

Notes on Bion's basic-assumptions

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1. Bion has evidenced a universal aspect of human psychology which can be adequately observed only in group situations: the individual's tendency to combine instantly and involuntarily with another individual (or with more than one at a time) in sharing a basic-assumption and acting consequently.

A characteristic trait in the behaviour of individuals belonging to a group which follows a basic-assumption, is the use of language for conveying feelings and emotions rather than precise meanings. The concepts of « development » and « learning from experience » are totally alien to a group in the basic-assumption situation; time references such as: before, after, etc., are non-existent. The group members, due to their participation in a certain basic-assumption, lose part of their individuality, that is to say: their condition is phenomenologically indistinguishable from a depersonalization situation.

It is not easy to detect which basic-assumption is active (dependency, pairing or fight-flight). Bion indicates the presence of a distinctive element in the group emotions (e.g. anxiety, fear, love) which differs according to the basic-assumption present: « the modification that feelings suffer in combination in the respective basic-assumption group may arise because the 'cement', so to speak, that joins them to each other is guilt and depression in the dependent group, Messianic hope in the pairing group, anger and hate in the fight-flight group » (W. R. Bion, 1961, p. 166). The three basic-assumptions may be differentiated not only on a phenomenological basis but also according to their connection with specific unconscious phantasies. Bion himself indicates their interchangeability and describes their evolution from a common matrix (proto-mental system) (W. R. Bion, 1961, pp. 98-113).

2. The basic-assumption concept, according to Bion's description, is one of the keys to a psychoanalytical approach to groups and group psychology. And, in fact:

- a) it identifies an aspect of the individual psyche which is not directly dependent on motivation but rather on the fact of belonging to a group;
- b) it indicates which phenomena constantly accompany the aggregation of various individuals in a group explaining many manifestations of the group considered as a whole;
- c) it evidences the 'irrational' and 'unconscious' phenomena to be explored by psychoanalytical research. In Bion's words: « Many techniques are in daily use for the investigation of work group function. For the investigation of basic-assumption phenomena, I consider psychoanalysis, or some extension of technique derived directly from it, to be essential » (W. R. Bion, 1961, p. 154).

It is consequently of the utmost importance to investigate the origin of basic-assumptions, inquiring whether the basic-assumption groups mental life can undergo a process of evolution due to analytic work. From a theoretical and clinical point of view, it would also be relevant to investigate whether basic-assumptions correspond to other better known phenomena. It is now my aim to examine the first two problems (D. Meltzer, 1980, p. 1).

3. Bion believes that «basic-assumptions emerge as formations secondary to an extremely early primal scene worked out on a level of part objects, and associated with psychotic anxieties and mechanisms of splitting and projective identification » (W. R. Bion, 1961, p. 164), and that « the more disturbed the group the more easily discernible are these primitive phantasies and mechanisms; the more stable the group, the more it corresponds with Freud's description of the group as a repetition of family group patterns and neurotic mechanisms » (W. R. Bion, 1961, p. 165).

This is all confirmed by clinical practice. We can, in fact, consider the following as manifestations of the relations at the level of part objects: the unrestrainable violence of the behaviour of individuals forming a basic-assumption group; the fact that people, who are mature and creative on their own,

form groups which are instead highly pathological; and, finally, the very frequent inhibition of thought, which takes place especially in very structured or numerous groups.

The following examples demonstrate the contemporary presence of different levels of functioning: the double relationship established by the group members with the analyst who is contemporarily felt as the leader of the group and the object/subject of a personal relationship which shares common traits with transference, and of the often ambivalent emotions aroused in structured groups by an eminent figure with whom there is a personal relationship.

The importance of a very primitive primal scene can be grasped by considering: the continuous proliferation of Messianic phantasies, the tendency towards 'acting in' and 'acting out', the way patients in groups express themselves, both concrete and very rich in images.

4. In my opinion, these connections between basic-assumptions and the theory of splitting and of the primitive primal scene do not fully clear the problem. It remains to be explained if and when the reactivation of basic-assumptions can be considered a meaningful event due to its connection with a given phase of the group's analytical work.

According to «Attention and Interpretation», in fact it is possible to hypothesize that different phases of mental development take place in small analytical groups too.

5. The group's original level could be named: 'primitive stage'. In this stage of the group members' mental development, both the analyst and the Messianic expectations are ill-defined and the differentiation between the ego and the super-ego, between the ego and the ego's ideal is hardly recognized in the individual psyche (W. R. Bion, 1970, p. 75).

In this stage equality seems to reign in the group and prohibitions do not seem to exist, but it would be more correct to say that there is no capacity for discrimination; there are no conflicts since no differences have been yet detected (W. R. Bion, 1970, pp. 117-8). Envy and persecutory feelings, the threat of expulsion and the fear of a catastrophe, however present, are contained in the Messianic and fusional experience.

An impulse towards evolution and learning are also present at this stage; but learning is more like a 'physiological' exercise of group functions and refers essentially to the body, its contacts and its limits.

Phenomena comparable to this 'stage' are more easily detected at the beginning of an analysis or in the introductory or final moments of a scission (cfr. G. Iannuzzi, 1970, p. 63). As for example, when the group members enter or leave the consulting-room, or chatter before the session: the analyst, who keeps the group together with his 'force', is present in a somewhat more human and tangible manner and more similar to the other group members (1). This familiar atmosphere and the analyst's closeness seem to disappear once the session has started. By careful scrutiny, these two elements however can always be detected in certain moments of silence or in certain qualities of psychical presence. Familiarity and closeness can also be traced in the setting, which constitutes the common substratum of analytic work, especially when the containment of Messianic expectations takes place in a shared and not too ritualized or structured form (2).

6. It is when the group's expectations become more intense and the Messianic expectations more centred on the analyst's function, when aspects of the group members' personality begin to differentiate and become capable of growth, that the « primitive stage makes way for the stage of discrimination » (W. R. Bion, 1970, p. 176), cfr. J. Milton 1677, p. 134; Book IV, 515-20).

The group members begin to realize that soon it will no longer be possible to keep their anxiety confused with the group and the analyst (cfr. W. R. Bion, 1961, pp. 127-8 and W. R. Bion, 1970, pp. 125-6). The first form of suffering often appears in the form of a feeling of humiliation. The group members appear as individuals and it is no longer possible to consider them as parts and counterparts of a single 'happening' (D. Meltzer, 1980, p. 11).

In this transition phase, basic-assumptions manifest themselves in a defensive fashion: the group actively resists change (C. Neri, 1975, p. 40 and F. Fornari, 1981, p. 664).

According to what has been said by Bion in «Attention and Interpretation», this can also be expressed by saying that the appearance of the phenomenon of basic-assumptions is understandable if one considers it the effect of « knowledge » (K) and at the same time, as the

effect of the evolution of the group's reality (the evolution in O) (cfr. W. R. Bion, 1965, p. 151; W. R. Bion, 1970, pp. 128-9; J. Milton, 1977, p. 101: Book III, 46-55).

7. The first type of development in the group members is the awakening of thoughts similar to curiosity, aimed at the investigation of 'contents', working out connections and unifying complex mental structures such as: phantasies, wishes and pre-conceptions (cfr. A. Meotti, 1981, p. 427). In this case, anxiety is caused by the object being investigated: the group as container of the group member's primitive phantasies. The group is: all the group member's phantasies (the primal scene, the mother's interior, the mouth and so on) and anxieties, derive from the group as a primitive imago, but are turned against thought and the investigating subjects (cfr. W. R. Bion, 1961, p. 164) causing an impulse to inhibit the epistemophilic drive and, at the same time, depersonalization phenomena and defensive aggregation among the group members, who, as Bion describes, tend to act following a basic-assumption, rather than as individuals able to recognize the meaning of their projections (W. R. Bion, 1961, p. 90; S. Freud, 1927, p. 11).

8. The second type of development is more difficult to describe (evolving O): in this case, the aim is not the knowledge of complex forms of mental activity, but rather facing what has not yet evolved in order to stimulate its growth and differentiation. When the analyst intersects group member's mental phenomena which are not contained by categories of time and space, he makes possible the perception of aspects of the members' mental experience which were previously not noticed, and which are, in a certain sense, not yet existent but possible. He is not working out knowledge but developing 'new' mental phenomena (E. Cassirer, 1906, pp. 32-3).

This intersection is accompanied by intense anxiety, a sense of hazard, the perception of the impossibility of controlling what could be brought forward and of its irreversibility. Anxiety is not related to any particular content, but to the status acquired by the activities of thinking and speaking. A more careful examination of the situation indicates that speech — or even thought itself — could imply a cata-strophical upheaval of the container (space, time, emotions) on which the ego is dependent for its consistency and for its capacity to relate. The above mentioned experience can be described in Bion's words: « The impact of the evolving O domain on the domain of the thinker is signaled by persecutory feelings of the paranoid-schizoid position » (W. R. Bion, 1970, p. 103).

9. From the very start this process (evolution in O) can take different routes: the 'artificial blindness' of the analyst, causes a situation similar to the one experienced by the psychotic patient. The only difference is in the type of development, which is for the first the establishing of contact and for the second the need to destroy it.

Due to the progressive and rapid lowering of the capacities of thought and 'judgement and the encystation of the emotional working thought, there is the possibility of suicide, dismemberment or sudden recovery. In any case, this evolution happens without any assumption of responsibility on the part of the group members, who have not experienced anything or acquired knowledge of it. Rather, a certain event has been forced on them in such a way that they are not the same anymore. For example, the existence of the group has become « nasty, brutish and short » (Hobbes, on Bellow Dangling men, p. 32).

10. The analyst might also manage to maintain a relation between Messianic expectations and the magical quality of thought, facing « infinity empty and shapeless » and the persecutory feeling due to the consciousness of his limitations. The first analyst's task, in cooperation with all group members, is to work out a container suitable for these contents, in this order: the setting, the group and the mind.

The second stage is the idealization of the group and of analysis. In Bion's words: « Idealization in the group is a reality based activity essential for the growth of discrimination in the individual » (W. R. Bion, 1970, p. 76). Idealization should include a first inkling of discrimination. « Otherwise there is a danger that a state of mind [connected with idealization] is transferred (by projective identification) to the group and acted out - not altered. [...] Sometimes the separation fails and the group is not only seen to be ideally omnipotent and omniscient but believed to be so in actuality » (W. R. Bion, 1970, p. 76).

The next transformation, from the 'container-group-analyst-self' to the 'container-thought' phase, is directly connected to the transition from the 'primitive phase' to the 'differentiation phase'. It implies the use of thinking activity not as a magical instrument or as a medium of sensory contact, but as an 'empty grid'. A type of thought not entangled in guilt or destructive anxiety. This type of thought does not free itself from doubt either by saturating itself with answers already stored in the memory or by anticipating answers, which mainly express the need to acquire self-confidence. This 'void' pause allows thinking to acquire the traits of consciousness and in particular: elasticity and capacity for self-development; at the same time, it loses omniscience, the existence of 'answers to every question, and omnipotence, the automatic relation between stimulus and action (J. Lotman, 1978, p. 58)

11. The third possible evolution (which is alternative to the two I have described: progressive lowering, containment) is the following: the group members react by strengthening, detaching and facing a cancerous increase of the 'suprarenal fight-flight', 'gonadal-pairing', 'prolacting-dependency' quotas of the group's proto-mental system, which can emerge as basic-assumptions or in the form of somatic phenomena (W. R. Bion, 1978, p. 8).

12. The second and third type of development imply, with different characteristics and forms, structural changes. « Any formulation felt to approximate the illumination of O is certain to produce an institutionalizing reaction » (W. R. Bion, 1970, p. 81). The individual's 'ego ideal' and the group's ideologic and gnoseologic system are set up at the same time with more or less structured religious, political or scientific institutions. This also implies a 'separation-relation' or a 'hierarchical' distinction between analyst (analysed part) and patient (non-analysed part) (F. Corrao, 1980, pp. 4-5).

In Freud's writing: « The development of the ego consists in a departure from primary narcissism and gives rise to a vigorous attempt to recover that state. This departure is brought about by means of the displacement of libido on to an ego ideal imposed from without; and satisfaction is brought about from fulfilling this ideal » (S. Freud, 1914, p. 100). And: « The ego ideal opens up an important avenue for the understanding of group psychology. In addition to its individual side, this ideal has a social side; it is also the common ideal of a family, a class, a nation » (S. Freud, 1914, pp. 100-1).

It is probably from these indications from « On Narcissism: an introduction » that Bion has worked out his hypothesis of a passage from the 'primitive phase' to the 'discrimination phase', to which he adds: a) the importance given to the pervasiveness of religious phenomena which he does not reduce, as Freud does, to sexuality and the Oedipal family (S. Freud, 1927, p. 42); b) the indication that in the group too there can be a working out of thinking problems and of problems connected with the feelings of omnipotence in the individual.

I would like to end with a last, brief quotation: « The individual's realization of a gulf between his view of himself as omnipotent and his view of himself as an ordinary human being must be achieved as the result of a task of the group itself as well as in individual analysis » (W. R. Bion, 1970, p. 76).

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NOTES:

- (1) To distinguish phenomena belonging to this stage of the group's life from other similar phenomena see: A. Correale and M. Parisi 1979, page 59; C. Neri 1981, pages 26-27; C. Neri 1979, pages 3-5. It is more difficult to differentiate the 'primitive stage' from the 'pairing group'. They can be distinguished by the character of 'process' of the first, and the character of 'defensive phantasy' of the second.
- (2) In the case of small psychoanalytical groups, it is more appropriate to speak of a 'primitive position', rather than of a 'primitive stage', due to the commonness of this type of phenomenon. This does not alter in any way the fact that there is a possibility of distinguishing, as Bion does, passages from one phase or one position to another.