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