Title: Engaging with young people: a reflection on groupwork experiences in the light of Wilfred Bion’s early insights into group process.

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Summary

This article seeks to explore the work of Wilfred Bion in the early stages of his therapeutic explorations of the group process. Focusing on examples from his work in the Second World War, the author draws on three key themes that epitomise Bion’s thinking; striving for the leaderless group, relinquishing the leadership role and studying the group itself. These themes are then used to inform a reflection of the author’s experiences working with groups of young people who, for a variety of reasons, are reluctant to engage. Conclusions are drawn regarding the enduring relevance of Bion’s insights and the value that may be gleaned by stepping back from the leadership role and from ensuring that evaluation of group activity includes engaging with not just the ‘what‘, but also the ‘how‘ and ‘why‘ of the experience.

Key words: Wilfred Bion; young people; groupwork; leaderless groups.

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Introduction

The study of groups and the processes at work within them has its roots embedded in the psychotherapeutic traditions of the early 20th century. Freud’s text ‘Group Psychology and the analysis of the Ego’ published in 1921, explores the nature of leadership and the behaviours humans exhibit when grouped together (Stokes, 1994); his observations created a foundation for future theorists and practitioners to build upon. Wilfred Bion was just one of the professionals from the field of psychotherapy who took up this baton. For much of his working life Bion’s focus was the study of psychoanalysis and the individual, but for a relatively brief period in his long career, he worked in groups, theorised on groups, and wrote and spoke regarding his experiences of conducting the psychotherapeutic process within a group setting. Despite the brevity of this period, Bion’s ideas have endured and though his name remains little known beyond ‘semi-specialist fields’ (French and Simpson,2010, p.1860), he is noted as ‘a key figure at a significant moment in the development of group and organisational dynamics’ (ibid). The numerous recent publications, referencing Bion, also serve as an example of his lasting relevance and appeal (for examples see Stokes 1994, Dal Forno and Merlone, 2013; Williams, 2013; French and Simpson, 2015). This article seeks to provide an exploration of key elements of Bion’s early thinking on groups, drawn from his work with the War Office Selection Board and at Northfield Military Hospital during the Second World War. The aim is to consider the value of Bion’s deliberations to practitioners working beyond the therapeutic field today, with young clients who may be struggling to engage. Yalom (2005) aptly uses the term ‘distant cousins’ (p.xii) to describe the wide range of professionals drawing on theoretical group work methods to engage with their clients. It is with these professionals in mind that the idea for this article was formulated.

The author’s interest in Bion’s work originates from first reading of his experiments in leaderless groups (Bion, 1946). Many of the situations Bion explores chime with personal experience of working with young people in need of additional support, a significant percentage of whom were perceived to be reluctant to engage in education and social contexts, and with institutions and government services. For the author working on support projects in the late 1990s, group work was frequently the delivery method of choice. The method bore fruit on many occasions; however, evaluation revealed only the success of the interactions with individual young people, with limited exploration of the actual dynamics at work within the groups. Almost two decades later, the author has at her disposal, the benefit of hindsight, a second career in higher education and the enlightenment that arises from a detailed examination of the early writings of Bion, his colleagues and those who have been inspired to develop his thinking further. These factors combined to form the tentative conclusion, that considering elements of Bion’s wartime experiences in groups to the context of group work with young people struggling to engage successfully, may be of value to the professionals working in what is potentially a very challenging role.

The work of Wilfred Bion in context

The theoretical focus of this article is the work of Wilfred Bion, it is however important to be clear; the body of work he produced relating to the group context is limited. As Pine (1992) notes, ‘Bion wrote little on group psychotherapy and not comprehensively’ (p.ix), ‘no more than the first etchings for a theory’ (p.2). Bion himself also questions the status of his theoretical work on groups. When asked during an interview in 1976, if his book ‘Experiences in Groups’ (1961) was a definitive text, he states that the book was not ‘a final view’ and urges those engaging in the research and implementation of the group process ‘to make it out of date as soon as possible’ (Banet, 1976, p.285). Despite, this personal modesty, Bion’s ideas have prevailed, both in the UK and the USA and in the fields of psychotherapy and the social sciences (Pine, 1992). His compelling argument as to the existence of subconscious forces at work within any group, has had ongoing influence on the understanding of groups. Bion’s contemporaries, Lawrence, Trist, Bridger and Rickman, to name only a few, are in no doubt as to Bion’s pivotal role, ‘Bion was able to make the quantum leap in understanding of the nature of human groups’ (Lawrence, 1992, p.307). Stokes et al listed earlier, demonstrate his continual relevance to present day group theory and group relations by their willingness to engage with and further develop his observations and insights.

The author is conscious that by focusing on Bion’s early experiences, this article omits engagement with his seminal work on groups. In 1961, Bion published ‘Experiences in Groups’, a collection of essays produced over the preceding decade. The book encompasses his clinical work with groups, both during the Second World War and at the Tavistock Institute in the two decades following the conflict. Bion’s theorising focuses on the unconscious forces at play when people group together, forces that have the power to disrupt the group process. Bion uses the term ‘Work Group Function’ (Bion, 1961, p.153) to describe the forces within a group that is engaging effectively with its aims and purpose. Alternatively, he identifies the influence of ‘Basic Assumptions’ (Bion, 1961, p.146). In the latter, participants, and at times leaders, who wish to avoid the challenges that the group may present, will subconsciously subvert its aims and purpose, i.e. without active knowledge, thus undermining the group’s effectiveness. The presence within groups of such subconscious forces is the central tenet of ‘Experiences in Groups’. However, the ideas are complex and as Foresti (2011) states, Bion’s thinking originates in his clinical work during the Second World War, therefore to understand the origins of his ideas, a discussion of his early experiences is essential, hence the author’s current endeavours.

Bion’s work during the Second World War

Bion was engaged in three key projects during his time in the military, two for the War Office Selection Board and one at the Training Wing of Northfield Military Hospital in Birmingham. All contributed to the development of his thinking on groups.

The War Office Selection Board (WOSB)

Bion was posted to the WOSB in 1942 (Bleandonu, 1994). The board was established in response to the urgent need to recruit new officers and included both military and psychiatric personnel. Eric Trist also worked with Bion on the WOSB in the experimental unit. Trist recalls a key task of the unit was to improve ‘the quality of trainee intake’ (Trist, 1992, p.6) in response to a growing shortage of officers and the high failure rate of current candidates. Bion describes the method developed for the WOSB as ‘so simple and obvious….that its revolutionary nature can easily be lost sight of’ (Bion, 1946, p.77). Men invited to the selection board found that instead of individual assessments which had been the norm in officer selection, they were allocated to a group and required to participate in a series of group activities: ‘mutual introductions’ ‘free group discussions’ ‘spontaneous situations’ and an ‘inter-group game’ (Trist, 1992, p.7). All tests were of the group, not the individual. No instructions were given as to how the series of tasks should be carried out or who should lead the process,

‘these were left to emerge, and it was the duty of the observing officers to watch how any given man was reconciling his personal ambitions, hopes and fears with the requirements exacted by the group for its success’ (Bion, 1946, p.78).

Bion’s advice to the observers is revealing. He reminds them not to interfere, as this would ‘distort the field’ (p.78) and to focus not on the success of the group to complete the task, but ‘the way in which a man’s capacity for personal relationships stand up under the strain of his own and other men’s fear of failure and desires for personal success’ (p.78). Bion’s interest is not in how well the group complete the task, the latter is simply a tool to create the opportunity for observation; it is what the activity reveals about the interaction between the men when they are under pressure to perform. Bion is also highlighting the unique circumstances that can exist within a group that may not be readily present themselves within a 1:1 interaction.

Bion’s second role for the WOSB was the development of the Regimental Nomination Scheme. Again, the shortage of good quality recruits for officer training was the impetus, leading Bion to suggest that the ‘selection should be the concern of the army, not just the selection board’ (Bleandonu, 1990, p.58). The scheme, for a brief period, led to soldiers of all ranks within ‘good’ regiments nominating suitable candidates to be put forward for consideration by the WOSB. The scheme however was short lived; though successful in increasing the number of suitable recruits, it was deemed subversive by the military hierarchy (ibid). Bion’s idea of sharing responsibility for selection with all members of a regiment and recognising the personal knowledge and experience, which ordinary soldiers can bring to the selection process, is a radical one. At its heart can be seen the essence of his theoretical approach; that sharing responsibility amongst all those concerned (i.e. relinquishing control) engenders a sense of belonging and a shared commitment to a mutual purpose.

The Northfield experiment

Bion’s third wartime project relates to his work in the Training Wing at Northfield Military Hospital in 1943 alongside John Rickman. Rickman and Bion had already identified a shared interest and enthusiasm for the group method. Though no copy now exists (Trist, 1992, p.9), they had previously worked together to draw up a blueprint (The Wharncliffe Memorandum) for the ground-breaking approach that was implemented at Northfield. The Wharncliffe experiment ‘consisted of the association of paramilitary training facilities with psychological care for the soldier,’ (Conci, 2011, p.78). Patients at Northfield were drawn from a range of backgrounds, military personnel, prisoner of war escapees and individuals with disciplinary problems (Harrison and Clarke, 1992). The key purpose of the training wing was to facilitate the process of returning the patient to active service. This however did not always happen ‘many…..regarded beating the system as their main task’ (Harrison and Clarke, 1992, p. 698).

Bion espoused the view that both patients and staff in the training wing at Northfield were displaying, en-masse, an avoidance of the key issue. From Bion’s perspective this key issue was the actual inter-relationships within the group. ‘Without realising it doctors and patients alike are running away from the key complaint’ (Bion, 1946, p.79). Bion’s solution was to encourage the identification of ‘the ailment afflicting the community, as opposed to the individuals composing it, and next give the community a common aim.’ (ibid). In the ‘Guiding Principles’ for the approach Bion implemented, he outlines how he encouraged a re-focusing of priorities within the ward to ensure ‘the therapeutic occupation of the group was the study of the group within itself.’ He begins by noting that the objective of the ward must be the ‘study of its internal tensions’ with the aim of making clear the relationship between ‘neurotic behaviour’ and the ‘frustration, waste of energy and unhappiness in the group’ (Bion, 1946, p.81). Bion’s ambitions for the project are lucidly put when he states, ‘it was our object to send men out with at least some understanding of intra group relationships and, if possible, how to harmonise them’ (ibid). He asserts the importance of establishing a ‘good group spirit’ (Bion, 1961, p.25). This he defines as: a shared purpose, recognition of the boundaries of the group, a willingness to welcome new members, a valuing of individual opinions, a recognition of the value of sub-groups but also their capacity to alienate and the capability to deal with difficulties as a group (ibid).

At Northfield, Bion coalesced his thinking into a radical approach to the workings of the group. His ideas give responsibility back to the group because in his eyes the managing of the tensions of the group is the responsibility of the group itself. He also challenges the role of the professional, traditionally in charge of the process (Bion, 1946, p.81). Bion is questioning the value of the accepted hierarchy between professional and patient, (perhaps this can be extended to teacher and pupil, support worker and client), and endorsing the view that the patient, (the pupil or the client) may be best placed to resolve their own problems. It is no surprise that Bion’s work at Northfield was short lived, after only 6 weeks the first Northfield experiment was ended. Again, elements of the military hierarchy were ill at ease with the nature of Bion’s radical thinking.

The relevance of Bion’s ideas to group work with young people (YP groups): a reflection

The following reflection arose from a detailed comparison of Bion’s early thinking on groups with the author’s perceptions of their own experiences working in groups with young people who, for a variety of reasons, were struggling to engage. The discussion seeks to explore the value of considering Bion’s observations in relation to working with such groups of young people. The historical, social and economic contexts of many of the issues facing the young people are complex (MacDonald, 2008), here the discussion will focus on the group itself and explore three keys themes that arose from the analysis:

* Striving for the leaderless group
* Relinquishing the leadership role
* Studying the group itself

The YP groups

Two externally funded projects ran from the mid to late 1990s in England and Wales. Young people, aged 15 to 18, took part in sessions that were facilitated by staff from local Careers Services. The young participants attended for a range of reasons but they all had one factor in common, they were not engaging in any form of activity related to education, training or employment; many also did not appear on any government statistics and at the time were termed ‘the missing 10%’ (Watts, 2001). The projects, financed through the European Social Fund, aimed to engage with this group of young people and therefore reduce a statistic that was gaining much political attention as the 1990s progressed. Recruitment occurred through liaison and partnership working with other local support services, who already had informal contacts with the young people e.g. Detached Youth Projects, Drug and Alcohol Services, Social Workers, The Probation and Youth Services. The YP groups ran for a set period delivering a programme tailored to the perceived needs of the participants. The settings, selected with care, were in informal locations familiar to the group members. An accredited programme of experiential activities, developed by the staff, underpinned the work of the groups. The activities sought to engage the group and address issues thought to be creating barriers inhibiting engagement in further education, training or work. The activities were largely social skills orientated, designed to encourage the young people to develop their skills and to consider strategies to assist them to take positive steps forward.

Striving for the leaderless group

Bion’s thinking

Encouraging the group’s full participation is a strong theme throughout the literature. Bion’s advice to the observers involved in the WOSB was ‘not to interfere’ with the activities by offering guidance or instruction. To Bion, the interaction between the men when they were leaderless and under pressure to perform, was the most powerful. He asserts that interfering in the group process, ‘distorts the field’ (Bion, 1946, p.78). Bion’s ideas on selection of suitable candidates for officer training were also radical, because they placed some of the responsibility for choices, into the hands of all ranks of the army. The plan demonstrates another element inherent in the notion of handing over responsibility; trust and respect for the soldiers, recognising their unique position to judge if a fellow soldier is suitably equipped to lead. Similarly, the new regime instigated in the Training Wing at Northfield involved staff stepping back and leaving the day-to-day running of the wing to the patients; chaos did ensue. The innovation lies in Bion’s response to the subsequent complaints; he declined to be solely responsible for finding solutions, on the basis that it was a ‘communal responsibility’ (Bion, 1961, p.18). A month later Bion reports that ‘the wing had an unmistakeable ‘esprit de corps’, a change he attributes to the men in the wing, who, when pressed by circumstance not authority, were eventually willing to take on the management of their environment.

Reflections on the YP group

The resonance between the circumstances of the men at Northfield and the young people in the YP groups is considerable. At Northfield the men were, in theory, being prepared for a return to active service but, in reality, were frequently attempting to ‘beat the system’ (Harrison, Clarke 1992, p.698). The members of the YP Groups were equally out of tune with the mainstream; they had left or been asked to leave secondary education early, they had frequently been labelled a problem, difficult or challenging. Disaffected, disengaged and socially excluded were also familiar labels at the time for this client group (McDonald, 2008). Efforts were made to encourage the group themselves to recognise that the effective functioning of the group is everyone’s responsibility, the nature of the experiential activities in the accredited programme serve as evidence of this intention. On reflection however, and for a variety of reasons, workers rarely handed over the leadership role to the group. Stepping back to a sufficient degree to enable the young people to experience leadership, problem solving and decision making at first hand requires confidence in group members and a recognition and respect for their capabilities. Safety issues were a concern, as were perceptions of unreliability and the need for constant supervision. Stereotypical views of who the young people were, a possible influence; the negative terms listed above were common parlance in the media and government policy of the time (McDonald, 2008). Many of the young people were also vulnerable and a wish not to see them fail, as they often had in the past, was an additional factor. Bion suggests first-hand experience of personal responsibility, is vital if the true capacity of the individual is to manifest itself. The supervision offered by the leaders of the YP groups, rather than aiding self-efficacy, may at times, have served to reaffirm the notion of incapacity to the groups. It is possible that activities intended to engage did not always fully utilise the possibilities for young people to learn about their own strengths and weaknesses and recognise the benefits of co-operation within a group, because they were not a leaderless group. Many in the YP groups, as with the patients at Northfield, were best equipped to judge the circumstances in which they existed. Deferring to that knowledge was a powerful tool if utilised effectively, but its success relied upon a respect for the group members and a recognition of their capabilities and their worth.

Relinquishing the leadership role

Bion’s thinking

The willingness of the leader to relinquish their role is a factor that Bion highlights. The challenges of resisting the temptation to ‘step in and save’ or to be ‘the expert’ is recognised by Bion, ‘as long as the group survives, the psychiatrist must be prepared to take his own disappearance from the scene in not too tragic a sense’ (Bion, 1946, p.81) . In his view, the patients’ were best placed to resolve their own problems. Handing responsibility over to the group was a core of Bion and Rickman’s work at Northfield, instituting the new regime in the Training Ward for this very purpose. He argues strongly for the benefits achieved, if people are encouraged to take responsibility for themselves, for each other and for their shared environment.

In his later writings (1961, p.147) Bion notes that the leader may not be the only person reluctant to accept the handing over of control. The group may also resist the leader’s attempts to step back, because the acceptance of responsibility, inherent in a leaderless group, requires active participation, and this may present a challenge. Bion’s ideas on dependence on the leader are an integral part of his theory of ‘Basic Assumption’. He asserts that in any group the majority of participants believe ‘the group is met to be sustained by a leader, on whom it depends for nourishment, material, spiritual and protection,’ (ibid), the notion of a leaderless group directly challenges such a belief. Bion suggests that group members may behave in ways that actively encourage the worker back into the leadership role they are attempting to move away from, for example by their lack of co-operation, poor behaviour or actual absence from the session. Bion encourages the view that this resistance should be expected, the removal of the safety net provided by the leadership role, encouraging the group instinctively to protect itself from the responsibilities inherent in a leaderless group.

Reflections on the YP group

Bion’s discussion of the challenges inherent in relinquishing leadership shone new light for the author, on the difficulties and the frustrations that at times appeared to hinder progress in the YP Groups. Bion asserts that both leader and participants may be actively engaged in sabotaging efforts to share responsibility for group function. The leader may be reluctant to hand over control, because of lack of time or trust, perceived incompetence or simply the pleasure of being the group’s saviour; similarly the group may resist efforts to encourage the acceptance of responsibility because of the challenges this presents for participants within a group.

In terms of the leader’s role in hindering group engagement, developing a participative atmosphere does take time. With a programme to work through and targets to reach, the instinct to maintain leader control, may at times appear the most effective approach. Participation can also lead to chaos, as illustrated at Northfield. Many of the participants were in the groups because they had consistently failed to engage in social situations, therefore to consider handing over responsibility to those deemed untrustworthy or incapable is challenging. Perhaps the most interesting point however is the status that the leader may gain from their leadership role and therefore their reluctance to sacrifice this position to the group. Bion identifies the latter in the psychiatric staff at Northfield and therefore it is no surprise, that with hindsight it is possible to recognise similar characteristics within the leadership of the projects.

In terms of the reluctance of group members to accept responsibility, examples abounded. Poor attendance was considerable, reluctance to participate was ongoing and distractions very common. Staff frequently viewed such problems as, a weakness on the part of the young person or something lacking in the programme or in the leaders themselves. The notion that such behaviours were a natural response to encouraging the personal acceptance of responsibility was not considered. Trist, a colleague of Bion, following observing the latter working with a group, notes his own depression at the breadth of challenges in the group. When asked how it makes him feel Trist replies’ like giving up’. Bion’s response is telling, he advises Trist ‘that is what the group, with the part of themselves that has no intention of changing, wants you to do’ (Pines, 1992, p.30). Bion asserts that the group, challenged at a subconscious level by what is occurring, is responding to deflect the therapist from their purpose. Consequently, Bion seems to be encouragingly suggesting, that at the point of most frustration and disruption for the practitioner, the group may well be closest to achieving its aims.

Studying the group itself

Bion’s thinking

Bion asserts that ‘the therapeutic occupation of the group was the study of the group within itself’ (Bion, 1946, p80). He draws parallels between how the group members react to each other and the ‘frustration waste of energy and unhappiness in the group’ (Bion, 1946, p.80). Bion is suggesting that ‘how’ the group functions is worthy of study because such an exploration is the key to assisting group members in understanding themselves. Bion does however note that, as with his attempts to encourage groups to take on responsibility, efforts to engage the group in self-reflection were frequently resisted. In his practice he identified that such activity is not something a group willingly engages with (Bion, 1961), because it is a challenging experience. The Northfield Experiment however suggests that such an activity was central to patients coming to an ‘understanding of intra group relationships and, if possible, how to harmonise them’ (Bion, 1946, p.81). Bion argues that problems in the group should not be tackled until they are fully understood by the majority of the group members. Such assertions would suggest that despite the challenges inherent in the process, reflection on the dynamics of the group would also have been of value to the YP groups.

Reflections on the YP groups

From the outset, the projects chose to use groups as the method of delivery, because of the perception that the young people we would work with struggle in social settings. Despite this early focus, the final evaluation of the project included many measurable factors, but interestingly, not ‘how’ the group members interacted. The key outcomes evaluated were the placement of young people into education, training or employment; therefore, the nature of the group dynamic and the interplay between the individuals within it, i.e. the factors which aid effective working and those which hinder progress, were not considered in any systematic way. Reflecting on Bion’s approach, lack of exploration of the workings of the groups, with the group members, was an opportunity missed. Such exploration was rarely taken to the group; it was deemed the job of the practitioners to resolve internal conflicts or problems arising from the programme or the relationship with those outside the group, such as fellow users of the premises. When the group was engaged in attempts to resolve issues, for example, an occasion involving snowballs and passing cars, the group was ultimately saved by the group leader, who stepped in and spoke on their behalf when they appeared to be struggling to articulate a response. This action ultimately robbed the group of a valuable learning opportunity and the chance to challenge the preconceptions of the other users of the premises, by being prepared to own their own actions and apologise for them. In terms of the programme content the experiential exercises did include detailed reflection, this being inherent in the very nature of experiential learning (Ord, 2012) but this did not include reflection on the dynamics at work within the group. For Bion, ‘the study of its own internal tensions’ (Bion, 1946, p.80) was crucial to a group’s progress, it would therefore seem vital for both workers and participants to reflect on how successfully the group worked together and what elements aided or hindered their effectiveness.

Conclusions

The purpose of this discussion was to explore Bion’s observations relating to his early experiences working with groups and consider his unique thinking, in relation to groups run for young people who are struggling to engage. Bion provides valuable insights very relevant to the group work practice of Yalom’s ‘Distant Cousins’ (2005, p.xii), those many workers in a wide range of support roles who deliver group work as an integral part of their role but are not named counsellors, teachers or therapists. The analysis identified three overarching themes relevant to the YP groups: the challenges of striving for a leaderless group, the role of the leader in that process and the benefits of detailed reflection on the actual dynamic at work within the group.

In terms of areas for further research, as previously stated the author omits as much of Bion’s thinking on groups as she includes, there would therefore be much to gain from further exploration of his post war writings, particularly those focusing on his theory of Work Group Function and Basic Assumption Phenomena. As discussed earlier, others have done much work exploring and developing these complex ideas in relation to a range of different specialisms, but there would still seem to be scope for further consideration of their applicability to the work of the practitioners and the young people discussed in this article.

Finally, to return to a term Bion uses when discussing his work at Northfield. He speaks of the need to establish ‘a good group spirit’ if a group is to work effectively (1961, p.25). Though the intention here is not to provide a blueprint of how to work with groups, it is possible to suggest that Bion’s criteria for the development of such a ‘spirit’ serves as a practical illustration of his ideas and as such, a valuable addition to the toolkit of skills and knowledge available to group practitioners.

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