

# GROUPING<sup>1</sup>

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*According to the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, there are two roots for the word 'group'... The more ancient Germanic origin of the word 'group' is derived from the word for 'crop'; that is, the gizzard of a bird. For within the crop of an animal is to be found an agglomeration of substances... which have lost their discrete nature and are now clumped together to form a fibrous mass.*

*The other origin of the word 'group' comes from the Latin, and is connected with a concept of 'grouping' as an active process.*

(Pines, 1994, pp 53-54)

*The most obvious error to be got out of the way at the beginning is organismic idealism, in terms of which the group is seen as a hyper-organism.*

(Laing and Cooper, 1964, p 129)

## ***Introduction***

My intention in this chapter is to lay a foundation for a reflexive theory of group behaviour. I shall suggest that such a theory requires three levels of articulation: a descriptive account of the behaviour of groups; an interpretative account of the grouping process; and a deconstructive account of the language and context in which these theories are formulated, and the interests they serve.

I shall also put forward an account of the grouping process, in which groups are constituted within the domains of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real as defined by Lacan<sup>1</sup>.

Some clearing of the ground will be necessary before this foundation can be laid. One of my difficulties is that there is considerable confusion in the literature, or perhaps amongst readers of the literature, between theories of the behaviour of groups, and theories of social behaviour which use interpretative work in face-to-face groups as a method of studying it.

There are also considerable variations in the meaning of the word 'group'. For example, in group relations conferences (eg Miller, 1990) and in the work of the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Grouping' (1998); in French R and Vince R, *Group Relations, Management and Organization*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (in press).

Institute of Group Analysis (eg de Maré *et al*, 1991) a large group consists of say 30-100 people; whereas in the writings of the nineteenth century sociologist Georg Simmel, a large group is a group of over two thousand people (Simmel, 1950). Historically, various sizes of group have been deemed to be too large. Under the *Ancien Régime* in France, twenty noblemen were not allowed to assemble together without special permission from the king. More cautiously, the Conventicle Act under Charles II included punishments for religious home assemblies of more than five persons. (Simmel, 1950, pp 174ff).

There is also a tendency to over-generalise from studies conducted under very particular conditions, and a lack of reflexivity about what I shall refer to as the discursive practices by which theories are framed.

In addressing these problems I shall propose that it may often be useful to think of 'grouping' as something which people do, rather than of groups as objects. Charles Handy (1981, P 146) illustrates what I mean:

Put random collections of people into groups - for instance on a management training course - and they will, if they wish to be a group... , start to find a name, or a private territorial sign, or a ritual, which will give them an independent identity. If they do not do this, it often means that membership of such a group is not important to them, that they are happy to remain a random collection of individuals.

Handy might have omitted 'to be' and simply said: '...if they wish to group'. He uses the word 'group' in two senses: people may be put into groups, but they do not necessarily wish to be a group.

The chapter is in two parts. The first clears the ground and puts down some markers; the second uses texts by Yvonne Agazarian and by Lyman Ketchum and Eric Trist to illustrate the three levels of theorising I have proposed. Several of the key concepts I shall use are the outcome of many conversations with Philip Boxer, the influence of whose intellectual clarity and audacity I acknowledge gratefully<sup>ii</sup>.

## ***I CLEARING THE GROUND***

### ***What is a group?***

There is an extensive literature in which groups are objects in a real world, whose properties can be described; the behaviour of their members can be in part be understood in relation to theories of group formation and development, the influence of group size, inter-group relations and other factors. For example, Handy writes:

Groups mature and develop. Like individuals they have a fairly clearly defined growth cycle. This has been categorised as having four successive stages. (Handy goes on to describe Tuckman's (1965) stages of 'forming', 'storming', 'norming' and 'performing'.) (1981, p 160)

In the first chapter of a book on group relations, in a section entitled 'Foundations', it would be nice to feel that this body of knowledge provided something solid under our feet. Unfortunately it does not, for at least two reasons. The first is that groups are not objects in a world existing independently of our perceptions. With a hint of the discourse of Zen, Smith and Berg call them 'organisations of emptiness' (1987, p 151). This is not a serious difficulty: nobody supposes that groups are fundamental constituents of the universe. A group is a useful construct - an object in the social world of the same status as organisations, communities, associations, tribes and nations. Thus Brown (1988, p 2) proposes this definition:

a group exists when two or more people define themselves as members of it, and when its existence is recognised by at least one other.

I am not adopting this definition, but I am agreeing with Brown's assumption that the existence of groups is of a kind that comes about through human activities like defining and recognising.

There is a second, linguistic difficulty which is more serious. This is that the word 'group' is used to refer to several different collectives:

- i A cluster of people. This might not conform to Brown's definition: while I might say, 'Look at that group outside the pub', they might not see themselves as members of a group.
- ii A series. This is a term used by Sartre (1960)<sup>iii</sup> to refer to a number of people who are related by virtue of being linked to the same object, but who have no relationship to each other, like people standing in a bus queue. For Sartre, grouping was the process by which a series becomes a group.
- iii A face to face meeting. In the handbook that goes with the training video *Meetings, Bloody Meetings*, Anthony Jay writes: 'In the world of management, a meeting is very often the only occasion where the team or group actually exists and works as a group' (1976, p 5). Handy says senior managers can spend eighty percent of their working day in 'one sort of group or another' (1981, p 145).
- iv A session of a therapeutic or experiential learning event; as when a member says: 'We had a good group this morning'.
- v A social grouping of which people define themselves as members, both when they are meeting and when they are apart. So the members of a family living apart and

meeting for festivals and funerals, or of a branch of a political party meeting together and then going out canvassing, constitute groups according to this usage.

- vi A social system. I use this term to refer to a whole range of collectives up to the large and complex associations and communities discussed by nineteenth century sociologists, and by Freud in his 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego' (1921). These early studies of large social systems were uneasily preoccupied with their potentiality for breaking down into undifferentiated masses. Hopper (1997) has interpreted the behaviour of simple and complex social systems in terms of processes of aggregation, massification and cohesion.
- vii A category. Groupings like 'men', 'women', 'black people', 'white people', 'cyclists', 'diabetics' and 'the unemployed' are classificatory categories which imply no necessary sense of relationship between the persons concerned. (However, under some circumstances, people in all these categories may have a sense of affinity when they meet each other. Two black people may be glad to see each other in a predominantly white gathering; cyclists often greet each other on lonely roads.)

***With what kinds of group is group relations concerned?***

This is not a simple question, for several reasons. Wilfred Bion's early work on groups, described in *Experiences in Groups* (1961), has become a normative model for group relations practitioners. The title of his book, and the theories set out in it, imply that his object of study was the periodic meetings of patients or trainees he describes. On the other hand, he says on more than one occasion that the phenomena he seeks to elucidate are ubiquitous:

The only point about collecting a group of people is that it enables us to see just how the 'political' characteristics of the human body operate... I do not consider it necessary for a number of people to be brought together - the individual cannot help being a member of a group... The individual is a group animal at war, not simply with the group, but with himself for being a group animal and with those aspects of his personality that constitute his groupishness. (1961, p 131)

In Isabel Menzies Lyth's phrase (1990), Bion is concerned with 'the dynamics of the social' - perhaps we should add 'and political' - rather than solely with the dynamics of meetings of five to eight people. This is I think the best way to define the focus of contemporary group relations conferences. There has been a shift in the discourse of some conferences, from talk of groups to talk of systems. Participants meet in groups (meaning iii or iv), but the focus of study is whatever social systems (meanings v, vi and vii) can be distinguished, within and across the boundaries of these meetings and of the conference (eg Grubb Institute, 1997).

*What is group theory about?*

There is now a considerable sociological, psychological and psychoanalytic literature on group processes. Much of the psychoanalytic literature is based on work with meetings of small therapeutic groups, a smaller part on work with larger meetings and in educational study groups and group relations conferences. From time to time it is asserted that the phenomena described can also be observed in everyday committees and working groups, if not overtly then below the surface. Thus Bion (1961) invites his reader to test the theories he is putting forward by recalling to himself (or herself)

the memory of some committee or other gathering in which he has participated, and consider[ing] to what extent he can recall evidence that could point to the existence of what I call work-group function, not forgetting the actual administrative structure, chairman and so forth, as material to be included in his review. (p 146)

Yvonne Agazarian makes a similar claim (1994, p 48), to which I refer later. These assertions have been insufficiently examined. Although even the most cynical person might expect to see some evidence of work group function in a committee meeting, the meetings and task group activities which make up the day to day life of organisations are in many respects very different from the meetings of therapy groups and study groups. For many years I have conducted a course on chairing meetings for middle managers in the Civil Service. It is based on a series of simulated meetings, which are videotaped and played back, with each manager chairing in turn. In debriefing these meetings, I have seldom found myself calling upon psychoanalytic or group analytic concepts, either in my comments or in making sense of them for myself, except on the rare occasions when a meeting has seriously fallen apart.

I suggest therefore that the existing body of psychoanalytic group theory:

- i Is essential for work with therapeutic and experiential learning groups.
- ii Is sometimes useful but in itself insufficient for understanding and participating in the working meetings of 'ordinary' organisations like businesses, educational institutions, and welfare agencies.
- iii Provides a valuable perspective upon the 'dynamics of the social', that is, on the processes which shape our micro- and macro-social reality.

**Specification for a reflexive theory of group behaviour**

We have established that groups are constructs, and that the term 'group' embraces a range of human collectives. So theories of groups as objects with properties will prove inadequate at the point where the processes by which they are constructed are in question. I wish therefore to propose a framework for constructing theories of groups and of the social which are reflexive, in the

sense that their own presuppositions can be called into question<sup>iv</sup>. Such a theory will have first, second and third orders of articulation:

**Descriptive (first order):** accounts of the behaviour and properties of groups as social or organisational objects, how they evolve, the effects of size, and so on.

**Interpretative (second order):** accounts of the processes by which men and women construct, and act in relation to, groups as objects. These 'grouping' processes may be self-conscious or unreflective. Psychoanalytic theories are generally of this second order, since they offer interpretations of the mental processes of group members: they are theories about the (tacit) theories of those who group.

**Deconstructive (third order):** analyses of the terms (or more accurately the discursive practices) within which these accounts are framed. The term 'discursive practice' was introduced by Michel Foucault (1972). Amongst the practices of different professions and disciplines he included their 'discursive practices', that is, their practices of speaking and listening. These include the distinctive language they employ, and in particular the objects and concepts which furnish the 'reality' they construct; the tacit rules governing who speaks with authority, and under what circumstances; and the latent intentions or ideologies which determine the thrust or bias of the discursive practice. To stop short of this third order of theorising is to ignore the fact that Simmel, Freud, Lewin, Foulkes, Bion, and this writer speak and write in a historical context, creating and drawing upon ways of speaking which construct reality in a particular way, which support particular interests and intentions, and which maintain their distinctive silences.

## *II ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES*

In the second part of this chapter I shall develop these propositions by means of two illustrative texts. They differ in many respects and it is not my intention to set them up in opposition to one another. The first text, by the American group analyst, Yvonne Agazarian, is a description of unconscious processes in group development, drawing upon concepts from psychoanalysis, group dynamics and systems theory. The second, by an American management consultant, Lyman Ketchum, and the late Eric Trist, who was English and one of the founders of the Tavistock Institute, describes what is entailed in building self-regulating production teams in industry. As well as introducing a number of concepts of groups and grouping, these texts illustrate two particular issues:

- i The second text, unlike the first, makes no reference to unconscious processes, although it clearly informed by psychoanalytic and systemic understanding. This highlights the question of the usefulness of theories evolved in group relations events and therapeutic groups outside these specialised contexts.
- ii In spite of their different contexts, purposes and readerships, both texts are descriptive (first order) and interpretative (second order), and both are susceptible to a deconstructive (third order) reading which questions the terms in which these accounts are framed.

### ***FIRST ILLUSTRATIVE TEXT: GROUP DEVELOPMENT***

The group dynamics literature contains several accounts of the development or evolution of groups over time (see for example Bennis and Shepard, 1956; Schutz, 1958; Sartre, 1960; Tuckman, 1965, Ashbach and Schermer, 1987). I have chosen for discussion a more recent paper by Yvonne Agazarian, 'The phases of group development and the systems-centred group' (1994). This paper draws upon general systems theory and develops Bion's group theory. It therefore shares its theoretical underpinning with writing from the Tavistock tradition.

Agazarian identifies a series of phases and sub-phases through which groups develop. She makes clear that groups do not pass through these phases in a tidy way: they regress to earlier phases and progress forward again many times. Her scheme is an elaboration of that of Bennis and Shepard, which explicitly drew upon the work of Bion. She identifies these phases:

- i A leader-oriented phase, which centres on the group members' expectations of the leader, and their responses to the frustration of these expectations. There are explicit parallels with Bion's account of groups dominated by the dependency and fight-flight basic assumptions. Members expect the leader to solve their problems for them, and are disappointed by her responses. There is a first, flight sub-phase, in which members avoid facing their frustration. They offer the leader patients or problems on which to display her power. This is followed by a second, fight sub-phase in which the failed leader is denigrated, attacked, and disowned. This leads up to what Agazarian, following Bennis and Shepard, calls a 'barometric event'. It is moment of transformation, in which the group symbolically kill off the leader and in so doing are released from the constraint of their identification with her.
- ii A group-oriented phase, which centres on the relatedness of members to the group itself. There is a first sub-phase of enchantment, in which the group and its members become idealised objects to each other. The mood of expectancy is reminiscent of Bion's pairing basic assumption. This leads into a second, disenchantment sub-phase, characterised by disillusionment with the group and jealousy of each other: the parallels with Bion are less clear. This concludes with a second turning point, which Agazarian characterises as a transition from intimacy to maturity. So the first phase leads to the end of the fantasy of the omnipotent leader, the second to the end of the fantasy of the omnipotent group; it entails, as Agazarian says, 'risking that, in spite of one's inner convictions, one has been mistaken' (p 73).
- iii A goal-oriented phase, in which the group is able to work on the purposes for which its members came together. It is the stage at which there can be 'transactions across the boundaries', and at which 'the first step in any difficult work is to establish a containing reality (of time, place and person), within which regression to other levels of experience can take place' (pp 75-6). It corresponds to Tuckman's 'performing' stage. In Bion's terms, the work group is now able to control the powerful emotional

drives of the basic assumption group. It is the stage of what Agazarian calls 'transformation - and the many splendoured phoenix' (p 37). Agazarian compares the difference between the developing group (Phases 1 and 2) and the developed group (Phase 3) to

the difference between the patient in individual therapy who is helplessly tossed on the sea of transference, and the patient who is familiar enough already with the experience to be able to navigate through its shoals. (pp 74f)

### ***Group as organism and process***

What kind of a text is this? It contains descriptive (first order) material, including samples of the kinds of conversation that take place, between members and with the therapist. But it is primarily an interpretative (second order) account of the way people 'group', offering explanations of the mental processes which give rise to this behaviour. It is also shaped by her systems orientation; the introduction to her paper begins:

Systems-centred theory approaches all living things, as small as a cell and as large or larger than society, by defining them as systems that are similar in structure, function and dynamics... The advantage of describing all living human systems isomorphically in this way is that what one learns about the dynamics of any one system says something about the dynamics of all the other systems in its hierarchy. (p 37)

This makes groups feel more solid: they develop the way living organisms develop. But we might also choose to say that there is no group apart from a grouping process, any more than a dance has any existence apart from the dancing. Adapting what Gianfranco Cecchin says of social systems: 'the group is simply doing what it does, *and this doing is the it that does it*' (1987, p 408). When we introduce this complementary mode of description, we call into question the 'reality' which is the object of group theory<sup>v</sup>.

### ***The Systemic Fallacy***

How useful is Agazarian's scheme as a general theory of grouping? She claims that this pattern is followed by all groups:

Underlying system dynamics are no different whether the 'groups' observed are therapy groups, training groups or groups of people working on a board or in committee; no different in organizations or even in nations! (1994, p 48)

I believe this statement illustrates what we might call the Systemic Fallacy. Armed with general systems theory, we may be able to perceive an isomorphism between single cell organisms, birds and mammals, and between small face-to-



face groups, organisations and nations; this is true. However, this does not mean that someone who knows all about amoebas understands human beings, or that someone with knowledge of small groups is able to run an organisation or govern a country. The Systemic Fallacy arises from a disregard for complexity.

Agazarian's claim discounts the influence of context upon the phenomena she observes. Differences of context explain some of the similarities and differences between theories. For example, Bennis and Shepard based their account on a study of groups of university students over a five year period. Like Agazarian, therefore, they were working with small groups of people in a relationship of dependence upon their institutions. In contrast, Sartre based his theory on a historical analysis of the emergence of the revolutionary masses during the French Revolution. Not surprisingly, the phases he identifies are different (see Laing and Cooper, 1964; Rosenfeld, 1988).

The process Agazarian describes reflects the distinctive organisation of the therapy group. This is one in which a task is not, or cannot, be defined in a way which enables people readily to identify with it, as their unconscious object of desire. Without this anchor, relations between members, and between members and leader, are flooded by primitive drives. Unable to sustain a stable transference upon a task, the participants transfer their idealising expectations in turn to the therapist and then to the group, with the consequences Agazarian describes. They are 'helplessly tossed on the sea of transference'. Only after much emotional work does the group reach her third, goal-oriented phase, and not always, for she says: 'Unfortunately, it is not unusual for the therapy group to remain in the first phase throughout its entire life' (p 46). This emotional work is the stuff of therapy, but in most contexts task groups are not organised in this way.

### *The myth of development*

The focal object of the discursive practice which shapes Agazarian's scheme is the group conceived of as an organism which ideally develops from infancy to maturity. I stress the word 'ideally', to draw attention to the fit between the metaphor of an organism, which develops, and a therapeutic ideal of maturation. Many group therapists, with the exception of those following Sartre, read the life of the groups they lead in the light of a myth of human psychic development - whether or not they draw upon systems theory. The resulting theories are not just descriptive, but also normative: they are accounts of how groups should develop, and of the kind of development the therapist is seeking to promote. As Agazarian says, 'unfortunately' groups do not always develop in this way.

Such is the power of the developmental myth that Bion's theory of work group and basic assumption group activity is frequently recast as a developmental theory. For example, Ashbach and Schermer's group analytic grid represents the group as developing from fight, through fight/flight and dependency, 'higher

level competition', and pairing, to work (1987, p 284). Agazarian's paper includes a perceptive deconstructive reading of Bion's later, Kleinian theory<sup>vi</sup>, in which she describes him as a pioneer 'who lived at a time when either/or thinking was the norm'. She goes on:

He also observed consistent defensive responses to group conflicts that did not appear to be the property of individual members but rather to be the property of the group-as-a-whole. He failed to observe that these conflicts tended to occur in a sequence. (p 43).

Maybe he did, but I think Agazarian fails to observe the influence of the theorists' desires and ideals upon their theories.

### ***SECOND ILLUSTRATIVE TEXT: TEAMBUILDING***

My second illustrative text is taken from *All Teams Are Not Created Equal: How Employee Empowerment Really Works* (1992), by Lyman Ketcham and Eric Trist. Ketcham trained at the National Training Laboratories in Bethel, Maine. Trist contributed to the development of the concept of socio-technical systems, which is a key concept in this book. I shall focus upon the chapter entitled 'Designing the New Plant' (pp 140-166), which sets out principles for constructing core production teams in an industrial unit, of which I shall select six.

#### ***Design principles for a core production team***

- i Motivation The writers suggest that the first step in building an effective team is to decide what is to be the principle source of motivation for its members. Is it to be the intrinsic satisfactions of task performance, or extrinsic rewards and sanctions? They advocate the former, on the grounds that the root cause of bad work is lack of intrinsic commitment to a task. The designer's goal is 'to get everyone to do what needs to be done because they want to do it'. The work process is then designed in a way which removes obstacles to intrinsic motivation. This is a key feature of a 'new paradigm' for work organisation.
- ii Technical analysis Team building is not just a matter of designing the social system, but of studying the technical system and the stages in the work process at which quality and productivity may be liable to vary significantly. The essential groundwork also includes a technical analysis of the task. Working together on this analysis is also important in building the team: 'As one busy manager noted, "It gets people together for two days to talk about the technical system when they otherwise would not find the time to do so."' (p 147)

- iii Boundaries It is necessary to determine the boundaries of the team's work. 'Making good use of the completed technical analysis, designers fix the extent of the technical system over which the team will have jurisdiction' (p 147). Preferably, the limits of this jurisdiction coincide with discontinuities in the work process, so that the team have the satisfaction of carrying out a complete task.
- iv Mission statement The team produces a mission statement, defining the 'purpose or reason for the team's being'. This 'is another of the forces that both brings them together and makes them a distinctive group apart. Thus the mission is another form of boundary' (p 148).
- v Team leader There is a team leader, who is external to, and managerially responsible for, the team. His or her task is to act as 'the custodian of the design; the anatomy of self-regulation must be made right and kept right' (p 159). He or she receives 17½ days' training, which includes boundary management and behaviour analysis (p 270).
- vi Team meeting The team is self-regulating, learning system. Integral to this system is a regular team meeting. In this meeting they step out of the frame of their work on the shop floor, into another, from which they helicopter over themselves at work and assess how they are working. Then periodically they step into a third frame of reference, from which they can assess the way they are assessing their work in normal team meeting time. 'Essentially the final step of the meeting is a self-critique and employs well-known techniques of group dynamics' (p 153). Tantalisingly, we are not told what these techniques are.

### *Creating the conditions for goal-directed work*

What kind of a text is this? The style is primarily first order and prescriptive, setting out what must be done to create a self-regulating production team, although it also includes descriptive case studies. So what we are reading is what the writers believe practising managers need to know in order to be able to act. In this respect it appears to be different from the Agazarian text, but perhaps is not entirely so. Agazarian is also concerned with what therapists need to know in order to act. But the kind of action she is concerned with is interpretative intervention; she is not talking about designing the setting for an effective therapy group.

We should note that Ketchum and Trist make no reference to stages through which a team develops, though later they say it is 'like a living organism... which must grow and develop from an initial, embryonic state' (p 174); neither do they discuss unconscious processes which may disturb its work. At first glance they seem to imply that teams can attain goal-oriented functioning if the right conditions are created, and to agree with Elliott Jaques's statement, that

the reason we have bad or dysfunctional organizations is not a reflection of pathological forces to be understood and resolved by the application of psychoanalytical concepts and methods. Far from it...

We have simply not yet learned how to construct adequate organizations (1995, p 343)

This impression is not altogether accurate. First, it is evident from the whole book that the writers are only too aware that the work of self-regulating teams can be undermined by ways of thinking which are, from their point of view, destructive. These are rooted in what they call the 'old paradigm' of organisation (1992, p 40), characterised by external motivation and hierarchical control. They thus interpret destructive processes in cultural rather than psychological terms.

Secondly, the design of the new paradigm plant includes a number of devices which are necessary to support the team and senior managers in holding to the mission and ethos they have adopted. The team meeting institutionalises occasions for assessing how the team is functioning. The team has access to outside facilitation, and may call in a senior manager to arbitrate when they have been unable to reach a decision. The team leader acts as custodian of the design.

So for these writers understanding of processes within teams is a significant but secondary element in an account of team-building for managers, the content of which is left to the psychologists and trainers. Their first concern is with designing a form of organisation which will support self-regulating, goal-directed work. But as I shall go on to suggest, their injunctions for the setting up of the team imply or require psychoanalytic scrutiny if they are to be adequately explained and assessed.

### *'Good work' and the object of desire*

What then are we to make of the interpretative content of this text? On what theory of the grouping process is it based? The key proposition, as I have said, is that 'good work' is a function of the personal investment of team members in the achievement of its goals. The writers assert that there are 'certain basic needs that people... require from their work: to join with others in a common task; to have some latitude to make decisions; to receive recognition for one's contribution; to learn and go on learning...' (p 10: from a longer list).

The writers go no further in explaining these so-called needs. Their use of the word 'need' requires examination. It tends to foreclose further enquiry: people have a need for these things, and that's it. At the same time it suggests a theory that people combine in collaborative groups as they discover in them a shared object which satisfies fundamental drives. Freud's thesis (1921) was that members of large collectives like an army or the Church become an integrated social system as each member identifies with the leader - with their general, or with Christ. They each substitute an image of this leader for their own ego ideal, and so identify themselves with one another in their egos (1991 edn, p

147). This, he says, explains why the Assyrian army scattered in panic when their general Holofernes was killed (p 127).

Lacan's version of this is that groups and masses are animated as they locate in the group the cause and object of their desire (1991, p 56). (No imaginable object can satisfy this desire: it is rooted in what Lacan calls the domain of the Real, outside language.) This formulation suggests a third order reading of Ketchum and Trist. Team members strive to do good work and overcome difficulties to the extent that they unconsciously identify the work of the team with the object of their desire. So the writers' aim is that team members should be animated, not by identifying with a leader, nor by idealising the group, but by the desirability of the task itself - or, more precisely, by what it unconsciously stands for.

More generally, we might say that one aspect of grouping is this process of transference, upon a leader or a body of knowledge, upon the group itself, or as here upon a task. We might also distinguish between two strategies for developing goal-directed functions in working groups, exemplified by our two texts. One is that of interpreting defensive formations, what Agazarian (p 37) calls 'inexorable pressure on the outer shell of defences'. The other is that of evoking an object of desire which draws group members to transcend their defences in the (impossible) hope of attaining it.

### *Defining boundaries*

How do the writers conceptualise the structure which is required to support such inwardly-motivated work? As we have seen, they talk about the necessity of defining the team's technical boundary, and later about defining a mission statement which constitutes another boundary 'that both brings them together and makes them a distinctive group apart' (p 148). Emphasis on the importance of drawing clear boundaries is a key element within the group relations tradition, and reflects the context of the 1960s in which this tradition was formalised.

However, while defining boundaries is necessary for coherent functioning, the more firmly they are drawn, the more strongly the subject identifies with them, and therefore the more strongly he or she resists attempts to change them. It is a commonplace of social psychology that the process of grouping can be set in motion simply by allocating people into categories according to an arbitrary principle. For example, Sherif and Sherif describe how boys at a summer camp were divided into two lots of twelve, matched by age, education, class and so on, by assigning them an identifying colour, red or blue, and allocating them to different bunkhouses. Within a short time they had become close-knit groups with distinctive names and cultures, and when they were brought into contact

with each other they become intensely rivalrous (Sherif and Sherif, 1956, cited in Handy, 1981, pp 148ff)

In Lacanian terms the technical and territorial boundaries of the team are Imaginary. This does not mean that they are illusory, but that they organise an indeterminate hurly-burly of activities in a bounded, holistic image. In the turbulent environment of the 1990s, which the writers allude to in an earlier chapter, and which Trist himself identified (Emery and Trist, 1965), the self-regulating team may be insufficiently flexible to respond to change, if its members are strongly identified with an Imaginary team. The challenge of organisational design is therefore not only to define requisite boundaries, but to prevent people becoming addicted to them.

One way in which, in practice, the writers' design may reduce this tendency is through the institution of the mission statement, although they obscure this by referring to it as a boundary (p 148). Within the Tavistock tradition statements of task are frequently referred to as defining a boundary (eg Miller, 1959). This reflects the fact that this discursive practice includes no developed concept of language. A mission statement does not create a distinction between an inside and an outside. It is what it says it is - a statement, a form of words, deriving its meaning from a larger discourse. In Lacan's terms it defines the team and its intended work within the Symbolic domain - that is, the domain of law and language. It can be seen as a statement which symbolises the object of desire which motivates the team. The object of desire is necessarily outside language, but working on the mission statement provides a vehicle by which the team can negotiate, and federate around, a formula which stands for what each member wants to achieve.

Reflection on the second text has thus suggested a theory of grouping, in which groups are constructed in three domains: in the domain of the Imaginary, through a holistic image with a boundary between inside and outside; in the domain of the Symbolic, through statements which anchor the group within a universe of language and law, and so make it an object of communication; and in the domain of what Lacan calls the Real, outside language and unmarked by Imaginary boundaries, which makes itself known as the cause which motivates group members to pursue their task (or, we might add, to subvert it for the sake of their own satisfaction).

### *What is missing?*

What is missing from this account? First, its prescriptive style conceals how much depends upon the skill with which it is operationalised - upon the efficacy of the team meetings, upon the way the team leader fulfils his or her custodianship of the design, upon the quality of the team leader training, and upon the finesse of senior managers in judging whether and when to intervene. Much depends upon the competences of consultants or managers in enabling

teams and their managers to maintain, rather than close down, a number of creative tensions: between the different ways in which senior managers and production teams may define task boundaries, between explicit formulations of how things work and those implicit in what actually happens, and between adhering to the ideals enshrined in mission statements and responding creatively to unforeseen circumstances?<sup>vii</sup>

Secondly, Ketchum and Trist regard their concept of the self-regulating team as a manifestation of a new work paradigm. They also refer to the fact that the concept has been around for forty years now, but do not seem to recognise the extent to which it may also be shaped and limited by its historical context. As they expound it, and in particular as they assert what people 'need' from work, it becomes apparent that their theory comes out of the same box as McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Elton Mayo's Hawthorne experiments and the human relations ethos which was integral to the early work of the Tavistock Institute. That does not in itself mean it is out of date; but my conclusion is that it is theoretically and pragmatically unsound, in the turbulent environment of the 1990s, to base the design of a working team on assumptions about the needs of the workers. Many organisations seek to give their members maximum scope to exercise discretion and creativity, but their viability depends on their ability to be responsive - to be open to what their users want, and to be quicker to respond than the competition. So the team can only be constructed round the desire of its members, if their desire is to be responsive to user demands. A turbulent environment has a life of its own; a responsive business or agency is one which is able to rejig its organisation to intervene in, or respond to, that life. Although Emery and Trist (1965) described the dynamics of turbulent environments in the 1960s, their concept of the socio-technical system was not explicitly open to an environment of this degree of complexity.

If I am right, implementation of the Ketchum-Trist design as it stands would lead to the creation of organisations which in the short term produce motivated teams and good work, but in the longer term tend to be outflanked, because they are too committed to their own ethos and structures, and hence too inflexible, to be able regroup to meet new market opportunities or public service demands<sup>viii</sup>.

### *Conclusion*

By now the reader may wonder whether we are still within the domain of group relations. We are a long way from the phenomena described by Wilfred Bion and Yvonne Agazarian. I suggest that it is possible to see group relations as comprising two distinguishable discursive practices: (i) theories of unconscious processes in groups and organisations (eg Freud, Bion, Foulkes, Menzies Lyth, Agazarian); and (ii) systems theory as applied to groups and organisations (eg von Bertalanffy, Trist, Rice, Miller). My intuitive choice of case studies placed

me with one foot in each domain. Writers in the group relations field tend to see (ii) as outside the scope of psychoanalytic enquiry. I have sought to elucidate how both these bodies of theory are elaborated in a way which is rooted in unconscious desire and unconscious defences. But we need Lacan's concepts of language and of desire, and Foucault's concept of discursive practices, or something like them, to see and say this. It has been impossible for me to see or say as long as I have believed that (i) represents the totality of what psychoanalysis has to say about groups and organisations.

There remains the question of the reflexivity of the ideas put forward in this chapter. The discursive practices I have called into question here, by means of a third order analysis, are very much part of myself. They shape the way I habitually think, when under pressure to respond to the demands of client organisations. This is thus an attempt to work through my transference upon this body of theory and practice.

I can however claim no privilege for the concepts I have introduced: they are no less determined by the desire of the writer and his historical and linguistic context than the texts he has studied. There are limits to the extent to which a writer can deconstruct his own text if he and his editors wish him to finish it. It may be best to offer this task to the reader, and to suggest some questions which may be of assistance (questions like this also provide a way in to the third order of analysis of any text of this kind)<sup>ix</sup>:

- i In what ways does the writer's account appear to be historically, contextually or ideologically determined, in ways of which the text has no knowledge?
- ii Does the text at any point imply that there is a right approach to a deconstructive reading of the illustrative texts? If so, what is its supposed source of authority?
- iii Are there gaps or disturbances in the text which suggest that the writer has been unable to face some truth, perhaps about himself?



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## Endnotes

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- i For these terms, see for example Muller, 1996; Evans, 1996; Fink, 1997, pp 32-41.
- ii I would also like to acknowledge the pertinent suggestions of the editors, which have had an important influence on the final form of this chapter.
- iii See also Laing and Cooper (1964, pp 121ff); Rosenfeld (1988, pp 1f).
- iv Philip Boxer has suggested to me that there is a distinction between a reflexive framework for constructing theories, and a theory which is reflexive in use. I have not worked this distinction through in what follows.
- v Cf the way the emergence of the wave and particle theories of light raised questions about the observing system which brought these complementary accounts of reality into being.
- vi Eric Miller (1997) has recently proposed that Bion's later, Kleinian reading of his experiences in groups overlays an earlier theory in which the basic assumptions were manifestations of drives rooted in bodily instincts.
- vii For an account of the three dilemmas of organisations which I have paraphrased here, see Boxer (1994).
- viii This seems to have happened to designs for responsive local government evolved by Roger Hadley and Ken Young (1990).
- ix For similar questions directed at the critical examination of consultancy practice, see Boxer and Palmer (1994).