

Anxiety at the front line *

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If you don't talk about it, you don't know it's bad
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It is an axiom of attachment theory that you give what you have received. To be attentive one has to be attended to. In any kind of danger, support close by is needed. Being resilient in one's work – as opposed to compulsively self reliant¹ – depends on a lively sense that help is at hand, perhaps at the end of a telephone or at the end of the shift, but there nonetheless.

This is not well understood in public services. The nurse cited above conveys the dilemma precisely. It may be better not to know, and just keep working. The prevailing culture of front line – education, health, social services and emergency – services is based implicitly on a military notion that once trained, you can do the job, if necessary by following instructions from a protocol. These are orders which are given in the absence of one who has authority. When there are new skills to learn, new instructions can be issued. Authority then exists only in the management, not in the worker.

The nature of urgent work is that it is exciting, which is not to say entertaining. Adrenaline suppresses tiredness, pain, fear, even thought. Slowing down enough to reflect on what has happened may be quite disturbing. Attempts to get junior doctors, social workers, teachers, family centre workers and others to stop what they are doing and attend a work discussion group are routinely resisted. Once encouraged to do so neonatal nurses noted how being on duty suppressed their bodily needs, even to the extent of not needing to pee. The addictive quality of work, together with the satisfaction of keeping a still-great enterprise such as the National Health Service going, is a powerful drug.

Staff group support is a “soft” process. There is no official advice on how to do it, and no suggestion that a resource which may seem self-evidently a good thing may, once set up, be undermined. Together with a colleague I convened a group of clinical professionals who had asked for a meeting. This was well attended and produced floods of eloquent and

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¹ “A pattern of attachment behaviour related to compulsive self-reliance is that of compulsive care-giving. A person showing it may engage in many close relationships but always in the role of giving care, never that of receiving it” (Bowlby, 1977, p. 207). This pattern is over-represented in the helping professions: “being the caregiver, with the fantasy of being invincible and having no thoughts about ones own needs..” (Garelick, 2012, p. 81)

moving narrative about the stresses – and physical dangers – of the work and the lack of support from management, even though one of the managers attended and spoke up bravely. The meeting was timed to coincide with an hour-long handover between shifts. Within a few weeks the handover period had been reduced to fifteen minutes. The group could no longer take place. Was this deliberate sabotage? Our impression that it was not, but that we had experienced a brutal unconscious attack on reflective practice, as if management had sensed the dangers of free speech. And who knows, if the meetings had been permitted to continue, whether members themselves might have found their own ways to stifle thoughtfulness?

The role of managers in staff groups is crucial. Citing examples from their work, Bolton and Roberts caution against meetings set up for the wrong reasons. “Support groups are unlikely to be appropriate for dealing with crises, or with the consequences of absent or inadequate management” (1994, p. 164). A recent text on the politics of care says “the NHS gives little thought to group dynamics and how to get the best out of teams. Too often, structure and culture impede rather than enable good team working. Rare tokenistic gestures such as training events and team ‘away days’ are not usually followed through and are often undermined by management initiatives that have not considered the effects on the team dynamic” (Ballatt & Campling, 2011, pp. 81-82). Milton and Davison’s observational study of staff support groups in psychiatric services notes an irony in their use: “Action often occurred in place of thinking. In fact it seems that rather than being a space for thinking, the group was used as a repository for unbearable states of mind. Perhaps the very existence of the staff group represented an institutional defence in Menzies Lyth’s terms” (Milton & Davison, 1997, p. 143).

The legacy of Isabel Menzies’ 1960 study of hospital nurses is a principal stimulus for this book. Summarising her view, she later wrote that social defences against anxiety “include the denial of feelings, evasion of significant issues ... concentration on service and neglect of attachment functions [and] inappropriate delegation of authority” (Menzies Lyth, 1988, p. 188). In the 65 years since then much has changed, yet not nearly as much as our newer knowledge of attachment and of organisations would suggest. There seems to be an inherent fragility about meetings whose purpose is to reflect rather than to produce.

Even when groups are established with some care, an obstacle to reflection comes from the staff themselves. After a few sessions they begin to discover their own lack of authority. They come face to face with differences amongst themselves. A readily available defence against this discomfort is to unite in self righteous grievance against managers who “never understand what we have to go through”. This bolsters their self-esteem, but not their capacity for reflection. Identification with such an attitude has almost universal appeal, as in thrillers where the hero is a police officer who is undermined and even humiliated by his or her risk-averse seniors. This defiant adolescent theme is exploited both in Hollywood blockbusters such as *Die Hard* and *Dirty Harry* but also in more sophisticated European TV dramas such as *The Killing* (*Forbrydelsen*), *Spiral* (*Engrenage*) and *Salamander*. The rogue officer is the hero, while the deskbound senior is a fool.

In this mood a staff group can avoid conflict but at the cost of their own sense of agency, achieving, as Wilfred Bion put it in 1948, “an equilibrium of insincerity” (Bion, 1948, p.

81).² Stuckness in human groups is familiar to anyone, such as readers of this book, who has studied them from inside and out. At the front line there is an even greater incentive not to take emotional risks. It is not obviously helpful to discover how badly one's physical and mental health is affected by the job or that there are fundamental flaws in the wider organisation that one can do nothing about. Bion's basic assumptions (1961) are often recruited to explain this restraint; that group members are either waiting for one of their number to take the lead (which may well happen) or have simply lost track of why they were there in the first place. Yet this does not seem quite sufficient. I wonder if there is an even more fundamental human quality that can keep a group in cautious suspense, not thinking but waiting; not exploring differences, but suppressing them. When deprived of their day-to-day business what is it that makes a group of people left to their own devices so oppressive? I will return to this question after a detour into mid twentieth century history.

The reinvention of authority

As a young woman Isabel Menzies had studied economics and experimental psychology at St Andrew's University, becoming a lecturer there in 1939. During her vacations the acting head of department, the brilliant social psychologist Eric Trist, invited her to join him in a new project to identify potential army officers, the War Office Selection Board (WOSB). Its procedure was based on the leaderless group method: "a learning community, which improved collective capacity through the sharing of common here-and-now experiences of the candidates" (Trist, 1985, p. 7). Men had to work and live together for three days and were given military problems to discuss and a practical group task to perform, such as building a temporary bridge together. The psychiatrists, psychologists and military testing officers, among them Isabel Menzies, did not intervene but observed and took notes. What emerged from this remarkable exercise was the realisation that social class, education and athletic ability were less important for leadership than the capacity of the individual to attend to others in the group. Instead of a traditional authoritarian with an impressive voice and moustache, the better officers were sensitive to social process: "the conflict for each individual candidate was that he could demonstrate his abilities only through the medium of others" (Murray, 1990, p. 55). Up to that time the concept of authority had been implicitly associated with patriarchal notions of hierarchy and class. These pioneering social scientists had discovered that an exploration of differences within a peer group can lead to emotional learning about one's own part in it. This has to include a sense of attentive concern – a maternal function, perhaps. Authority then becomes a power within oneself to relate to others, rather than to control them. Individuals who had to direct fighting men at the front line were selected on the basis of their capacity to manage *themselves* in this role.

Along with Eric Trist and Jock Sutherland, Wilfred Bion (later Menzies' training analyst) is regarded as the principal innovator of WOSB, but there were many others actively involved, Ronald Hargreaves, A. T. M. 'Tommy' Wilson, John Rickman and Pierre Turquet. Next to Isabel Menzies in the photograph below is John Bowlby, better known for his

² a paper in which Bion himself adopts a tone of wounded innocence when referring to the closure of the experimental and very brief project since known as Northfield I; "The experiment was brought to a close by the authorities, and since it has not proved possible to investigate their state of mind I cannot suggest a cause of failure" (Bion, 1948, p. 81). *see footnote 8.*

much later work on attachment theory, but who at the time did a follow up evaluation of No. 2 WOSB. This showed greatly improved retention of officers, reducing the failure rate from forty five per cent to fifteen per cent (Dicks, 1970, p. 107). In the front row of the group is Menzies' mentor Eric Trist³ and behind her the Canadian social scientist Elliott



Figure 9.1. (Front left) Eric Trist, Raitt Kerr, Unknown, Unknown, Unknown, Fergusson Rodger. (Back left) Unknown, Unknown, Ben Morris, Elliott Jaques. (Behind) Isabel Menzies, John Bowlby, Jock Sutherland. Summer 1943, 25th War Officer Selection Board, Headquarters, Hampstead, London. courtesy Mrs Beulah Trist

Jaques, the first to use the phrase 'social defences against anxiety' in a scholarly publication (Bain, 1998). These fiercely egalitarian men and women were committed to social applications of psychoanalysis. They became known as "the invisible college" that formed the basis of the post war Tavistock Clinic and Institute. Here for both Menzies and Jaques

³ Eric Trist, 1911- 1993; his autobiographical essay on his life and influences – I.A. Richards in Cambridge, where he also , and memorably, briefly met Kurt Lewin, and at Yale, Edward Sapir (and Lewin again) and his future wife - is personal and vivid. (Trist, 1993)

www.moderntimesworkplace.com/archives/ericbio/ericbiobody/ericbiobody.html Meeting starving victims of the great depression led him to read Marx. He was a brilliant scholar, getting firsts and distinctions at every turn. Back in Britain he headed the psychology department at St Andrew's and became politically engaged on the left "with Spain ... and with the unemployed". During the war Trist became chief psychologist to the Civil Resettlement Units (CRUs) for repatriated prisoners of war; "probably the most exciting single experience of my professional life". After the war he was central to the creation of the new Tavistock and involved in psychoanalysis (Klein, Bowlby, Winnicott, Jung) and consultation to industry, including the application of war time officer selection methods. He returned to America (USA, then Canada) in the 1960s, developing 'socio-technical systems' in major consultancy projects, and theorising about the struggles of change-making organisations.

were formative collective experiences of social psychology, both as observed in the group exercises and as experienced amongst themselves. “Our first experiment with group methods was on ourselves” (Trist and Murray, 1990a, p. 7).

These wartime explorations of leadership were taking place at precisely the same time as the new welfare state was being defined, when for the first time in the war there was hope in Britain for a better future, rather than fear of defeat. William Beveridge’s best selling report *Social Insurance and Allied Services* was published in December 1942, less than three weeks after Winston Churchill’s famous speech declaring that the allies had reached “the end of the beginning”⁴. In those revolutionary times everything seemed possible. The concept of socialism had not yet been contaminated by irrefutable revelations of the murderous dictatorship of our wartime ally Stalin, or by the later drift to the right⁵ of the centre ground in western politics. In 1946 the Tavistock Clinic’s grand vision of a social psychiatry would engage the population from the beginning of life in “Infant Welfare Clinics, Obstetric Units, as well as ... such organisations as a Nursery School and a Juvenile Employment Agency” (Dicks, 1970, p. 143). At the same time within the clinic there was a radical commitment to horizontal collective relationships: “staff lists were printed without any distinction of seniority; the professional staff, the secretarial staff, the administrative staff and the refectory staff are all in the same type and with the same degree of emphasis” (Dicks, 1970, p. 162). The clinic at that time paid “identical salaries for medical and non-medical full time staff” (Dicks, 1970, p. 162). Derived from WOSB and other group innovations during the war⁶ the notion that everyone in the organisation has an equal say was a serious aspiration.

The shift from vertical to horizontal relationships changed the Tavistock staff’s consciousness of relatedness in groups, but others were less affected. There was greater social cohesion during and shortly after the war than at any time since but the psychological or anthropological basis of this was not understood by political leaders or their advisers. In spite of the sheer scale and courage of the nationalisation programme of the 1945–50 UK government – of which only a wounded National Health Service remains⁷ – the group relations revolution in public services did not happen. Even today repeated government exhortations to service agencies to “work together” are uttered without any grasp of the powerful forces that frustrate that.

⁴ “Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.” Churchill’s speech at Mansion House, London on 10 November 1942, following the allied victory over Rommel’s forces at El Alamein in Egypt.

⁵ Thatcher/Reagan; Clinton/Blair, the latter being leaders after the fall of state communism in Eastern Europe and Russia, which had provided a counterbalance to capitalism, then unleashed (Glyn, 2006).

⁶ In particular in the first Northgate experiment: “Northgate I”, where the Quaker psychoanalyst John Rickman’s influence was most marked. Bion’s training analysis with Rickman was cut short by the onset of war, after which they became loyal colleagues, powerfully influencing each other with new ideas about human groups (Kraemer, 2011).

⁷ “The current government views the NHS as a failing bank or business. This stance is one of the most cynical, and at the same time cunning, ways by which the government abdicates all responsibility for running a health care system” (Lancet editorial, 2013).

There is some evidence from contemporary accounts of a post war waning in enthusiasm for group work. In 1947 Bion gathered at his consulting room a group of analytically minded colleagues, but made it plain by his manner that he did not want to lead it. Trist, who was present, writes:

He was subdued; Rickman was embarrassed; no one else knew what to say. ... Those present were all people [Bion] trusted. He seemed to be asking something of us ... He wanted to be with us as a group. To use terms Rickman had used in a presentation to the London Psychoanalytical Society on the Creative Process, he wanted a 'Pentecostal group' in which everyone could speak with tongues and would be accepted on an equal level with everyone else. Such a group would be neither a therapy group nor a seminar but would represent a new mode – a mutually supporting nexus of 'selectively interdependent' individuals ...

The consulting-room meetings petered out, partly for lack of conceptual clarity, partly because the unification of the social and psychological fields which had characterized the war period was beginning to break up and the society was moving away from a persisting ba F [basic assumption Fight] towards ba D [basic assumption Dependency]. (Trist, 1985, p. 27)

Trist is making the point that in wartime people are pressed into a collaborative and egalitarian struggle against a common enemy. Once that is over so is the obligation to suppress our differences. Trist goes on to account for the group's failure to develop: "at that time we did not have concepts of domain (Trist, 1977), of selective interdependence, of appreciation of searching; neither had we recognized the special role of social networks (Bott, 1957), as distinct from holistic organizations, in fostering innovation" (Trist, 1985, p. 27).

The Tavistock innovation that did flourish after the war was selection for leadership. In 1990 Murray wrote "More than 40 years later multiple assessment methods ... traceable to wartime methods used in WOSB, continue in use for the appraisal of individual potential" (Murray, 1990, p. 65). In what are now known as assessment centres, exercises derived from wartime are still in the twenty first century used to pick out leadership qualities in big corporations and organisations. Even if applicants become anxious during the group process, those ambitious enough to want senior posts are motivated to go through with it. Yet as a basis for consultancy and staff learning the Tavistock's discoveries did not thrive.

The concept of social defences against anxiety became celebrated in academic circles, but applications in the workplace were few. Elliot Jaques complained that while his book *The changing culture of a factory* (1951) was widely read and reprinted many times, he was not invited to repeat the exercise anywhere else. Citing his disappointment Trist and Murray write "no requests were received to continue this kind of work. As Jacques said at the time, 'the answer from the field was silence'" (Trist & Murray, 1990a, p. 9). Resistance to Menzies' 1960 study of hospital nursing was fierce, her findings rapidly dismissed as the fault of poor management. A contemporary review by an anonymous 'Registered Mental Nurse' stated bluntly: "My solution for the difficulties of the hospital would be to appoint a matron of known competence whom the nurses knew and trust, who could restore their self-confidence by re-establishing order in the nursing service" (cited in Menzies Lyth, 1988, p. 94). This now classic study was published fifteen years after the war had ended, by which time cultural space for horizontal innovation had diminished

even further. The power of the peer group had been harnessed in war and was to be developed by charismatic individuals in the therapeutic community movement, and in scattered enthusiastic efforts to get mental health staff groups going, but less so at the front line in social and health services. Krantz writes in a special review of Isabel Menzies Lyth's work:

..there is also a bittersweet quality to the arc of her work. The great transformative potential of social defence analysis went largely unfulfilled in the course of her work (Spillius, 1990). Few of her projects produced the deep, transformative change that seemed within the scope of her thinking. The nursing study, for example, largely fell on deaf ears. [Krantz, 2010, p. 195]

The reforming zeal of the invisible college, even as it became visible as the Tavistock Clinic – a founder member of the NHS in 1948 – and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, could not change its environment. The flaw in the Tavistock's concept of social intervention ("sociatry") was that society is like a patient. But society does not ask for help as a patient does. When trying to effect change in an organization a consultant is rarely able to get hold of the whole of it⁸.

The focus of this chapter is not so much on changing organizations as mobilising the power of a peer group to learn from each other. At the shop floor level what do workers want from a support group? Even if they have asked for it themselves, enthusiasm for sitting in a circle of chairs every week and reflecting on their experiences in the workplace can quickly evaporate. Once pent-up discontents have been aired what is the perceived gain of such emotional risk taking? Having had time to size each other up, members of the group may then discover from one another the truth of what they already sensed, which is that the organization is not able to carry out its primary task properly. Their preoccupations are ignored by senior managers who have other concerns, such as balancing the books. Group approaches to staff development has never gained a critical mass in front line services. Hartley and Kennard (2009) report a significant minority (around a quarter) of mental health agencies using staff support groups, fewer (less than a fifth) in social services, nowhere enough to make this routine practice.

Are systemic anxieties sufficient to explain the lack of reflective practice in front line services? There is little doubt that supervision under the 'new managerialism' (Lees, et al., 2013) is more focused on recording and regulating risk than on containing it through reflection⁹. Child protection policy has been driven by the fear that yet more children will be murdered by their parents, but has not prevented these deaths. It is a common

⁸ At Northfield Hospital in 1942/3, Bion and Rickman were not trying to change the army, but because they did not include senior officers in their radical therapeutic experiment, as soon as there was a crisis they closed it down (Bridger, 1990, Thalassis, 2007).

⁹ Just as "security" has contrasting meanings depending on whether it is a depressive or paranoid concept, so also "containment" can mean something thoughtful or repressive. Except in scattered experiments (see Cole, 2013) there is little sign of reflective practice being taken on as a matter of routine as encouraged by a recent UK national report into social services (Munro, 2011). "The Standards for Employers and Supervision Framework set out a list of elements that employers should put in place to support practitioners, including welfare services, mechanisms for reporting concerns, regular supervision, supervision training for supervisors and continuous learning through case reflections" (Lees, et al., 2013, p. 555).

complaint amongst statutory professions that they have to spend too much time ticking boxes instead of working with clients or patients. Yet this frustration may well conceal the greater anxiety of being left alone with a disturbed, possibly dangerous, client. It is safer at the computer, where the ritual of entering data, in an ironic echo of Menzies' observation of nurses at work, offers reassurance and relief from anxiety (Taylor et al, 2008, Waterhouse & McGhee, 2009).

A basic condition of human groups: 'a bizarre type of political hierarchy'

Besides the crushing effects of micro-management, a valid explanation for the paucity of reflective practice at the front line is provided by the nurse cited at the beginning of this chapter. Urgent work generates anxiety which is not only a mental process, but a biological one, in that stress hormones (Sapolsky, 2000) facilitate action, not thought. When death is a possible outcome it may be preferable to concentrate only on the technical task in hand. At the military front line a century ago the nineteen year old Wilfred Bion was out of his mind with despair: "... the fact remains that life had now reached such a pitch that horrible mutilations or death could not conceivably be worse. I found myself looking forward to getting killed..." (Bion, 1997, p. 94), in spite of which he acted bravely and was decorated for it¹⁰.

A more fundamental obstacle to free discussion in human groups is identified by anthropologists who have studied the hunter-gatherer way of life. Before the invention of agriculture around ten thousand years ago this was the only form of human social organization. Observing twentieth century hunter-gatherers Woodburn describes fluid groupings in which no adult will depend on another. Conflict between individuals is dealt with by moving away, if necessary to another group, or by direct violence, including murder. Success is recognized but not privileged: "... successful individual hunters are specifically denied the opportunity to make effective use of their kills to build wealth and prestige" (1982, p. 440). No one is in charge. "Such arrangements are subversive for the development of authority" (1982, p. 432). On the basis of similar observations of contemporary foraging people in many parts of the world the anthropologist Christopher Boehm argues that prehistoric hunter-gatherers would have maintained similar levels of egalitarianism, because it was vitally necessary in a hostile environment. The survival of early human groups depended on a compelling obligation to share, especially the carcasses of great beasts whose meat could not be preserved for long. Foragers do not store food, and live in larger bands than non-human primates. Boehm, who had earlier also studied chimpanzees with the ethologist Jane Goodall, notes a significant and puzzling difference between groups of humans and non human primates. The latter are always led by a silver backed alpha male, an individual who has fought his way to the top where he can then reserve females for his exclusive use, and get the first and best choice of food. Hunter gatherers typically do not tolerate such domination, from which Boehm deduces that early humans evolved a different social system.

As members of bands or tribes, humans can be quite egalitarian ... Individuals who otherwise would be subordinated are clever enough to form a large and united political coalition. ... Because the united subordinates are constantly putting down the more

¹⁰ Bion had originally been recommended for the highest military decoration, the Victoria Cross (VC), but this was reduced to the DSO when he swore at officials in the War Office for their ignorance of the realities of modern war (Trist, 1985, p. 10).

assertive alpha types in their midst, egalitarianism is in effect a bizarre type of political hierarchy: the weak combine forces to actively dominate the strong. [Boehm, 1999, p. 3].

While ganging up against a more powerful individual is common in apes too, the outcome is invariably different. "... when a pair of rival [apes] manages to unseat an incumbent alpha, only one of the two will assume the alpha position as a new set of competitive alliances comes into play" (Boehm, 2012, p. 844).

How could this kind of hierarchical organization have been suppressed by their human descendants? Boehm's answer is that in order to survive in larger groups we evolved a capacity to restrain the impulse to help ourselves at the expense of others, indeed *to desist from taking a lead in any obvious way*. Like other anthropologists Boehm has observed in many modern foraging societies that anyone who persistently tries to take over the group, or to have more than his share, is systematically mocked and if necessary ostracised by the group. He cites the anthropologist Jean Briggs's account of her exclusion by a small nomadic band of Inuit Eskimos, the Utku, with whom she had lived happily for many months in arctic Canada in the nineteen sixties. She was impressed by a man named Innutiaq who "kept strict control of his feelings ... the effort was caught in the flash if an eye, quickly subdued, in the careful length of a pause, or the painstaking neutrality of a reply" (Briggs, 1970, pp. 41-2). Innutiaq never lost his temper, but he beat his dog "with a fury that was unusual" (Boehm, 1999, p. 53). Local white sportsmen began to borrow the Utku's two valuable and fragile canoes for fishing. The Utku did not like this but did not complain. When one of the canoes was damaged beyond repair, Briggs protested to the Canadians. Soon after it became clear that the Utku group no longer wanted her around. Boehm's understanding of this ostracism, which lasted for months, is that the group would not tolerate someone who "*arbitrarily tried to make a decision that involved the entire group*" (Briggs, 1970, p. 59). Briggs notes that amongst the Utku "people tend to look askance at anyone who seems to aspire to tell them what to do" (1970, p. 42). Such individuals are identified by Boehm as "upstarts": "typical behaviours that are reasonably well controlled by the egalitarian band would seem to be: bullying behaviours; cheating or shirking in the context of co-operative efforts; serious degrees of deception or theft; and 'sexual crimes' like adultery, incest, and rape" (Boehm, 2000, p. 85).

But Boehm describes a greater sanction to enforce the foragers' egalitarianism. When mockery and ostracism fail to subdue an upstart, execution may be necessary: "... hunter-gatherers live in intentionally reversed dominance orders, and ... these muted hierarchies involve political tensions so strong that they sometimes require capital punishment to maintain them" (Boehm, 1999, p. 227). A paradoxical statistic supports this startling view. Providing detailed figures from a variety of communities Boehm shows that amongst most foraging societies rates of interpersonal violence are far lower than in settled agricultural communities, while murder rates are higher. "Foragers do have very high homicide rates, but they also exhibit relatively low levels of lesser conflict, and are heavily preoccupied with the maintenance of social harmony" (1999, p. 227). "The homicide rate per capita for egalitarian foragers is as high as in large American cities" (2012, p. 846). On this view, the original human condition does not allow much space for individualism. Egalitarianism of this kind is a potentially oppressive – a "profoundly conservative" social system (Woodburn, 1982, p. 447). You would not want to set yourself up as a leader, or even express too discordant an opinion, if the group then ganged up on you or tried to kill you.

With this abbreviated account of human evolutionary and cultural development in mind it becomes clearer why putting a group of professional adults in a room to discuss their relationships with each other is an alarming thing to do. Having been selected to restrain upstarts over hundreds of millennia – and despite the flourishing of very different political arrangements since the invention of agriculture (Service, 1975) – human beings remain conservative socialists¹¹ [see also appendix below, p. 17]. Anyone who has participated in a Tavistock-Leicester conference study group will recall the anxious insecurity of their first moments with mostly unknown others. How are we to get on? Do I have to be nice to everyone, or can I risk having a go at saying what I actually think? My point here is that the anxiety in such gatherings is created *by the setting itself*, one that generates a remarkable paralysis of decision making¹². Any attempt to take over the group is both welcomed and undermined. Relief at having someone in the lead is accompanied by veiled attacks on assumed authority. A request, say, to visit another group elsewhere in the conference is slowed down by others who provide a variety of reasons for this not to happen: that “we must all stay together because there is some work to do first”, that “we should be clearer about the reason for the visit”, that the selected person is “not the right person” to go, and so on.

A hundred years ago Freud first described his hypothesis about the origins of totemism and religion:

In 1912 I took up a conjecture of Darwin's to the effect that the primitive form of human society was that of a horde ruled over despotically by a powerful male. I attempted to show that the fortunes of this horde have left indestructible traces upon the history of human descent; and, especially, that the development of totemism, which comprises in itself the beginnings of religion, morality, and social organisation, is connected with the killing of the chief by violence and the transformation of the paternal horde into a community of brothers ... We must conclude that the psychology of the group is the oldest human psychology. [adding in a footnote] ..there was only a common will, there were no single ones. [Freud 1922, p. 122]

Freud's mythical description of the primal horde's murder of the father may have prehistoric validity, after all.

¹¹ Systematic conflict avoidance in settled agricultural groups was carefully observed in rural Russia by John Rickman a hundred years ago: “... the village formed a *leaderless group*, and the bond which held the members together was that they shared a common ideal ... When a topic came up for discussion someone would begin speaking in a guarded, vague and rather long-winded way ...By constant repetition of argument and many contradictory assertions made by nearly everyone present, the members of the group, after several evenings' talk, arrived at a fair guess at which way the wind was blowing. Personally, I never saw a vote taken. Everyone's “face” was saved by this method. There was no minority, no one in particular had carried the meeting, no one was defeated” (Rickman, 2003, p. 162).

¹² Because most of the those attending these events are professional people, it is tempting to assume that some kind of middle class overpoliteness takes over, each member falling over themselves to defer to others (“after you; no please, after *you*..”). We can now see how this may be misleading. The anthropological observations cited are made in traditional societies where modern notions of social class could not apply; indeed there is no class at all.

This narrative adds something to the psychoanalytic concept of primitive anxieties in groups. From the ethological point of view it is the actual death of the group that is being defended against, rather than an infantile terror of disintegration.¹³ Eric Miller (1988) notes an ambiguity in Bion's formulation of the involuntary and unconscious "proto-mental states" that always affect a group, which he called basic assumptions (1961). Miller asks whether these are primarily instinctive – inherited – traits, or desires and anxieties acquired through experience after birth¹⁴. He argues that during the later 1950s Bion shifted his view towards the latter, both under the influence of his final training analysis with Melanie Klein, and also following the death in 1951 of his first training analyst and mentor, John Rickman (Torres, 2013, p. 18). Miller (like Trist before him, and Armstrong¹⁵ after) sees this as a reductionist view, underplaying the primal power of social life on all of us. He argues in favour of Bion's original, tentative, formulation of an "instinctive groupishness" that is common in other species such as bees, birds and cattle. Curiously, though himself trained in anthropology, Miller does not speculate about its human origins, relying instead on his own "amateur" observation made decades earlier of a group of langur monkeys reacting "as if they were a single organism" to an external threat (Miller, 1998, p. 1501). The restraints on individuality in higher primates are more sophisticated than that. Apes do not behave like swarms or flocks – they defer to status. This primate tendency was suppressed in humans by a compulsive egalitarianism that reduced conflict:

100,000 years ago, humans, aided by much larger brains and by an advanced form of communication, created communities that could hold down not only domination behaviours by alpha individuals, but any other behaviour they identified as being directly or potentially deleterious to members of the group—or deleterious to the group's functioning as they saw it. [Boehm 2000, p. 98]

By focussing on early human evolution, Boehm's hypothesis fills a gap in group theory.

¹³ ..though of course infant terrors are related to the anxieties of abandonment and death.

¹⁴ This theme has preoccupied group relations scholars for decades. Bion's ambivalence about his mentor and hero at medical school Wilfred Trotter plays a significant part in his view of the origin of basic assumptions (Torres, 2013). Despite the fact that several distinguished group relations practitioners and writers have been anthropologists there is surprisingly little reference to this branch of knowledge in the literature.

¹⁵ "In his original and earlier series of papers, brought together in *Experiences in Groups*, Bion's focus is on the tension between the individual and the group, seen as built in to all mental functioning and involving an interplay between distinct but interdependent and interacting factors or forces. However, in the Review chapter, written subsequent to his training analysis with Melanie Klein, he can seem to read group mentality as if it were simply generated from within, an outcrop from very early primitive anxieties associated with part object relations. This reductionist reading, in my view, though not the only way of interpreting Bion's text, has played a major part in obscuring the significance of Bion's perspective within psychoanalysis and the corresponding tendency to read group and social phenomena simply as the outworking of individual pathology (cf Elliott Jaques formulation of social systems as a defence against anxiety, as against that of Isabel Menzies Lyth). From such a position it can become dangerously easy to extrapolate from psychoanalytic insight, without having as it were to take on either the discipline or the burden of a change of perspective, a different modality of engagement" (Armstrong, 2012).

The dangers of speaking your mind

Despite ten thousand years of predominantly settled agricultural and civic social organisation, an instinctive pressure to conform in human groups still holds sway. It is not so often observed because gatherings usually have a non-reflexive task such as work, play or celebration. But when they do not, such as in support groups, an underlying regulation of initiative is exposed. There are anecdotes among service staff of meetings that they had to go to where “nobody spoke”, where the facilitator was experienced as a Tavistock study group consultant sometimes is; an inscrutable and frustrating person who ought to be in the lead but refuses to do so. Such groups are soon abandoned, at least by those made most anxious by the silence. While sophisticated mental health staff in therapeutic settings can usually manage this, the majority may not. My own experience of reflective work with hospital front-line staff¹⁶ is that in the absence of a formal didactic task or other programme it is necessary to create a “change of gear” to get the group started. Though participants are usually keen enough to attend, their heads are full of things – urgent or mundane – that need doing, from which it is very difficult to drag them away. Any question about recent problems or stresses is met with a mixture of frowns and raised eyebrows, and vague remarks to the effect that everything is fine. Given that there are almost always problematic patients who have been seen in the department since we last met I don't believe this, yet saying so does not promote anything but further defensiveness. And waiting in silence at the start is the surest way of putting busy colleagues off any future meeting of this kind.

While trying hard to preserve the principle of peer group learning – that everyone has an equal voice – it is necessary to modify the method to get to that point. I have found that my anxiety at the beginning of a meeting is best put to work by reminding the group that we are talking about the process of ‘becoming a doctor’. I may have to say something about my daily discovery that this continues indefinitely, exploiting the fact that I was also, decades earlier, in their position as a junior doctor in paediatrics.

I am increasingly aware of what seems to be the privatisation of personal opinions¹⁷, in which expression of seriously held views is routinely suppressed, as if one were not allowed to notice intellectual, ethnic, sexual, political, religious, social class, professional, physical and financial differences in case that would be ‘judgemental’. The taboo of exploring rivalry amongst a group of highly successful (and mainly female) graduates is most striking. Yet once loosened from these restraints they are capable of emotional courage and generosity in exploring and sharing their clinical, training and personal experiences. They begin to see, for example, how profoundly they are affected by the patients and the families that they look after. One was shocked and ashamed to discover how violent she felt when she witnessed a child patient being cruelly mocked by his mother. She felt like hitting the woman. Another bravely told the group how angry she was at the teenage girls who regularly get admitted to the ward following a deliberate overdose of tablets. She had had her own problems in adolescence but never felt like doing such a thing. Yet she and her colleagues - nurses and doctors - look after these patients very attentively. This led to a discussion about how easy it would be instead for

¹⁶ This illustration is primarily based on fortnightly work discussion with junior paediatric staff. Because of the shift system based on the European Working Time Directive the membership of the group is never constant.

¹⁷ Comparable to the privatisation of ill-health, as if disease has no social origins. (Marmot, 2015)

the ward to replicate the rejecting, or rejected, family from which these young people have temporarily escaped (which far too often is precisely what happens to these young patients in crisis. (Hawton et al 2012))

Concealed behind the generous spirit is a fierce moral code. As it would have been when many doctors were former 'public' (private boarding) schoolboys, there is an echo of the military in medical culture, where loyalty at the front line trumps anxiety and fatigue. It is almost impossible to be ill because that is to let down your colleagues who will have to stand in for you on duty. The same morality dictates that you should not demonstrate your vulnerability to colleagues or to patients. One doctor explained that if you ask for help from your consultant that will show that you are weak, or stupid¹⁸.

While the modern public service setting does not seem fertile soil for reflection, there are promising developments. The structured procedure of Schwartz rounds (Goodrich & Cornwell, 2012), in which hospital staff are gathered for a monthly lunchtime meeting to discuss selected case presentations, may seem inflexible compared to psychoanalytical approaches, yet the anxieties I am describing are contained by this method sufficiently to keep the process going. It is regulated and facilitated by individuals who have been trained in it, in effect a manualised form of work discussion, and widely praised by participants. The text by Hartley and Kennard, *Staff Support Groups in the Helping Professions* (2009) though much less prescriptive, can be read as a handbook for group facilitators, offering practical yet sophisticated guidance for many of the familiar challenges of this work. A reflective method of teaching medical students to think about narratives of serious childhood illness has been running successfully in London for several years (Macaulay & Hirons, 2016). A randomized controlled trial (Maratos, Tanner et al., *submitted*) of staff support groups in mental health yielded encouraging results. The continued use, and effectiveness (Yakely, et al., 2011), of Balint groups in GP and psychiatry training is evidence of a commitment to horizontal learning in preparation for front line service. In social services an innovative method of peer support – dubbed 'the pod' – has been operating in the London borough of Hillingdon with encouraging effect:

groups of between six and eight practitioners, each responsible for an individual caseload ... meet weekly to discuss their cases and provide support to each other. Whereas, in the past, staff were responsible for either the initial assessment process or longer-term care, now each member takes on a case from the start and sees it through to the point when it is closed. [Cole, 2013]

Conclusion: conflicting sources of power

Horizontal work relationships are fragile, easily overcome by the prevailing paradigm of corporatised public services, where using your authority can readily be taken as an abuse of someone else's. Yet if staff feel secure enough they can relax their guard and find their voices. However it is to be achieved, that security is promoted by a model of attentive leadership rooted in the systemic discoveries of seventy years ago, working at the intersection between the vertical and the horizontal where conflicting sources of power meet: "to keep alive in one's experience the reality of the person, the group, the

¹⁸ Failure to train doctors about clinical uncertainty was, according to the American physician Kenneth Ludmerer, "the greatest deficiency of medical education throughout the twentieth century". Ludmerer KM. (1999) *Time to Heal* NY: OUP.

organization and the wider society” (Trist & Murray, 1990b, p. 37).

There is renewed interest in the dynamics of peer relationships from street-level political action such as in Madrid in 2011 and later all over the world in the Occupy movement. This alerted a new generation to the excitement but also the sheer stubbornness of a freely associated group, reliving our prehistoric struggle to bypass the power of individuals.

*It's impossible to switch off, I dream about it at night. It was hard work learning how to conduct the assemblies, especially the big one. ... We learn something new every day.*¹⁹ [Anonymous, 2011]

Recent history has shown how much hope for political change from mass action, particularly in North Africa, has been dashed, but not all of it (Mason, 2013). Trist's explanation of the failure of the 1947 “Pentecostal group” was that they did not at the time have an understanding of the “domain”, as he called it. His 1977 paper (Trist, 1977) on that subject describes his hopes that the new social movements and methods of communication that arose in the nineteen sixties would change political process fundamentally. The fact that they did not is sobering.

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¹⁹ The quotation (published in *Le Monde Diplomatique* 12 July 2011) is from an unnamed young woman who had spent every day occupying Puerta del Sol in Madrid. The Indignados had been the first to be inspired by the North African Arab spring, before Occupy got going.

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Appendix

Prepared for a discussion around this chapter at the Academic Faculty of the Anna Freud Centre, November 2015

Foragers	Farmers
Nomadic/shifting membership ^{1,2}	Settled/stable (expanding)
0.1 person/sq km ³	5- 10 persons/ sq km
Horizontal	Vertical
“Living socially” ie <i>not</i> society ⁴	Structures/classes of society
Autonomous individuals in a band	Subject individuals in tribes/nations
Shame, gossip, risk of exclusion by majority ⁵	Power/fear
Child centred; control by teasing ⁶	Adult centred; control by punishment
Immediate/timeless ^{7,8}	Harvest/storage/surplus/future
Knowledge	Capital/wealth
Dreams/memory	history
Sharing	Reciprocity/trade
few personal possessions, shared <i>on demand</i> ⁹ (gifts welcomed and thrown away ¹⁰)	property
Intimate identification with land (no 'countryside') plants, animals (no 'vermin ¹¹ ') including respect for prey ¹²	Domesticate/dominate nature: rival 'vermin' attack produce
Animism/shamanism/trance	Religion/alcohol
Genders more equal; animal/female deities	Female deities deposed ¹³ ; Patriarchal society and religion
Shared parenting more common ⁵	Shared parenting less common
Equality; no leader ¹⁴	Inequality; chief/emperor/king
Trust	Command
No showing off ¹⁵ (except of generosity ¹⁶)	Ostentatious grandeur of elite
Reputation	Power/status
Public = private ¹⁷ [oppressive to us]	Public vs private [more 'freedom']
Authority for specific tasks only ¹⁸	Authority located in chief
Conservative; deviance suppressed	'Progressive' (war/rebellion)
Anti-hierarchical push damps down change ¹⁹ (requires ostracism/execution)	Anti-hierarchical push promotes change
leadership ²⁰	

¹ “Intimacy implies exclusion of others, which is strikingly lacking in this almost boundary-less social

² “Relationships are not totally ‘given’ .. [but] must be worked out in a variety of social processes.” Myers, F. (1986) *Pintupi country, Pintupi self: sentiment, place, and politics among Western Desert Aborigines*. Washington and Canberra: Smithsonian Institution Press and Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

³ Brody, H. (2000) *The Other Side of Eden*. Faber, p 153

⁴ Ingold, T. (2004) On the social relations of the hunter-gatherer band. In (Eds) R.B. Lee & R. Daly *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers*. CUP 2004. p 399

⁵ “Because there are no alpha males to intervene authoritatively in their disputes, a serious dyadic conflict can quickly result in homicide.” Boehm C. (2012) Ancestral hierarchy and conflict. *Science* 336; 6083: 844-847 p 846

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- ⁶ Hewlett BS, Fouts HN, Boyette AH, Hewlett BL. (2011) Social learning among Congo Basin hunter-gatherers. *Philosophical Transactions of The Royal Society B* 366: 1168-1178.
- ⁷ Whitrow, G. (1988) *Time in History*. Oxford, p8-9
- ⁸ “oriented forever in the present” Sahlins, M. (1972) *Stone Age economics*, Tavistock. p30
- ⁹ “sharing almost invariably takes place in response to requests..” Ingold, T. (op cit) p408
- ¹⁰ Brody (op cit) p121
- ¹¹ Brody (op cit) p14
- ¹² no wish to dominate nature, rather “maintain proper relationships with these beings” Ridlington, R. (1982) Technology, worldview and adaptive strategy in a northern hunting society. *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 19: 469-81 p471
- ¹³ Kraemer, S (1991) The Origins of Fatherhood: An Ancient Family Process. *Family Process* ,30:377-392
- ¹⁴ “systematically eliminate distinctions of wealth power and status” Woodburn, J. (1982). *Egalitarian Societies*. *Man*, n.s, 17(3): 431-51, p431
- ¹⁵ “ a good hunter should never make his superiority obvious, and should always refrain from telling others what to do – an injunction that ends to impede effective decision making” Ingold (op cit) citing Henriksen, G. (1973) *Hunters in the barrens: the Naskapi on the edge of the white man’s world*. Newfoundland Social and Economic Studies 12. Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland. 40-54
- ¹⁶ “It [is] reputation that hunters [are] maximizing, not protein.” Hrdy, S.B. (1999) *Mother Nature; Natural Selection and the Female of the Species*. Chatto & Windus. p229
- ¹⁷ “..selves expand to fill the entire field of relationships that constitute them” Ingold (op cit) p407
- ¹⁸ authority limited to “specific situations like organizing ritual or arranging marriages, and leave individuals to exercise personal autonomy in broad areas of everyday life” Endicott, K. (2004) Gender Relations in hunter-gatherer societies. In (Eds) R.B. Lee & R. Daly *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers*. Cambridge, p416
- ¹⁹ “A bizarre type of political hierarchy” Boehm, C. (1999). *Hierarchy in the Forest: the Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p3
- ²⁰ working at the intersection between the vertical and the horizontal where conflicting sources of power meet: “to keep alive in one’s experience the reality of the person, the group, the organization and the wider society” Trist, E., & Murray, H. (1990). Introduction. In: E. Trist and H. Murray (Eds.) *The Social Engagement of Social Science: A Tavistock Anthology. volume 1: The Socio-Psychological Perspective*. London: Free Association Books, pp. 37-8. p. 37 [cited above, p 13]