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EXPERIENCES IN GROUPS: II*

by W. R. BION

I ended my last article by saying that my interpretations of group behaviour in terms of the group's attitude to myself must seem to be a contribution as impertinent as it was likely to be inaccurate. Criticisms of this feature of my behaviour in a group require careful investigation, and the sequel will show that to these criticisms I shall provide answers, not refutations. Let us first consider a few group situations

As we sit round in a rough circle, the room softly lit by a single standard lamp, a woman patient in the group complains angrily:

You (that is, the group) always say I am monopolising, but if I don't talk you just sit there like dumb things. I'm fed up with the whole damn lot of you. And you (pointing to a man of twenty-six, who raises his eyebrows in a smoothly efficient affectation of surprise) are the worst of the lot. Why do you always sit there like a good little boy—never saying anything, but upsetting the group? Dr. Bion is the only one who is ever listened to here, and he never says anything helpful. All right, then, I'll shut up. Let's see what you do about it if I don't monopolise.

Now another one: the room is the same, but it is a sunlit evening in summer; a man is speaking:

This is what I complain about here. I asked a perfectly simple question. I said what I thought was happening because I don't agree with Dr. Bion. I said it would be interesting to know what other people thought, but do any of you reply? Not a bloody one. And you women are the worst of the lot—

except Miss X. How can we get anywhere at all if people won't answer you? You smile when I say except Miss X, and I know what you're thinking, but you're wrong.

Here is another: a woman patient says:

Everyone seems to agree absolutely with what Dr. Bion has just said, but I said the same thing five minutes ago, and because it was only me no-one took the slightest notice.

And yet another; a woman says:

Well, since nobody else is saying anything, I may as well mention my dream. I dreamed that I was on the sea-shore, and I was going to bathe. There were a lot of sea-gulls about . . . There was a good deal more like that.

A member of the group: Do you mean that that is all you can remember?

Woman: Oh, no, no. But it's all really rather silly.

The group sits about glumly, and each individual seems to become wrapt in his thoughts. All contact between members of the group appears to have broken.

Myself: What made you stop talking about your dream?

Woman: Well, nobody seemed very interested, and I only said it to start the ball rolling.

I will draw attention only to one aspect of these episodes. The first woman patient said: You (the group) always say I am monopolising. . . . In actual fact, only one person had said this, and that on only one occasion, but her reference was to the whole group, and clearly indicated that she thought the whole

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group always felt this about her. The man in the second example said: You smile when I say except Miss X, and I know what you're thinking. . . . In the third example the woman said: . . . because it was only me no-one took the slightest notice. In the fourth example the woman felt that the group was not interested, and that she had better abandon her initiative. I have already pointed out (Part I, Page 317) that anyone who has any contact with reality is always consciously or unconsciously forming an estimate of the attitude of his group towards himself. These examples taken from groups of patients show, if there is really any need for demonstration, that the same kind of thing is going on in the patient group. For the time being I am ignoring obvious facts, such as that there is something in the speaker which colours his assessment of the situation in which he finds himself. Now, even if it is still maintained that the individual's view of the group attitude to himself is of no concern to anybody but himself, I hope that it is clear that this kind of assessment is as much a part of the mental life of the individual as is his assessment, shall we say, of the information brought to him by his sense of touch. Therefore, the way in which a man assesses the group attitude to himself is, in fact, an important object of study even if it leads us to nothing else.

But my last example, of a very common occurrence, shows that, in fact, the way in which men and women in a group make these assessments is a matter of great importance to the group, for on the judgments that individuals make depends the efflorescence or decay of the social life of the group.

What happens if I use this idea of group attitude to the individual as a basis for interpretation? We have

already seen some of the reactions in the first article. In the examples I gave, there could be seen, though I did not stress them, some results of this sort of interpretation; but one common reaction I shall mention now. The group will tend to express still further its preoccupation with myself, and then a point seems to be reached where, for the time being, the curiosity of the group is satisfied. This may take two or three sessions. Then the group begins the thing all over again, but this time with some other member of the group. What happens is that another member is the object of the forces that were previously concentrated on myself. When I think enough evidence has accumulated to convince the group, I say that I think this has happened. One difficulty about doing this is that the transition from a preoccupation with myself to a preoccupation with another member of the group is marked by a period during which the preoccupation with the other member shows unmistakable signs of containing a continued preoccupation with myself. I have depicted this situation in the first article (page 316) where I describe myself as giving an interpretation that, in questioning others, the group is really preoccupied with myself. I think that on that occasion I would have been more accurate if I had interpreted the emotional situation as a transition of the kind I have just described.

Many people dispute the accuracy of these interpretations. Even when the majority of members in the group have had unmistakable evidence that their behaviour is being affected by a conscious or unconscious estimate of the group attitude to themselves, they will say they do not know what the rest of the group thinks about them, and they do not believe that anyone else does either. This objection to the accuracy

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of the interpretations must be accepted, even if we modify it by claiming that accuracy is a matter of degree; for it is a sign of awareness that one element in the individual's automatic assessment of the attitude of the group towards himself is doubt. If an individual claims he has no doubt at all, one would really like to know why not. Are there occasions when the group attitude is utterly unmistakable? Or is the individual unable to tolerate ignorance about a matter in which it is essential to be accurate if his behaviour in a society is to be wise? In a sense, I would say that the individual in a group is profiting by his experience if at one and the same time he becomes more accurate in his appreciation of his position in the emotional field, and more capable of accepting it as a fact that even his increased accuracy falls lamentably short of his needs.

It may be thought that my admission destroys the foundations of any technique relying on this kind of interpretation; but it does not. The nature of the emotional experience of interpretation is clarified, but its inevitability as part of human mental life is unaltered, and so is its primacy as a method. That can only be attacked when it can be demonstrated that some other mental activity deals more accurately with matters of greater relevance to the study of the group.

Here is an example of a reaction where the accuracy of the interpretation is questioned; the reader may like to bear the preceding passages in mind when he considers the conclusions I draw from this and the associated examples.

For some time I have been giving interpretations which have been listened to civilly, but conversation has been becoming more and more desultory, and I begin to feel that my interventions

are not wanted; I say so in the following terms: During the past half hour the group has been discussing the international situation, but I have been claiming that the conversation was demonstrating something about ourselves. Each time I have done this I have felt my contribution was jarring and unwelcome. Now I am sure I am the object of your hostility for persisting in this kind of contribution.

For a moment or two after I have spoken there is a silence, and then a man member of the group says very civilly that he has felt no hostility at all to my interpretations, and has not observed that anybody else has either. Two or three other members of the group agree with him. Furthermore, the statements are made with moderation, and in a perfectly friendly manner, except possibly for what one might think was an excusable annoyance at having to give a reassurance which ought to have been unnecessary. In some respects I might say again that I feel I am being treated like a child who is being patiently dealt with in spite of his tiresomeness. However, I do not propose to consider this point just now, but rather to take perfectly seriously the statement made by these members of the group who seem to me to represent the whole group very fairly in denying any feeling of hostility. I feel that a correct assessment of the situation demands that I accept it as a fact that all individuals in the group are perfectly sincere and accurate when they say they feel no hostility towards myself.

I recall another episode of a similar kind.

Beside myself, three men and four women are present in the group; a man and a woman are absent. One of the men says to a woman:

How did your affair go last week?

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The woman: You mean my party? Oh, that went all right. Very well, really. Why?

The man: Well, I was just wondering. You were rather bothered about it if you remember.

The woman (rather listlessly): Oh, yes. I was really.

After a slight pause the man starts again.

He says: You don't seem to want to say very much about it.

She replies: Oh, yes, I do really, but nothing much happened. It really went all right.

Another woman now joins in and tries to carry the conversation further, as if she felt aware that it was faltering, but in a minute or two she also gives up. There is a pause, and then another woman comes forward with an experience she had during the week. She starts off quite briskly, and then comes to a stop. One or two members attempt to encourage her by their questions, but I feel that even the questioners seem to be oppressed by some preoccupation. The atmosphere of the group is heavy with fruitless effort. Nothing could be clearer to me than the determination of the individuals to make the session what they would consider to be a success. If only it were not for the two absentees, I think, I believe this group would be going very well. I begin myself to feel frustrated, and I remember how much the last two or three sessions have been spoilt because one or more members of the group have been absent. Three of the people present at this session have been absent at one or other of the last two sessions. It seems too bad that the group should be spoilt like this when all are prepared to do their best. I begin to wonder whether the group approach to problems is really worthwhile when it affords so much opportunity for apathy and

obstruction about which one can do nothing. In spite of the effort that is being made, I cannot see that the conversation is anything but a waste of time. I wish I could think of some illuminating—interpretation, but the material is so poor that there is nothing I can pick up at all. Various people in the group are beginning to look at me in a hopeless sort of way, as much as to say that they have done all they can—it is up to me now—and, indeed, I feel they are quite right. I wonder if there would be any point in saying that they feel like this about me, but dismiss this because there seems to be no point in telling them what they must know already.

The pauses are getting longer, comments more and more futile, when it occurs to me that the feelings which I am experiencing myself—in particular, oppression by the apathy of the group and an urge to say something useful and illuminating—are precisely those which the others present seem to have. A group whose members cannot attend regularly must be apathetic and indifferent to the sufferings of the individual patient.

When I begin to wonder what I can say by way of interpretation I am brought up against a difficulty which will have already occurred to the reader; what is this group which is unsympathetic and hostile to our work? I must assume that it consists of these same people that I see struggling hard to do the work, but, as far as I am concerned at any rate, it also includes the two absentees. I am reminded of looking through a microscope at an overthick section; with one focus I see, not very clearly perhaps, but with sufficient distinctness, one picture. If I alter the focus very slightly I see another. Using this as an analogy for what I am doing mentally, I shall now have another look

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at this group, and will then describe the pattern that I see with the altered focus.

The picture of hard working individuals striving to solve their psychological problems is displaced by a picture of a group mobilised to express its hostility and contempt for neurotic patients, and all who may wish to approach neurotic problems seriously. This group at the moment seems to me to be led by the two absentees, who are indicating that there are better ways of spending their time than by engaging in the sort of experience with which the group is familiar when I am a member of it. At a previous session this group was led by one of the members now absent. As I say, I am inclined to think that the present leaders of this group are not in the room; they are the two absentees, who are felt not only to be contemptuous of the group, but also to be expressing that contempt in action. The members of that group who are present are followers. I wonder as I listened to the discussion if I can make more precise the facts which give me this impression.

At first, I must confess, I see little to confirm me in my suspicions, but then I notice that one of the men who is asking the questions is employing a peculiarly supercilious tone. His response to the answers he receives appears to me, if I keep my mental microscope at the same focus, to express polite incredulity. A woman in the corner examines her fingernails with an air of faint distaste. When a silence occurs it is broken by a woman who, under the former focus, seemed to be doing her best to keep the work of the group going, with an interjection which expresses clearly her dissociation from participation in an essentially stupid game.

I do not think I have succeeded very

well in giving precision to my impressions, but I think I see my way to resolving the difficulty in which I found myself in the first example. On that occasion, it will be remembered, I felt quite positive that the group was hostile to myself and my interpretations, but I had not a shred of evidence with which to back my interpretation persuasively. Truth to tell, I found both experiences very disconcerting; it seemed as if my chosen method of investigation had broken down, and broken down in the most obvious kind of way. Anyone used to individual therapy might have foretold that a group of patients would deny an interpretation, and anyone could have foretold that the group would present a heaven-sent opportunity for denying it effectively. It occurs to me, however, that if a group affords splendid opportunities for evasion and denial, it should afford equally splendid opportunities for observation of the way in which these evasions and denials are effected. Before investigating this I shall examine the two examples I have given with a view to formulating some hypothesis which will give form to the investigation.

It can be seen that what the individual says or does in a group illumines both his own personality and his view of the group; sometimes his contribution illumines one more than the other. Some contributions he is prepared to make as coming unmistakably from himself, but there are others which he would wish to make anonymously. If the group can provide means by which contributions can be made anonymously, then the foundations are laid for a successful system of evasion and denial, and in the first example I gave it was possibly because the hostility of the individuals was being contributed to the group anonymously that each member could quite sincerely deny that

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he felt hostile. We shall have to examine the mental life of the group closely to see how the group provides a means for making these anonymous contributions. I shall postulate a group mentality as the pool to which the anonymous contributions are made, and through which the impulses and desires implicit in these contributions are gratified. Any contribution to this group mentality must enlist the support of, or be in conformity with, the other anonymous contributions of the group. I should expect the group mentality to be distinguished by a uniformity which contrasted with the diversity of thought in the mentality of the individuals who have contributed to its formation. I should expect that the group mentality, as I have postulated it, would be opposed to the avowed aims of the individual members of the group. If experience shows that this hypothesis fulfils a useful function, further characteristics of the group mentality may be added from clinical observation.

Here are some experiences which seem to me to be to the point.

The group consists of four men and four women, including myself. The ages of the patients are between thirty-five and forty. The prevailing atmosphere is one of good temper and helpfulness. The room is cheerfully lit by evening sunlight.

Mrs. X: I had a nasty turn last week.

I was standing in a queue waiting for my turn to go to the cinema when I felt ever so queer. Really, I thought I should faint or something.

Mrs. Y: You're lucky to have been going to a cinema. If I thought I could go to a cinema I should feel I had nothing to complain of at all.

Mrs. Z: I know what Mrs. X means. I feel just like that myself, only I should have had to leave the queue.

Mr. A: Have you tried stooping down?

That makes the blood come back to your head. I expect you were feeling faint.

Mrs. X: It's not really faint.

Mrs. Y: I always find it does a lot of good to try exercises. I don't know if that's what Mr. A means.

Mrs. Z: I think you have to use your will power. That's what worries me—I haven't got any.

Mr. B: I had something similar happen to me last week, only I wasn't even standing in a queue. I was just sitting at home quietly when . . .

Mr. C: You were lucky to be sitting at home quietly. If I was able to do that I shouldn't consider I had anything to grumble about.

Mrs. Z: I can sit at home quietly all right, but it's never being able to get out anywhere that bothers me. If you can't sit at home why don't you go to a cinema or something?

After listening for some time to this sort of talk it becomes clear to me that anybody in this group who suffers from a neurotic complaint is going to be advised to do something which the speaker knows from his own experience to be absolutely futile. Furthermore, it is clear that nobody has the least patience with any neurotic symptom. A suspicion grows in my mind, until it becomes a certainty, that there is no hope whatever of expecting co-operation from this group. I am led to ask myself what else I expected from my experience as an individual therapist. I have always been quite familiar with the idea of a patient as a person whose capacity for co-operation is very slight. Why, then, should I feel disconcerted or aggrieved when a group of patients demonstrates precisely this quality? It occurs to me that perhaps this very fact will afford me an opportunity for getting a hearing for a more analytical approach. I reflect that from the way in

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which the group is going on its motto might be: "Vendors of quack nostrums unite." No sooner have I said this to myself than I realise that I am expressing my feeling not of the group's disharmony, but of its unity. Furthermore, I very soon become aware that it is not accidentally that I have attributed this slogan to the group, for every attempt I make to get a hearing shows that I have a united group against me. The idea that neurotics cannot co-operate has to be modified.

I shall not multiply examples of team work as a characteristic of the group mentality, chiefly because I cannot, at present, find any method of describing it. I shall rely upon chance instances as they occur in the course of these articles to give the reader a better idea of what I mean, but I suspect that no real idea can be obtained outside a group itself. For the present I shall observe that in the group mentality the individual finds a means of expressing contributions which he wishes to make anonymously, and, at the same time, his greatest obstacle to the fulfilment of the aims he wishes to achieve by membership of the group.

It may be thought that there are many other obstacles to the fulfilment of the individual's aims in a group. I do not wish to pre-judge the matter, but for the time being I shall not attach very much importance to them. It is clear that when a group forms the individuals forming it hope to achieve some satisfaction from it. It is also clear that the first thing they are aware of is a sense of frustration produced by the presence of the group of which they are members. It may be argued that it is quite inevitable that a group must satisfy some desires and frustrate others, but I am inclined to think that difficulties that are inherent in a group situation,—such, for example, as a lack of privacy which

must follow from the fact that a group provides you with company, produce quite a different sort of problem from the kind of problem produced by the group mentality.

I have often mentioned the individual in the course of my discussions of the group, but in putting forward the concept of a group mentality I have described the individual, particularly in the episode in which the two absentees played a big part in the emotional orientation of the group, as being in some way opposed to the group mentality although a contributor to it. It is time now that I turned to discuss the individual, and in doing so I propose to take leave of the neurotic and his problems.

Aristotle said man is a political animal, and, in so far as I understand his *Politics*, I gather that he means by this that for a man to lead a full life the group is essential. I hold no brief for what has always seemed to me an extremely dreary work, but I think that this statement is one which psychiatrists cannot forget without danger of achieving an unbalanced view of their subject. The point that I wish to make is that the group is essential to the fulfilment of a man's mental life—quite as essential to that as it is to the more obvious activities of economics and war. In the first group that I described in these articles I could say that the group was essential to myself because I wished to have a group to study; presumably the other members could say the same; but even had I admitted this as the aim of the individual members, including myself—and it will be remembered that I did no such thing—I consider that group mental life is essential to the full life of the individual, quite apart from any temporary or specific need, and that satisfaction of this need has to be sought through membership of a group

Now, the point that emerges in all the groups from which I have been drawing examples is that the most prominent feeling which the group experiences is a feeling of frustration—a very unpleasant surprise to the individual who comes seeking gratification. The resentment produced by this may, of course, be due to a naive inability to understand the point that I made above, that it is the nature of a group to deny some desires in satisfying others, but I suspect that most resentment is caused through the expression in a group of impulses which individuals wish to satisfy anonymously, and the frustration produced in the individual by the consequences to himself that follow from this satisfaction. In other words, it is in this area which I have temporarily demarcated as the group mentality that I propose to look for the causes of the group's failure to afford the individual a full life. The situation will be perceived to be paradoxical and contradictory, but I do not propose to make any attempt to resolve these contradictions just now. I shall assume that the group is potentially capable of providing the individual with the gratification of a number of needs of his mental life which can only be provided by a group. I am excluding, obviously, the satisfactions of his mental life which can be obtained in solitude, and, less obviously, the satisfactions which can be obtained within his family. The power of the group to fulfil the needs of the individual is, I suggest, challenged by the group mentality. The group meets this challenge by the elaboration of a characteristic culture of the group. I employ the phrase "culture of the group" in an extremely loose manner; I include in it the structure which the group achieves at any given moment, the occupations it pursues, and the organisation it adopts. I will refer now

to my speculations (Article I, page 319) about the motives underlying the group's insistence on a leader. I said then that it would seem to be, in the situation I was describing, either an emotional survival operating uselessly, or else the response to some demand created by the awareness of a situation which we had not then defined. The attempt on that occasion to construct the group so that it consisted of a leader and his followers, above whom he towered supremely, is a very good example of the kind of thing I am meaning to include under the word culture. If we assume that the undefined situation is the group mentality of which I have been speaking, and I think there was good reason to assume that, then the group was attempting to meet the challenge presented to its capacity to fulfil the individual's need by this simple culture of leader and followers. It will be seen that in the scheme I am now putting forward, the group can be regarded as an inter-play—between individual needs, group mentality, and culture. To illustrate what I mean by this triad, here is another episode taken from a group.

For a period of three or four weeks in a patient group I was in very bad odour—my contributions were ignored, the usual response being a polite silence, and then a continuation of the conversation which, as far as I could see, showed no sign of having been deflected by any comments of my own. Then suddenly a patient began to display what the group felt to be symptoms of madness, making statements that appeared to be the products of hallucination. Instantaneously I found I had been readmitted to the group. I was the good leader, master of the situation, fully capable of dealing with a crisis of this nature—in short, so outstandingly the right man for the job that it would have

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been presumption for any other member of the group to attempt to take any helpful initiative. The speed with which consternation was changed into bland complacency had to be seen to be believed. Before the patient began to alarm the group my interpretations might have been oracular pronouncements for all the ceremonious silence with which they were received; but they were the pronouncements of an oracle in decay—nobody would dream of considering their content as worthy of note. After the group had become alarmed I was the centre of a cult in its full power. Looked at from the point of view of an ordinary man attempting to do a serious job, neither situation was satisfactory. A group structure in which one member is a god, either established or discredited, has a very limited usefulness. The culture of the group in this instance might almost be described as a miniature theocracy. I do not attach importance to this phrase as a description, except in so far as it helps to define what on that occasion I would have meant by culture. Having done that, the proper employment of my hypothesis of individual, group mentality and culture, requires an attempt to define the qualities of the other two components in the triad. Before the turning point, the group mentality had been of such a nature that the needs of the individual were being successfully denied by the provision of a good friendly relationship between the patients, and a hostile and sceptical attitude towards myself. The group mentality operated very hardly upon this particular patient, for reasons into which it is unnecessary to go. It was possible on this occasion, by exhibiting something of the culture of the group, to affect a change in the group without elucidating either the group mentality or the effect upon the

individual that the group mentality was having. The group changed and became very like school children in the latency period in its outlook and behaviour. The seriously disturbed patient, outwardly at least, ceased to be disturbed. Individuals then attempted again to state their cases, but put forward only such problems as were of a trivial or painless nature. I was then able to suggest that the group had adopted a cultural pattern analagous to that of the playground, and that while this must be presumed to be coping fairly adequately with some of the difficulties of the group—I meant coping with the group mentality but did not say so—it was a culture which only permitted of the broaching of the kind of problem one might well expect a school child to help with. The group again changed, and became one in which all members, including myself, seemed to be more or less on a level. At the same time a woman mentioned for the first time in six months quite serious marital difficulties which were troubling her.

These examples I hope give some idea of what I mean by culture, and also some idea of what I consider to be the need to attempt to elucidate, if possible, two out of the three components in the triad.

My attempt to simplify, by means of the concepts I have adumbrated, will prove to be very misleading unless the reader bears in mind that the group situation is mostly perplexing and confused; operations of what I have called the group mentality, or of the group culture, only occasionally emerge in any strikingly clear way. Furthermore, the fact that one is involved in the emotional situation oneself makes clear-headedness difficult. There are times, such as the occasion I described when two members of the group were absent,

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when it is clear that the individuals are struggling against the apathy of the group. On that occasion I attributed behaviour to the group on the strength of the behaviour of one or two individuals in it. There is nothing out of the ordinary about this; a child is told that he or she is bringing disgrace upon the school, because it is expected that the behaviour of one will be interpreted as the behaviour of all; Germans are told that they are responsible for the behaviour of the Nazi government; silence, it is said, gives consent. Nobody is very happy about insisting on collective responsibility in this way, but I shall

assume, nevertheless, that unless a group actively disavows its leader it is, in fact, following him. In short, I shall insist that I am quite justified in saying that the group feels such and such when, in fact, perhaps only one or two people would seem to provide by their behaviour warrant for such a statement, if, at the time of behaving like this, the group shows no outward sign of repudiating the lead they are given. I dare say it will be possible to base belief in the complicity of the group on something more convincing than negative evidence, but for the time being I regard negative evidence as good enough.