

*What is a Group?*  
*A discussion of Bion's*  
*Experiences in Groups*

Antony Froggett



2005

## INTRODUCTION

---

The answer to the question “*what is a group?*” is inevitably partial and incomplete. Group theorists are like the blind men in the Indian story that went to see an elephant, each grabbing a different part and separately proclaiming it was like a wall, a spear, a snake, a tree, a fan and a rope.<sup>1</sup> In this essay I give a brief outline of Experiences in Groups and suggest that we need to develop new ways of engaging with Bion’s ideas. I suggest that we need a conceptual leap in order to answer the essay title and that paradoxically a wish to define “what is a group?” may prevent us from having our own *experiences in groups*.

## BRIEF OUTLINE OF BION’S EXPERIENCES IN GROUPS

---

Bion makes a radical statement in his Experiences in Groups. Rather than accepting the conventional idea of a group as a collection of individuals he sees something more fundamental to the notion of the group. He states, “*I consider that group mental life is essential to the full life of the individual... and that satisfaction of this need has to be sought through membership of a group*” (Bion 1961:54). He is asserting that the group is at the core of what it means to be a human being – and that a group is both an external object and an active psychological element in the psyche of individuals. The group therefore is always present and interwoven into our human experience.<sup>2</sup>

Accounts of Bion’s *Experiences in Groups* understandably focus on his reference to basic assumption groups. There is a standard reading of these papers which I summarise briefly below. Bion distinguished between a “work group” – in which individuals cooperate together and are able to focus on the task for which they come together – and what he called basic assumption groups (BaG). The Fundamental element of BaG functioning is that “*the welfare of the individual is a matter of*

---

<sup>1</sup> See John Godfrey Saxe’s (1816-1887) version of this story at [http://www.noogenesis.com/pineapple/blind\\_men\\_elephant.html](http://www.noogenesis.com/pineapple/blind_men_elephant.html)

<sup>2</sup> Bion wrote, “*in fact no individual, however isolated in time and space, should be regarded as outside of a group or lacking in active manifestations of group psychology*” (1961:169)

*secondary consideration – the group comes first, in flight the individual is abandoned; the paramount need is for the group to survive...*” (Bion 1961:64)

It is under the pressure of what might be called survival anxiety that the group operates *as if* it were meeting for a different purpose. Bion named three types of basic assumption groups: dependency (BaD), pairing (BaP) and fight-flight (BaF). In BaD it is as if the group has met in order to be sustained by a leader on whom it depends. In BaP there is the wish to create a pair in order to provide the feeling of “Messianic hope” that will save the group. In BaF, it is as if the group has met in order to fight or to run away from an external threat. Bion stated that these basic assumptions could be observed not just in small study groups but in society as a whole. For example, he saw the army as particularly responsible for BaF phenomena whilst viewing the Church as promoting BaD. Bion referred to these institutions as *specialized work groups* (1961:167) because of the way they utilised basic assumptions within their functioning. Bion (1961:117-119) used the concept of *valency* to explain an individual’s willingness to take up roles in a basic assumption group, suggesting that individuals have a high pre-disposition to take up particular stances within a BaG.

In his Review paper, Bion links his work to that of Melanie Klein. He describes the group as approximating in the minds of individuals “*primitive phantasies about the contents of the mother’s body*” and that the mechanisms in the group for dealing with these fears “*are characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position*” (1961:162). Eric Trist points out that this paper, originally published in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* in 1952, came five years after the *Experiences in Groups* papers published in *Human Relations*, and that this was “long after he had ceased to take groups” (1983:266). The conventional view is that Bion withdrew his interest in groups as a result of his analysis with Melanie Klein who was known not to share his dual interest in groups and psychoanalysis. Others however have questioned this view. Trist, reporting his conversation with Bion states, “*he said to me that he was disappointed in the results he now got from his groups – they were not accurate enough, he said – compared with psychoanalysis*” (1987:268). In contrast, Armstrong (1995b) argues that we can still see Bion’s enduring interest in groups in his later

writings and that there has been a mis-reading of Bion by concentrating on his Review paper at the expense of his other writings.<sup>3</sup>

## AN EVALUATION OF EXPERIENCES IN GROUPS

My summary of Experiences in Groups is deliberately very brief. Bion's papers are well known and have been highly influential in the development of thinking about groups, in particular in the area of organisational consultancy (e.g. Stokes 1994). However, they have also become part of the assumptions that we bring when we enter a group – like a well worn map that tells us what to expect ahead of us. A potential consequence of this is a diminishment of our engagement with experiences within groups. Too often in groups there is the notion that by saying something is “a basic assumption” it has been understood. This is of course as ridiculous as believing that to say something is ‘electricity’ is to understand the construction of the atom and the process of how mass is converted into energy.<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, we need to forget about basic assumptions and work groups if we are able to fully engage with the life of a group. This appears to be what Bion himself did. David Armstrong gives a fascinating account of being in Bion's last study group at the Tavistock:

*“...Bion never gave the slightest impression of being the author of Experiences in Groups. Some of us had read this beforehand with varying degrees of understanding and frustration. We were primed to spot ‘basic assumptions’ at work and to be offered the evidence from our experience of their reality. We were to be sadly disappointed and then intrigued... In the early sessions he often spoke about ‘naming’ and the use of names: the way naming has an illusionary quality, as if it were felt to be the answer to a question rather than the question for which an answer needs to be sought” (1995b:119)*

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, Armstrong (1995b) points out that Attention and Interpretation is sub-titled “psychoanalytic insight in individuals *and groups*”

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Bion (whose father was an engineer) describes how as a child he did not understand the word “electricity”, mishearing it as a place called “electric city”.

We therefore perhaps need to question the unspoken premise in the title of this essay i.e. that if we want to answer the question “what is a group?” we should look at Bion’s Experiences in Groups. Bion himself did not see this as amongst his best writings and was bemused by its popularity. He wrote, “*the one book I couldn’t be bothered with... has been a continuous success*” (Bion 1985:213).

Bion had a deep suspicion of institutions and institutional life. He stated, “*the trouble about all institutions – the Tavistock Institute and everyone that we have- is that they are dead...*” (interview with Banet 1976). He went out of his way to avoid being seen as the leader of a movement or school of psychoanalysis. The problem is perhaps that, contrary to the stance taken by Bion, having *experiences in groups* comes to be replaced by being taught Experiences in Groups. I work as a group analyst. It is not arrogant to state that I have probably spent more time in study and therapy groups than Bion. Why then have I not written my own Experiences in Groups? To reply that this is because “Bion was a genius and I am not” may be true, but it is also a restrictive answer. I think the answer lies in my (un)willingness to have experiences without withdrawing into omnipotence as a way to avoid thinking.<sup>5</sup> To place oneself in a group with other people is a daunting experience that potentially threatens our sense of self and the way we see the world.

Perhaps the most radical idea in Experiences in Groups is his reference to “binocular vision” (1961:8), which he uses to refer to modes of looking relating to *the sphinx* (i.e. knowledge and science) and *the oedipal situation*. Importantly he does not describe these as two separate phenomena, but rather as modes of observation. In other words he is drawing attention away from the object and towards our way of looking i.e. towards the lens that allows us to see.

Bion had a very particular lens, no doubt reflecting his life experiences which he describes in The Long Weekend. He was born in India in 1897, at the height of the British Empire and the Raj. He was removed from his parents at the age of eight and sent to an English boarding school. Later he felt outrage at the conduct of officers

---

<sup>5</sup> When I was training to be a teacher in the 1980s, my tutor told our group that we shouldn’t worry about being inexperienced in the classroom or compare ourselves to our more established colleagues. He said, “some teachers have five years of experience, but others have one year of experience five times”. Of course, he meant that we gain experience by learning rather than by longevity.

when he was plunged into the First World War at the age of nineteen.<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Pines describing Bion's autobiographical writings states,

*“Reading this narrative with its barely suppressed ground-base of rage and despair, I could see how Bion became a man primarily concerned for the basic things in life and how this connected with his elucidation of the basic issues of group life ...”* (1983:252-253)

It is important to note that Bion's short period of work with groups comes in the main when he is still a serving officer in the army. It is simplistic, but not inaccurate, to state that Bion's concerns are about the nature of leadership and authority (Bion 1961:38-39). He is, implicitly, thinking both as a psychiatrist and an army officer. His technique, often called “the group as a whole approach”, reflects a particular understanding of the relationship of the individual to the group. This stance has been criticised by a number of theorists (e.g. Gustafson and Cooper 1979). This critique of Bion is perhaps best articulated again by Pines:

*“Bion was an amazingly perceptive observer of psychological phenomena but in his early work on groups he seemed to omit to account for the effects of his personality and technique on the situation that he was observing. He assumed that scientific and objective data could be obtained by the analytic instruments of the therapist's mind... Bion had an impressive but remote personality, his remarks were often cryptic and difficult to understand ... His technique fostered frustration and from the powerful forces of unleashed frustration develop the regressive group mentalities he so beautifully described”* (1987:259)

Others have disputed this view (e.g. Lipgar 2005, Symington 1996). I however find this argument convincing. In Bion's writings about groups there is little sense of *reverie*, *O*<sup>7</sup>, or *transformation*, that illuminate his later writings. It is hard to see how

---

<sup>6</sup> Maratos (1987:281) suggests the possibility of reading the three parts of his autobiography in terms of his concept of basic assumptions: India (dependency), Boarding School (pairing), and War (fight-flight).

<sup>7</sup> Bion defined *O* as “...absolute truth, the godhead, the infinite, the thing-in-itself. *O* does not fall into the domain of knowledge, or learning, save incidentally; it can be “become”, but it cannot be

more mature themes – of love, belonging, and identity – could emerge in his early groups. It has been left for others within the group relations tradition to develop Bion’s ideas about groups (e.g. Armstrong et al 1995).

## NEGATIVE CAPABILITY AND GROUPS

---

The answer to the question “*what is a group?*” is complex. This is because there are many different types of groups – family groups, work groups, pop concerts, therapy groups, social groups, football supporters, study groups, mother and baby groups, terrorist cells, groups in Sweden and groups in Africa. In some ways they are the same but in others they are significantly different.<sup>8</sup>

However, there is a more fundamental way in which a group is many different things. Linguistically the term “group” can refer to a single noun (e.g. a rock group) or a collective noun (e.g. a group of sunbathers). The word group is also as a verb, which can be transitive (meaning to place or arrange items) or intransitive (indicating to form or belong to a group). Lastly the term group can also be used as an adjective, such as when we describe something as “a group effort”. If we think of a group solely as a noun we can define a group in a fairly straight-forward manner using concepts such as “membership” and “boundaries”. If we move beyond this then our thinking needs to become more sophisticated. Physicists have both wave and particle theories to explain the nature of light. Depending on the method of observation, light appears to act as if it were a series of particles or as if it were a wave. Apparently contradictory scientific models are able to co-exist.

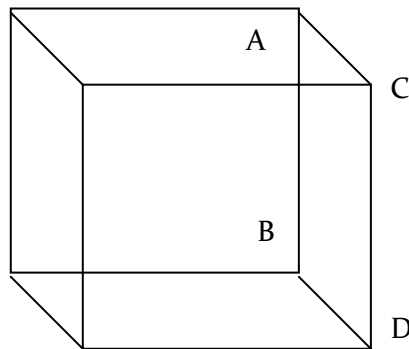
Previously I mentioned Bion’s concept of binocular vision and my notion of vertical and horizontal axes to understand different aspects of groups. Two lenses or axes are the minimum needed to locate an object in space. Binoculars give us the sense of

---

*“known”. It is darkness and formlessness but it enters the domain of K (knowledge) when it is evolved to a point where it can be known, through knowledge gained by experience, and formulated in terms derived from sensuous experience; its existence is conjectured phenomenologically”. (1970:26)*

<sup>8</sup> See Biran (2003) for a description of issues of running a group including Jews and Arabs in Israel.

depth, but this is illusionary. It depends on the functioning of our brain to hypothesize a third dimension from two dimensional data. The diagram below is the one used by Bion to illustrate his idea that the group leader must see “*constantly changing points of view*” and “*see the reverse as well as the obverse of every situation*” (1961:86).



The diagram only works because of the capacity of our brain to translate a flat plane into a three dimensional image. There is also a fourth dimension – which is time. We know time exists but we are not able perceive it directly. If we were, objects that appear as solid and fixed would be perceived as being in a constant state of change. Going back to our thinking about language, we might expect a people who could see in four dimensions to have fewer nouns and more verbs to articulate the world around them. It is 90 years since Einstein developed the concept of space-time which allowed a vision of the universe in which space and time where not absolute but could fluctuate and curve in order to produce phenomena such as black holes.<sup>9</sup> Modern scientists, using ideas such as *String Theory*, have suggested that our universe has at least ten dimensions, most of which cannot be observed (Osborne et al 2002).

This may seem a rather abstract, philosophical digression. However I am suggesting that we should not limit our capacity to understand according to our capacity to see. It may be that we need the metaphor of a kaleidoscope rather than binoculars in order to conceptualise of “the constantly changing points of view” within a group. In his later

---

<sup>9</sup> Bion (1991:573) wrote, “*don’t you think it pathetic that when Science and its brood of astronomers leads unmistakably to the discovery of our insignificance in contrast with those gigantic forces – novae, super novae, black holes and the rest – someone is sure to apply a mental first-aid dressing and hurl us back into the downy comfort of ignorance. Doesn’t that depress you?*”



writings, Bion became increasingly interested in the idea of mysticism as a way of attempting to engage with psychic reality that cannot be known or experienced directly. He used Keats term *Negative Capability* to refer to the capacity to remain “*in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason*” (1970:125). For me, it is when I have been in a group setting that I have experienced this terrifying not-knowing, and I have temporarily lost the assumptions that I have about myself and others.

## CONCLUSION

---

In responding to the essay title I have attempted to make problematic the question “*what is a group?*”. It is possible to see groups as things (nouns) that can be studied in an apparently objective manner. I have argued however that it is perhaps more fruitful is to consider our capacity to *see*. Bion advocated that we be “without memory or desire”, but we all have our desires. He wanted to make sense of the primitive destructiveness that he had observed in the First World War and the inadequacies of the army command in leading the soldiers who died. I also have my desires – to understand whether I am the same or different from others and to feel a sense of belonging. We all share a wish for security; for things to be known and predictable. We can use Experiences in Groups in this manner, to protect us from uncertainties and mysteries, if we wish. In the end, there are important aspects of being in a group that are very difficult to explain or put into words, like the dimensions of the universe that cannot be experienced directly by the senses. We are indeed like the blind men in the Indian story who could not grasp the enormity and complexity of what they were unable to see. However, if we are able to tolerate our ignorance then perhaps we will be capable of having our own experiences in groups from which we might learn.

## POSTSCRIPT

---

This essay was written as part of the Tavistock MA in *Consultation and the Organisation: Psychoanalytic Approaches*. For all my other assignments I was given a merit or a distinction. This essay on groups failed to achieve an MA pass. While I may not have adhered closely to the marking scheme, I was also perhaps “guilty” of criticising Bion. It seems that the long and strained relationship between group analysis and the Tavistock tradition in group theory continues.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

- Armstrong et al (1995) Group Relations: an introduction London: Process Press  
<http://www.human-nature.com/rmyoung/papers/paper99.html>\*
- Armstrong (1995a) *Making Absences Present* Paper presented to seminar on  
*Group Relations and Organisational Behaviour*  
New Bulgarian University 14 May 1995  
<http://www.human-nature.com/hraj/armstrong.html>
- Armstrong (1995b) *Names, Thoughts and Lies: The Relevance of Bion's Later  
Writing to Experiences in Groups* in Armstrong et al  
Group Relations: an introduction London: Process Press  
p117- 135 <http://human-nature.com/group/chap7.html>
- Banet A G (1976) *Bion Interview* Group and Organisational Studies  
I (3): 268-285
- Bion, F (1995) *The Days of Our Years* The Melanie Klein and Object  
Relations Journal Vol. 13 (1)  
<http://www.pschoanalysis.org.uk/days.htm>
- Bion W R (1961) Experiences in Groups London: Tavistock Publications
- Bion W R (1970) Attention and Interpretation London: Tavistock  
Publications
- Bion W R (1982) The Long Weekend Abingdon: Fleetwood Press
- Bion W R (1985) All my sins remembered (another part of a life), the other side  
of genius (family letters) Abingdon: Fleetwood Press
- Bion W R (1991) A Memoir of the Future London: Karnac Books
- Biran (2003) *The Difficulty of Transforming Terror into Dialogue*  
Group Analysis 36(4): 490.

- Foulkes (1948) Introduction to Group Analytic Psychotherapy London: Heinemann
- Freud (1921) Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego Standard Edition 18, p67-143
- Gustafson & Cooper (1979) *Collaboration in Small Groups: Theory and Technique for the Study of Small Group Process* Human Relations 31 p155-171
- Lawrence (1991) *Won from the Void and Formless Infinite: Experiences of Social Dreaming* Free Associations (22) 2 p259-294  
<http://www.human-nature.com/hraj/lawren1.html>
- Lawrence (1995) *Signals of Transcendence in Large Groups as Systems* in Armstrong et al Group Relations: an introduction London: Process Press p167- 184  
<http://www.human-nature.com/group/chap9.html>
- Lipgar (2005) *Building On Bion's Legacy: How Not To Throw Out The Baby With The Bathwater* Paper presented at the ISPSO Symposia  
<http://www.ispso.org/Symposia/Baltimore/2005%20papers/2005Lipgar.htm>
- Maratos (1987) *Book review of The Long-Weekend, 1987-1919. Part of a life by WR Bion* Group Analysis 20 (3) p281-282
- Osborne et al (2002) *Spacetime, Warped Branes, and Hidden Dimensions* SCIENCE MAGAZINE 296: 1417
- Pines (1987) *Bion: a Group-Analytic Appreciation* Group Analysis (20) 3 p251-262
- Stokes (1994) *The Unconscious at Work in Groups and Teams: Contributions from the Work of Wilfred Bion* in Obholzer and Roberts (eds) The Unconscious at Work London: Routledge p19-27

Symington, J&N (1996) The Clinical Thinking of Wilfred Bion

London: Routledge

Trist (1987)

*Some Additional Reflections on Working with Bion in the*

*'Forties* Group Analysis 20 (3) p263-270

Wardi (1992)

Memorial Candles: Children of the Holocaust

London:

Routledge

\*

A number of references used in this essay have been posted on the internet. The printed version, where available, may be different from the version that has been used in this essay.