

Towards a Unified Field Theory of Human Behaviour

The Bion construct takes a cross section through the human group in the plane of the here and now. It utilises the hypothesis that behaviour of the group at any given moment is a function of four distinct, yet interdependent, processes, namely the three basic assumption activity groups of **pairing**, **fight/flight** and **dependency**, together with the **work group**. Psychic energy of the group is distributed between the four areas and flows freely between them. At any given time there will be one dominant basic assumption activity with two Ba groups comparatively repressed. The energy of the work group may be above or below the dominant basic assumption group. In group relations training the task of the consultant is seen as the maintenance of work group energy at a sufficient level to enable members to carry out the primary task of the group, (namely to study its own behaviour as it happens), while mobilising energy opportunities for learning about the unconscious processes in play.

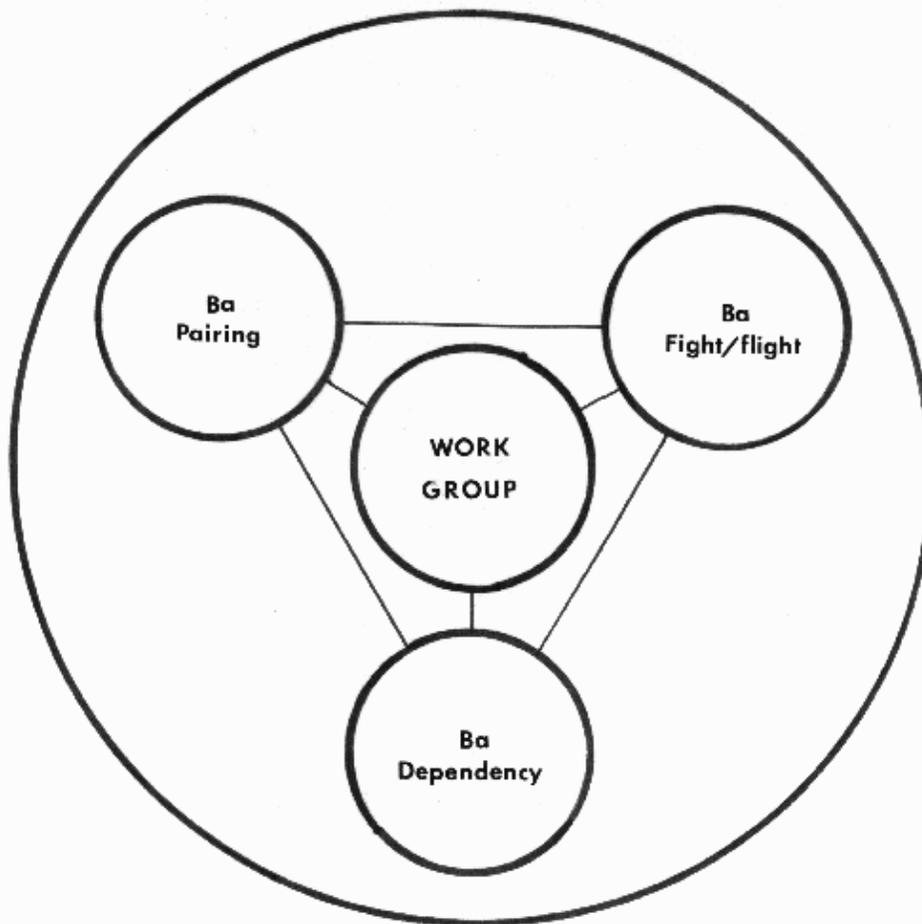
For Bion life begins at birth, and the fundamental experiences of dependency, conflict and relationship stem from the world of the infant. They are carried forward into adulthood as anxiety defence traces, functions of the 'id' over which the emergent 'ego' seeks to gain control, in order to mobilise work and reality oriented relationship with the environment and the self, together with authentic management of the boundary between them. The work group is thus seen as the emergent maturity mode, with the basic assumption groups, which always threaten to overwhelm the work group, as regressive states.

My thesis is that the Bion construct, while adequate for elucidating small group experience in situations where the survival of the group is not in question, is nevertheless inadequate as a construct for the conceptualisation of the large group, or for situations in the small group in which the group boundaries are unstable and highly stressed, and group survival is therefore in question.

The threats to identity of the individual in the large group, delineated by Pierre Turquet, and stemming from the massive information overload of the relationship matrix, constitute just such a set of unstable, hyper-stressed boundaries around any sub-group that forms. The threats are thus not only felt by the individual on the personal boundary, but also by the sub-groups at the sub-group boundary. On the macro level, institutions or societies whose survival support systems are seen to be unstable, hyper-stressed and in danger of imminent implosion will act in similar ways. The breakdown of the knowable world, experienced in industrial society, sets up a similar set of conditions. It would be experienced in training lab conditions if the number of people involved were allowed to rise significantly above the mid 60s, just as the large group dynamics begin to emerge within a small group whose numbers move significantly higher than 12. The dynamics of the hyper-saturated group are similar to the dynamics of the hyper-stressed group. The higher the level of stress, the greater the level of anxiety and the lower the level of

interpersonal information which can be handled at the given level of management. Thus with boundary stress levels held constant, work group functions will degrade as numbers rise, or conversely, with numbers held constant work group functions will degrade with rising boundary stress.

BION CONSTRUCT



Under these conditions, group behaviour operates in modes beyond those delineated by the Bion construct. It is well described by Gordon Lawrence in terms of acute social passivity, mirrored by exaggerated outbursts of anarchic aggression. The abdication of all responsibility to some other omnipotent, infinitely resourceful environment, towards which the attitude oscillates

between total regressed dependency or irrationally destructive counter-dependency. The culture is marked by intensive splitting, at all levels from the intrapersonal, via the interpersonal, group and inter-group, through the institutional and the inter- institutional to the societal boundaries. This splitting is reflected in terms of personal alienation, fracture in the world of the knowable and oscillation between its parts. Violent scapegoating and victimisation are the order of the day.

Attempts to probe the unconscious dynamics of this behaviour meet with extreme resistance and oppression. The consultant who begins to interpret the unconscious process underlying the social passivity becomes the target of its obverse, i.e. a focus of the anarchic aggression. The process is sufficiently violent to re-suppress the interpretation, often even before it can become consciously articulated.

I suggest that these dynamics were experienced by Bion at the boundaries of his construct and dictated therefore the boundary conditions of his analysis. We must look therefore to those fundamental experiences of being which lay beyond the boundaries of analysed unconscious content within which Bion, Melanie Klein and Freud himself were contained.

A NEW STARTING POINT

The fundamental or archetypal experience of human being is precisely not that of the dependent infant suckling at the mother's breast. Eternity has elapsed prior to that experience. I refer not to any idea of eternity as preconception but to that existential eternity between conception and birth. As the first early flickerings of foetal consciousness arise (in other words at the beginning of experienced being) the child is sustained in a warm protective sea, a bounded universe surrounded by strong, supportive, skin-like but elastic walls. There is no breathing, so sucking, no incorporation. Sustenance of the foetus is automatic, requiring no effort, no work, simply passivity.

The foetus grows, quickens, begins to explore the boundaries of its world, which apparently grows with it. No other world has ever been known. No beyond can be conceived. Any shocks, noises, movements, heart- beats, digestive rumblings or breathing are experienced as part of this supportive cosmos, this holistic environment, this life-support system, this Eden. Gradually a certain amount of rapport develops between the foetus and the womb--world which responds to the movements, the kicks, the writhings and squirmings of its occupant. The only other inhabitant appears to be the snake, the ropy umbilical cord upon which the foetus unknowingly depends for survival

Then gradually a transition begins. The world is felt to be getting too small. There is no exit but the foetal head engages in the narrower part of the womb towards the cervix and is held there. Then over the next week or so, sometimes within hours, all hell breaks loose. The supporting waters drain away, the head is gripped ever more firmly across the temples and round the crown, the womb-world constricts and begins to press down. Great pulsing surges of muscular contraction and expansion begin to massage the foetal body. At first faintly and infrequently, then with increasing intensity and duration, and at shorter and shorter intervals. The world has

gone wild, the head, increasingly crushed, is forced down, falling, falling, through this endless tunnel, which opens before it, yet envelopes it in ever more crushing, writhing convulsions of threatening muscle. The peaceful scene has erupted into the raging storm, the supportive cosmos has reversed and become an antagonistic environment. For the first time the foetal being is violently threatened. Life itself is at risk. As the birth proceeds, the constriction mounts around the shoulders, the chest, the abdomen, the pelvis. Crushing and agony may reach the limits of toleration and then surge well beyond it. The foetus traumatises; the conscious brain splitting off from the massive information coming to it from its boundary - the fatal split has occurred. For the foetus this is the end of the world. The violent ejection, falling into the abyss in agony is relieved only by unconsciousness.

There is a continuous process from conception, through womb life, via the birth channel and into the arms of the mother. The discontinuity lies within the conscious experience of the foetus. The head emerges, then with a twist and a squeeze, the shoulders, abdomen and limbs writhe out into the world beyond, to be slapped abruptly into consciousness, handled for the first time, shocked into breathing, hearing, crying, dazzled by unaccustomed light, with a battle for survival on its hands. No longer sustained automatically in being through the umbilical cord, new relationships with the environment have to be forged. Work has to begin. Oxygen must come first through breathing air into the lungs and gaseous absorption across membrane boundaries. Then comes sucking, swallowing, digestion and the introjection of fluid and food. So the cycle of afterbirth begins. Strange that the analysts see this point as the beginning of life.

And yet not so strange. Since to penetrate back into the foetal unconscious requires passage through the birth trauma and it must be remembered that for many the preceding description will have been mild. No forceps were used, no strangulation by the birth cord was experienced, the birth matrix expanded normally to give sufficient room for the baby to emerge, no operations were necessary. So the foetal trauma described is comparatively unstressed. Little wonder that approach to this material is guarded by rising panic, unnamed terrors, the sense of the annihilation of being, asthma (the crushed chest), migraine (the crushed temples). In the rising terror of abreaction the intolerable stress levels are re-experienced, myths of cosmic disintegration emerge, sometimes projected onto the environment, at other times introjected, leading to the impulse for anarchic destruction of either the world, or the self. The entry to Eden is guarded by the whirling sword, even if, in perception, the exit was precipitated by the snake.

DEMYTHOLOGISING THE MATRIX

In reality everyone who has ever lived has survived the emergence from the womb. To be sure there is a tunnel effect between the worlds, but the passage is not fatal. Memory traces were laid down continuously across the divide, however repressed they may be and however deeply split off from conscious recall. Life continued, it did not end at birth. So the myth that the womb-world has no exit except the descent into hell, the precipitation into the abyss, the fragmentation of being, can now be seen for what it is. It is the emergence into the consciousness of afterbirth of the last accessible conscious trace from the womb-world. It emerges in symbol form in all the great mythologies of known history. There is a commonality of unconscious experience which is racial. It is in this transition between the womb-world and afterbirth that the fundamental

experiences of loss, splitting, alienation, persecution, etc., are laid down, just as it is in the life of the womb-world itself that the human being experiences the foundations of dependency.

So we come to see that the three basic assumption activities are defences against the anxiety of being in separation from the womb, but the holistic experience of dependency within womb is fundamental. Infantile dependency is associated with a part of the mother, the breast; it stimulates a part of the infant, the mouth; it incorporates something tangible, the milk. Dependency in the womb however is holistic. It is dependency in relation to the whole environment, sustenance is of the whole being, no work is required, passivity is in order and in that condition the whole being is suffused with life giving nutrient. Now I suggest that foetal dependency is not the archetype of infant dependency but is rather the archetype of being. There is a holism, an ontology of foetal existence which dies in birth and lives in fragments in the beyond. Bion's construct of basic assumption groups and work group is a reflection of this fractured afterbirth, partial in time, split in construct, cut off from its foundation and incapable of giving a holistic reflection of life. Experiences of approaching stress trigger the human being back into the womb-world, into the period of consciousness just prior to the birth trauma. Here the sense of paranoia is total, not simply associated with the bad breast. There is no exit, no way through, only destruction. Hope is meaningless for there is no beyond. Work is inappropriate for it alters nothing. The eruption of irrational rage is a natural expression, but impotent. The only way out is back. Regression is called for into foetal passivity in the vain hope of re-evoking the bliss of the womb-world through the reversal of process in time. Symbolically this regression is caught up in Buddhist thought as the drop returns to the ocean to be absorbed into Nirvana.

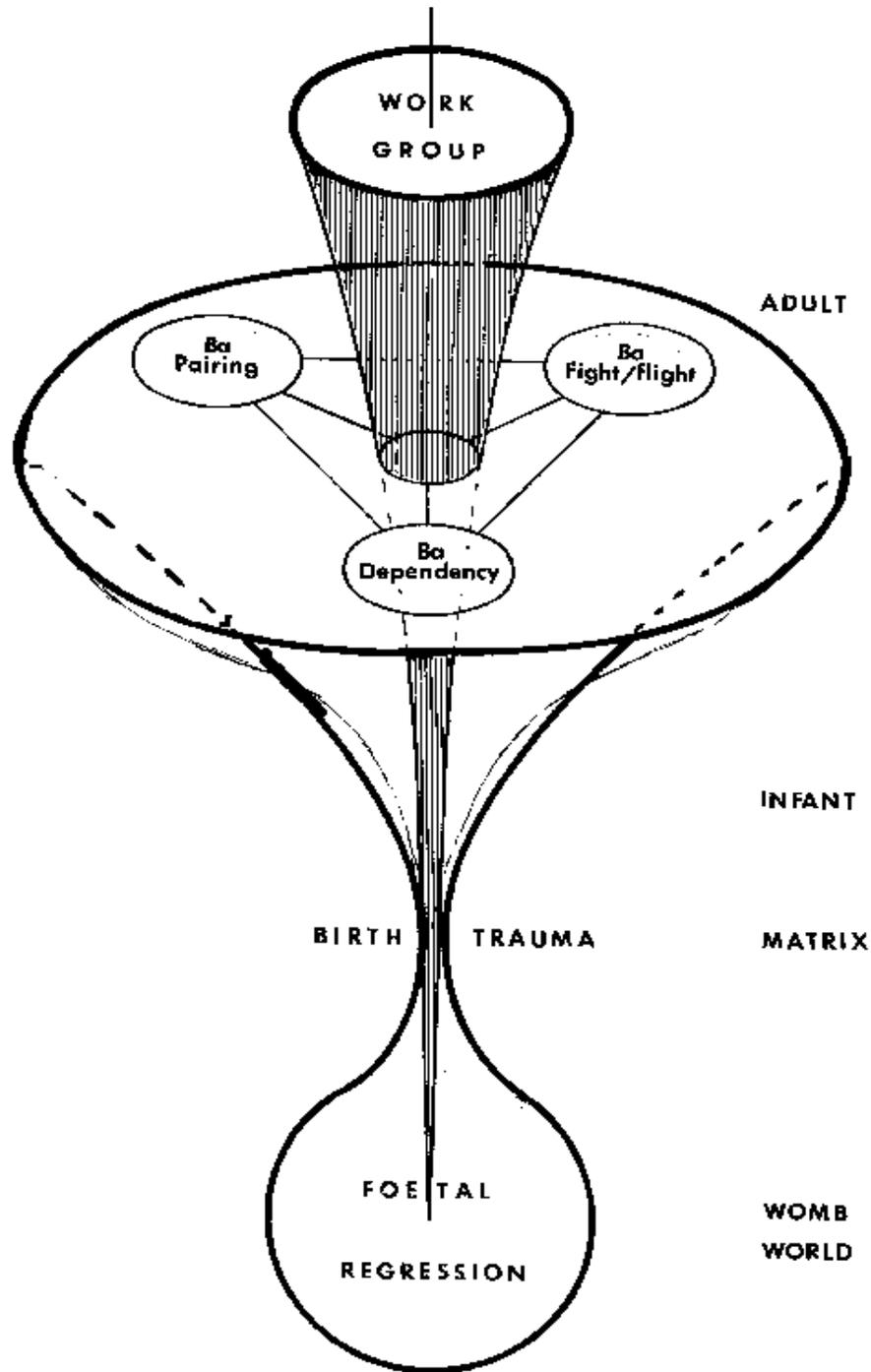
It is this regressive unconscious foundation which irrupts into the process of highly stressed small groups, as well as being the normal foundation of process within the large group and in institutions and societies which have passed the 'limits of the knowable'. Herein lies the dynamic of the 'fatal split' which should perhaps be renamed the foetal split. It is not fatal.

DISTINCTION BETWEEN Ba ACTIVITY AND FOETAL REGRESSION

While psycho-analysis has remained blocked to this material, group processes have had to be interpreted in terms of basic assumption activity. In the Bion construct there is no clear relationship between the work group and the three basic assumption groups.

Once we grasp a holistic construct these distortions and fractures are reintegrated. **Ba dependency** can be dissociated from foetal dependency. It is characterised by dependency on a part of the group or on a part of its history, on some words, on something in the environment that people can 'hang on to'. There is a certain amount of work to be done in Ba dependency. It requires listening, incorporation, something is taken in to provide, in fantasy, the resource which satisfies. Such phenomena can now be seen as quite distinct from the position of foetal regression.

HOLISTIC CONSTRUCT



Similarly the paranoia associated with **Ba fight/flight** is focused on certain persons, certain objects, certain parts of the environment as perceived threats, corresponding to projected parts of

the intrapersonal world, the bad breast, the persecuting dried teat. A certain amount of work is appropriate with Ba fight/flight since aggression towards or distance from the perceived threat gives a rational base for hope. Not so in foetal regression. Here the paranoia is total, and the equivalent mode is the polarity between passivity and cosmic aggression, where the anarchy is extroverted to environment or introverted to self. Even the violence is associated with despair and the passivity with resignation. There is no hope and no possibility of work.

Pairing basic assumption is also associated with parts - another person, the genitalia. There is real hope that out of the intercourse might come something, or someone, to deal with the anxiety and carry being forward into the future. Pairing within the foetal position is different. Here there is holistic sharing of being between foetus and environment. The relationship is total not partial, it is timeless and continuous but leads to no new thing. It is without conception or development, the intercourse is holistic. The being is immersed in the other. Within the womb-world the only hope is to remain unborn.

So we begin to identify basic assumption activity as reflections in adult interpersonal dynamics of infantile experience. Standing back, however, we can now see a more holistic picture that links the here and now to conception, providing a fundamental life-trace, an archetypal experience upon which the infantile state creates comparatively minor ripples.

But what of the **work group**? Here I suggest we see irrupting into the Bion construct that which emerged from the womb-world, crushed, traumatised, split off, but living, growing, developing, learning, relating, conceptualising, engaging with reality, differentiating, handling complexity, managing, adapting, in order to survive. The work group is always in danger of being overwhelmed by basic assumption resurgence. That, however, is minor compared to the risk which the work group faces if the person, the group, the institution or society regresses to the foetal position. When that happens there is no possibility of social hope, and work faces ultimate destruction. Again and again, even within this regressive position, the work group drives towards the matrix, only to be mirrored back into the womb as the repressed trauma re-engages. If the regression is deep, or the work group resources inadequate, myths will arise which justify displacement of work group activity into some kind of ordering of the womb-world. It is, I suggest, this displacement which underlies Gordon Lawrence's construct of 'managing oneself in role'. The work group which accepts the myth of the matrix, i.e. that birth is death, is forbidden to push through the constriction into the beyond, for it would be fatal so to do. Growth is taboo, development out of order, exploration to be contained and mirrored back into the safety of the womb. The work group leader, who presses through the matrix into the beyond and returns, is vested with madness, rejected, victimised and unheard. He is an object of terror, embodying in himself the awfulness of the malign cosmic convulsion, focusing here not the counter-dependency of foetal regression associated with the imploding womb and the crushing cervix

In contemporary mythology we need look no further than Jor-El the father of Superman, great scientist from Krypton, who predicted the planet's doom only to be treated by his fellows as if his very words might bring about the disaster. Crushed, silenced, rendered impotent by the containment of the regressed community, he sustains his work leadership within the doomed environment and ejects his son to safety. The powerful evocative symbolism emerges in one

form or another in films, in plays, in art, in literature, in science fiction and in the all pervading television. We need not, however, be confined by the imaginative. We do not have to look far within reality to see the same symbolism acted out in politics, in religion, in business and in war.

As we enter the period of containment of human replication imposed by the limitation of earth's resources, so this position of foetal regression becomes rapidly more dominant at every level of the global construct. It seems clear that unless the behavioural sciences can make that courageous leap into the role of racial therapy, breaking through the oppression which blocks analysis of the so-called 'fatal split', then the developmental work group, whose activity is so vital for the navigation of the traumatic passage ahead, will remain blocked, contained, mirrored back from the future into the past, expending its energy not on social innovation in the face of crisis, but on the oppressive agenda of the management of persons in. role:- the socialisation process of death.

To risk the engagement, however, may well be to face psychic or physical annihilation, and it is only those for whom death has no fear who will dare to take that road.

DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS

We face an oscillation between birth and death. The analysts and existentialists, poets and artists indicate death as the starting point. 'Only he who can face his own death can risk his own life', is their stance. I submit, however, that the starting point lies at the other end of life. To concentrate on death is to collude with the myth. The access point which has leverage on the dominant unconscious system is in the analysis and dynamic abreaction of the fundamental loss nexus, experienced by the foetus as the womb contracts, and the self, crushed and existentially destroyed, is ejected through the birth matrix into an alien environment. Once the reverberating terrors of that nucleus of loss have been faced and laid to rest, I submit that any other known form of death (and learning is experienced as a little death!) can be faced without fear.

However, the terror of re- engaging this traumatic pre- verbal area is reinforced by the facticity of death met in the midst of life, flight from which reinforces the repressive defensive system which guards the self from re-entry to the birth dynamic. Thus the bi-polar flight constitutes a mutually reinforcing, repressive cycle, baring the way forward into significant human growth and development. Only when environmental conditions become so threatening that individual death is no longer seen as the greatest evil; only when racial survival itself is threatened, will sufficient psychic energy be released to crack through this vicious circle. I would postulate that it may well be those who are operating authentically in a Christo-centric construct who will be the pioneers in this field, since for them death is already rendered impotent and they are comparatively free to examine birth anew.

Release from the dominance of foetal regression, and the demythologising of perceived birth trauma projected onto the difficulties of managing social innovation in an increasingly hostile environment, should free the work group and enable it to move well up into those higher orders of management being indicated as possible by the Brunel Institute of Organisation and Social Studies. If the breakthrough from Newtonian mechanics to the theory of relativity generated that

creative climate within which physics was able to harness nuclear power, then how much more important it would be if the release from the constraints of the Bion hypothesis and the emergence of a unified field theory of human behaviour should lead to the release and integration of the full range of human potential. Within the Bion construct that is a utopian dream emanating from the pairing basic assumption group. Within the holistic construct it is a reality-oriented function of the work group.

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