

Basic assumption groups (W. R. Bion)

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from: The fifth basic assumption by W. Gordon Lawrence, Alastair Bain, and Laurence Gould (Free Associations (1996) Volume 6, Part 1 (No. 37): 2855) [[pdf](#)]

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The authors state:

Experiences in Groups

There are many renditions of [Wilfried R.] Bion's formulation about groups but none can replicate the richness of the original. Like his Brazilian and ..., for example, Experiences in Groups requires close and repeated attention. Bion's major hypothesis was that when any group of people meet to do something, i.e., a task, there are in actuality two groups, or two configurations of mental activity, present, at one and the same time. There is the sophisticated work group (referred to as the W group) but this group is 'constantly perturbed by influences that come from other group mental phenomena' * which are primarily what Bion called the basic assumption groups (referred to as the ba groups).

What is the experience of being in a W group?

It is to be in a group in which all the participants are engaged with the primary task because they have taken full cognizance of its purpose. They cooperate because it is their will. ... Essentially, the W group mobilises sophisticated mental activity on the part of its members which they demonstrate through their maturity. They manage the psychic boundary between their inner and outer worlds. They strive to manage

themselves in their roles as members of the W group. ... The participants use their skills to understand the inner world of the group, as a system, in relation to the external reality of the environment. In a W group the participants can comprehend the psychic, political, and spiritual relatedness in which they are participating and are co-creating. ... In actuality the behaviour of the people in the group is often on another dimension. This is ba behaviour. The genius of Bion was to recognise that people in groups behave at times collectively in a psychotic fashion or, rather, the group mentality drives the process in a manner akin to temporary psychosis.

The term 'psychotic' is being used in this context to mean a 'diminution of effective contact with reality', to borrow Menzies Lyth's phrase.

Bion's three basic assumption groups

Bion adumbrated three ba groups. The members of the group behave 'as if' they were sharing the same tacit, unconscious assumption. Life in a ba group is oriented towards inner phantasy, not external reality. To identify a ba is to give meaning to the behaviour of the group and elucidate on what basis it is not operating as a W group. The three ba groups of Bion are:

- ba dependency (baD);
- ba fight/flight (baF/E); and
- ba pairing (baP)

Tourquet's basic assumption group "One-ness"

- ba One-ness;

Lawrence / Bain / Gould's fifth basic assumption group "Me-ness"

- ba Me-ness

As the opposite of One-ness the authors are proposing another basic assumption group that emphasises *separateness*; that hates the idea of

'we':

"A major difference between baM and other ba groups is that in the former it is the group which is invisible and unknowable whereas in the latter cultures it is the individual who is invisible and unknowable. In the cultures of baD, baF/F, baP, and baO the individual becomes lost in them. In baM culture the overriding anxiety is that the individual will be lost in the group if it ever emerges."

The authors further state:

"Hence, the emergence of baM which is a resistance to both ba and W behaviour. The paradox is that while the architectonic belief is that only the individual can come to know anything, this belief causes the individuals to co-create and co-act in a ba group. So they enter a ba group in spite of their efforts to avoid this experience. ...

In baM it is as if each individual was a self-contained group acting in its own right. A baM culture can never tolerate the collective activities of a W group because a baM culture has only individualistic preoccupations. A baM culture is more likely to pay attention to private troubles than ever it would to public issues, to use C. Wright Mills's classic distinction, because they have no relevance for the individuals. ... Our working hypothesis, now, is that there is a new phenomenon in that particular individuals can get caught up in a mental activity that does not allow them to enter the 'I'/singleton state and holds them in what, we are to call, the 'me'/singleton state because they never want to experience membership of a group. ...

Any social figuration such as the group, society, thus comes to represent the damaged and damaging object. The group is construed as an antagonistic object because it is deemed to be phobic.

Consequently, the 'me' who feels impotent and vulnerable, with real anxieties about obliteration, takes up a counterdependent position to the group which is succeeded by a denial of its very existence; only 'me' has reality. This seems to be of the essence of baM. Part of the experience of being in baM is of being present in a room with a set of other people who must never form a group because it is by unconscious definition a nongroup; must never achieve a language that can make use of 'we'. It is to be in a scientific posture of observing an object. The object is always potentially threatening and damaging. It can never carry hope. It is

disappointing and always frustrating. In such a situation there is no space for concern for the mood is fatalistic—whatever happens, happens! All that one can do in such a situation is survive by keeping the goodness in and the dirty, messy, contaminating, reality of the other out. There is no place for emotions because the concern of the participants is that feelings be not experienced and that they be not expressed. Hence, life in a baM culture is ordered, calm, polite, and androgynous. ...

Bion makes reference to Freud's idea that particular specialized work groups make use of the activities of particular basic assumptions. Bion goes on to say that the Church or an Army has to hold on to basic assumption mentality and work group activity at one and the same time. ...

Here we are puzzling out the relationship between baM activity and Work group activity recognising that 'basic assumption mentality does not lend itself into action'. **** ...

Bion's hypotheses derive from a psychoanalytic knowing of groups. This has enabled us to see connections between basic assumption behaviour and the interpretation of what reality might be. Basic assumption behaviour is psychotic, albeit temporarily. The more permanent it becomes, however, the more that mature, healthy individuals capable of social contribution, because they have a capacity for rush, are swamped in the basic assumption cultures of groups, organizations, or society. ...

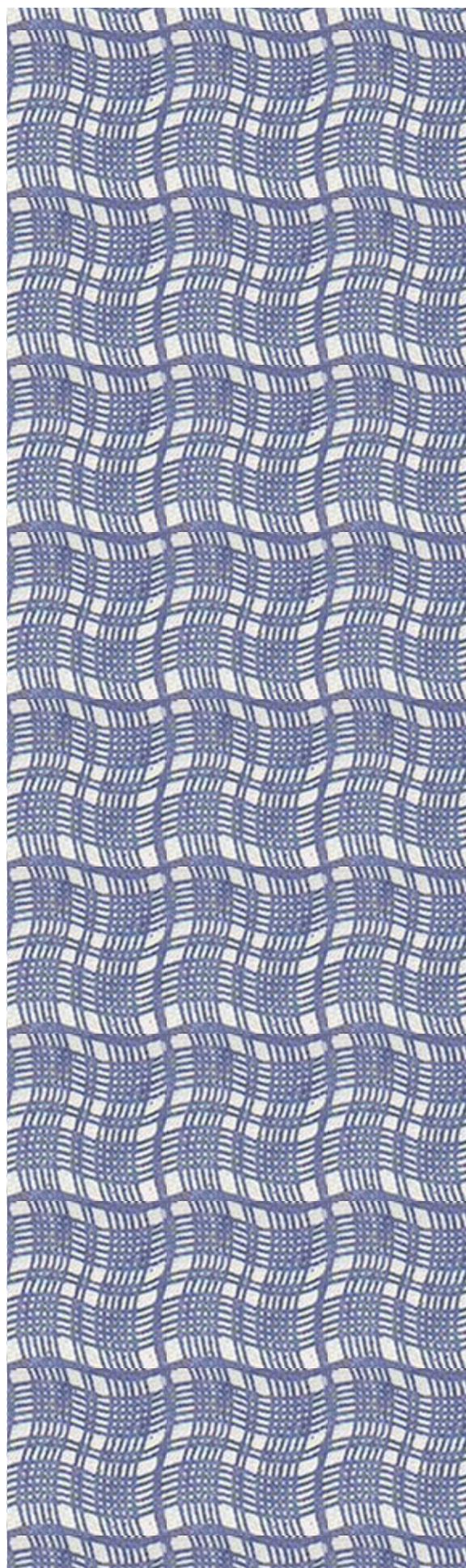
The more that we can identify through experience and come to know basic assumption behaviour, the greater our chances of interpreting the realities in which we live and transforming them so that human beings can become more mature through the quality of their contact with realities."

* Bion, W.R. (1961) Experiences in Groups. London: Tavistock Publications, p. 129

** Turquet, P.M. (1974) "Leadership: The individual and the group." In gibbard, G.S. et al., eds. The Large Group: Therapy and Dynamics. San Francisco and London: JosseyBass, p. 357

*** D.M. Winnicott, Human Nature. New York: Schocken Books, 1988, p. 68

**** Bion, W.R. (1961) Experiences in Groups. London: Tavistock Publications, p. 157



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The authors state:

What is the emotional experience of being in baD, in a culture of dependency?

The aim of the members of the group, and the assumption on which they work, is that they are met to have a feeling of security and protection from one of their members. This leader is invested with qualities of omnipotence and omniscience. He or she is idealised and made into a kind of god. The feeling is that only the leader knows anything and only the leader can solve the reality problems of the group. Such a leader is a magical person who does not need information—he or she can divine it. In such a group the mentality and culture are such that the individual members become more and more deskilled as information on realities becomes less and less available. There is an air of timelessness about the group which results in the feeling that it will never end. One phenomenon associated with this kind of group culture is that one person is made into the really stupid one, the ‘dummy’, who has to be taught everything by the others, the collective ‘mummy’. A similar process is to set up one member as being the object of care which other members proceed to deliver. A variation on this is to create a ‘casually’, i.e., someone who is made inadequate, even to the point of temporary breakdown.

What is the emotional experience of being in baF/F, in a culture of fight/flight?

The third basic assumption group of Bion is that of fight/flight (baF/F) which he sees as two sides of the same coin. What is the experience of being in such a culture? The unconscious assumption of the group is that they are met for action which is to preserve itself by fighting someone or something or by taking flight from these. The individual is less important than the preservation of the group. Understandably this ba culture is profoundly anti-intellectual and will decry as introspective any behaviour which attempts to reach self-knowledge through self-study.

What is the emotional experience of being in baP, in a culture of pairing?

The experience of being in a basic assumption pairing (baP) culture is to be in a group enthused by the idea of supporting two members who will produce a new leader-figure who will assume full responsibility for the group's security. The wish, in unconscious phantasy, is that the pair will produce a Messiah, a Saviour, either in the form of a person or an organising idea round which they can cohere. The gender of the two people constituting the pair is immaterial. The ethos of the group is one of hopefulness and expectation. The crux, however, is not a future event but the feeling of hope in the immediate present. The group lives in the hope of a new creation—a Utopia; a utopian thought that will solve all their problems of existence. There will be no feelings of destructiveness, despair, or hatred. But nothing must be created in actuality; otherwise the hopefulness will vanish.

What is the emotional experience of being in baO, in a culture of One-ness?

ba Oneness: is a mental activity in which 'members seek to join in a powerful union with an omnipotent force, unobtainably high, to surrender for passive participations, and thereby feel existence, well-being, and wholeness' **

** Turquet, P.M. (1974) "Leadership: The individual and the group." In gibbard, G.S. et al., eds. *The Large Group: Therapy and Dynamics*. San Francisco and London: JosseyBass, p. 357

What is the emotional experience of being in baM, in a culture of Me-ness?

"Our working hypothesis is that baM occurs when people—located in a space and time with a primary task, i.e., meet to do something in a group—work on the tacit, unconscious assumption that the group is to be a non-group."

"The pronoun 'me' is the accusative and dative form of the pronoun of the first person. This fits the meaning we want to give to baM because the 'I' becomes an object to itself—a 'me', governed by the prepositions 'to' or 'for'. ... In using the idea of 'Me-ness' we are harking back to the time when an infant becomes a unit able to distinguish between the inside and the outside. Winnicott with his usual perceptiveness writes:

“The idea of a limiting membrane appears, and from this follows the idea of an inside and an outside. Then there develops the theme of a ME and a notME. There are now ME contents that develop partly on instinctual experience. ***

For the authors within a baM culture the ‘like links with like’ turns into the relationship of ‘me with me’. “A baM group becomes a world of selfcontained, autodidacts selecting what they want to know from whom they choose.”

*** D.M. Winnicott, Human Nature. New York: Schocken Books, 1988, p. 68

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