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**THE DARK SIDE OF COMPETITION: PSYCHOANALYTIC INSIGHTS**

**HAS THE DARK SIDE OBSCURED THE LIGHT? A LOOK AT BION'S  
IDEAS ON GROUPS.**

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## **HAS THE DARK SIDE OBSCURED THE LIGHT? A LOOK AT BION'S IDEAS ON GROUPS.**

Psychoanalysis has shed light on otherwise obscure aspects of human personality and relatedness, rather in the way that space exploration enabled us to see the dark side of the moon.

However, the preoccupation and fascination of those working with psychoanalytic ideas tends, understandably perhaps, to be precisely with the 'dark side' – that is, with what goes 'wrong' in human development and interaction, with 'breakdown', individual or collective – so that the focus is on the blockages caused by 'dark' events and emotions.

This broad phenomenon is reflected in the way Bion's ideas on basic assumptions have received far more attention and interpretation than his 'work group' mentality. The latter remains – with notable exceptions (e.g. Armstrong, 2005) – a rather pale and inaccessible concept. The fact that the basic assumptions have been subtly differentiated – following Bion's lead – is a measure of the greater attention given to them, an echo, perhaps, of the devil 'having the best tunes'. The dark side appears to have obscured the light.

This paper proposes a different way of thinking about the relationship between 'work group' and 'basic assumption' mentalities.

Generally groups are taken to be functioning in one or other mode:

basic assumption group      <---->      work group  
baD/ baFF/ baP/ baO  
baMe-ness/ ...

However, the fascination with the split between ‘ba’ and ‘w’ may have made it hard to see that work group mentality might be differentiated along similar lines to basic assumption thinking. Thus, alongside baD, there may also be wD, alongside baFF, wFF. This question first arose for us when we asked whether *friendship* could be thought of as a ‘work group’ form of pairing – that is, as a form of pairing which, far from representing a shift away from task helps to keep the task in focus. Similarly, leadership can be experienced as enhancing rather than avoiding ‘work’.

Paradoxically, an on-task, ‘work group’ can actually *feel worse* than an off-task, ‘basic assumption group’ – presumably because that is the point: if basic assumption functioning ‘works’, then most of those involved have a reassuring sense that they are indeed doing the work that really matters. A work group, by contrast, is ‘working’ precisely because it is actually acknowledging and being prepared to work with or learn from its emotional tensions, rather than denying them by ‘escaping’ into basic assumption mode.

Thus, an alternative way of thinking about group phenomena would be to concentrate first on the activity, and only then on its mode or mentality – that is, whether it is on or off task, whether its energies are task-focussed or a form of dispersal.

<b>Off task</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>On task</b>
?	pairing	?
?	dependency	?
?	fight/ flight	?
?	leading	?
?	planning	?
?	etc.	?

This view may also shed some light on the theme of the Symposium, because competition arises precisely when there is interaction. The ‘dark side’ of competition lies in the ‘*com-*’ – ‘with’ – not in the ‘*-petition*’. The Latin verb ‘*petere*’ simply means ‘seek’ or ‘look for’. So in origin, ‘competition’ just means ‘looking for something together with others/ an other’. The ‘dark side’ of the experience lies in the emotions that arise from ‘with-ness’. They are the inevitable outcome of what Bion called ‘groupishness’, and are likely to be evoked by *any* activity that involves a ‘together with’: whether working together – *col*-laborating or *co*-operating; writing together – *co*-authoring; calling or gathering [the Senate] together, to ask for advice – *con*-sulting; or living together – *co*-habiting...

## **References**

Armstrong, David (2005) *Organization in the Mind: Psychoanalysis, Group Relations, and Organizational Consultancy – Occasional Papers 1989-2003*, ed. R. French.

London: Karnac.

Bion, Wilfred R. (1961) *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers*. London: Tavistock Publications.

## **Presentation**

OHP required (but not powerpoint).