A Note on the Protomental System and “Groupishness”: Bion’s Basic Assumptions Revisited

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In identifying the unconscious “basic assumption” behavior of groups, Bion made a significant discovery. Although he toyed with explaining this behavior as instinctive, he ultimately postulated that it was a postnatal defense. However, there is a strong case for the biogenetic explanation. This sharpens our understanding of some group and organizational processes that have been hitherto described in terms of psychoanalytic concepts. It may also have implications for management of, and interventions in, groups and larger systems.

KEY WORDS: group; instinct; groupishness; protomental system; basic assumptions; group culture; group mentality; splitting; projection.

INTRODUCTION

Psychoanalytic theory took a major step forward when Freud realized that attempts to understand neurosis by focusing on study of the individual patient had yielded only limited insight. His fundamental discovery was that the shift of focus to the analyst–patient dyad and to the transaction between the two—the transference and countertransference—could uncover rich material that was held in the patient’s unconscious. That dyadic relation was an “intelligible field of study” (Bion, 1961, p. 104). As a result, Freud and his successors have given us a much deeper understanding of the processes of human development from infancy onward and of the ways in which they shape our perceptions and relationships as adults. One simple example

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4All page numbers in the text refer to Bion (1961) unless otherwise specified.
is the recognition that an individual encountering a new authority figure is unconsciously bringing within him/herself images of earlier authority figures which are superimposed on this new person and will have a significant effect, through the feelings evoked, on the emergent relationship. Such processes of projection are now much more widely recognized.

Psychoanalytic theory has also contributed to our appreciation of the dynamics of groups and larger systems. Freud himself had at an early stage turned his attention to groups (Freud, 1913, 1921). In terms of organizational processes, one of the more influential later examples is the proposition that social systems operate as defenses against persecutory or depressive anxiety, which was put forward by Jaques (1953, 1955) [though he much later withdrew it (Jaques, 1995, see below)] and built on by Menzies (1959) and others. But probably the most significant original insights into group behavior came from Bion (1948-51, 1952, 1961). Most interpretations of psychodynamics of organizations had been, and still are, based on theory derived from the analytic dyad. Bion shifted the frame to the group and thereby identified—though he was cautious about claiming it (p. 104)—a new “intelligible field of study” (cf. Khaleelee & Miller, 1985). He did so by taking the role of analyst with therapy groups and later with groups who met for learning rather than for treatment. This gave him access to a set of dynamics previously unrecognized and he developed from them a theory which introduced the concept of a protome ntal system related to the groupishness of the human individual and he identified basic assumptions which he believed to be inherent in the underlife of all groups. “The individual,” he said, “is a group animal at war, both with the group and with those aspects of his personality that constitute his ‘groupishness’” (p. 168).

While Bion had introduced a quite new perspective on human behavior which has gained a significant place in, for example, organization theory (e.g., Miller & Rice, 1967), his explanations for it were ambiguous and at times seemingly contradictory. Thus he made early references to the instinctiveness of the phenomena, but then shifted to treating them as postnatal formations and linking them to contemporary psychoanalytic theory about the infant’s very early development of defenses to cope with distressing unconscious fantasies. This paper postulates that Bion was wrong to abandon instinct as an influence. In trying to fit his observations into contemporary psychoanalytic theory—theory based on the dyad—he was implicitly undermining his own group perspective as offering a distinct intelligible field of study. There are good arguments to support the biogenetic explanation of groupishness, which would have implications for the theory of group, organizational, and even societal behavior. This reformulation in no way diminishes but perhaps broadens the significance and relevance of Bion’s discoveries.