PSYCHOEDUCATION · GROUP DYNAMICS

Group Dynamics and Basic Assumptions

Wilfred Bion's model of the work group, and the emotional forces beneath it

Wilfred Bion (1897–1979) was a British psychoanalyst whose work with groups transformed how we understand group dynamics. In *Experiences in Groups* (1961), he described how every group works on two levels at once: its **stated task**, and **shared, often unconscious emotions** that can pull it away from that task.

ON THE SURFACE
The work group
focused on the real task: thinking, deciding, learning, solving problems together

BENEATH THE SURFACE
Basic assumptions

Dependency	Fight–flight	Pairing
"someone will rescue us"	*"there is an enemy to fight or flee"*	*"a future pair will save us"*

UNDERNEATH IT ALL
Group anxiety
Uncertainty, and the need for security and belonging, can make it hard to stay with the task, so the group acts *as if* one of these assumptions were true.

01 The three basic assumptions

the group behaves as if…

DEPENDENCY
The need to be rescued

The group acts as though a leader or authority will provide all the answers, protection or solutions.

YOU MIGHT NOTICE
- Waiting for instructions
- Idealising a leader, then disappointment
- Little independent thinking

For example: team members expect their manager to solve every problem.

"What could we work out ourselves?"

FIGHT–FLIGHT
The need to confront or escape

The group becomes preoccupied with fighting an enemy, blaming someone, or avoiding a perceived threat.

YOU MIGHT NOTICE
- "Us and them" talk
- Blame, or a scapegoat
- Changing the subject when it gets hard

For example: a team keeps blaming another department instead of looking at its own difficulties.

"What might we be avoiding in ourselves?"

PAIRING
The hope of future rescue

The group invests its hope in a future solution, special pairing or development that will one day fix things.

YOU MIGHT NOTICE
- Excitement about future plans
- Two people expected to save the day
- Hope without present action

For example: everyone expects a new leader to fix long-standing problems while action is postponed.

"What can we do now, rather than wait?"

02 · The work group

When a group is working well, members can think critically, tolerate uncertainty and disagreement, share responsibility and learn from experience. Bion saw **both levels in every group**; the question is how much the basic assumptions take over.

03 · Why groups stop thinking clearly

Under anxiety, groups may…

- suppress disagreement
- idealise leaders
- scapegoat individuals
- avoid uncomfortable information

04 · What helps: the role of leadership

- Tolerating uncertainty without rushing to answers
- Naming the assumptions at play
- Acknowledging emotions openly
- Returning the group to its real purpose

05 · Two further ideas from Bion

Containment: overwhelming emotions can become more manageable when someone receives them and responds thoughtfully. Groups and leaders can offer this.

Attacks on linking: disruptions in the capacity to connect ideas, feelings and experiences, especially when those links are painful.

06 Noticing it in my own groups

a team, family, class or community

A group I belong to…

What might it be protecting the group from feeling?

The pull I notice most

dependency · fight-flight · pairing · not sure

One question that could bring us back to the task…

THE KEY TAKEAWAY

Groups are shaped by both their conscious goals and their underlying emotional currents. Recognising these patterns can help a group think more clearly, take responsibility, and work together constructively.

SOURCES Bion, W. R. (1959). Attacks on linking. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 40*, 308–315. · Bion, W. R. (1961). *Experiences in groups and other papers.* Tavistock Publications. · Bion, W. R. (1962). *Learning from experience.* Heinemann. · Rioch, M. J. (1970). The work of Wilfred Bion on groups. *Psychiatry, 33*(1), 56–66.

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