

# The Tavistock paradigm: Inside, outside and beyond

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## I Introduction

My task in this chapter is to construct an account of the psychoanalytic understanding of organisations which has evolved from the work of the Tavistock Institute and Clinic over the last fifty years and more. I have found myself approaching this task with a mixture of awe, anticipation and dismay. I am awed by the magnificence of my object, which is for me, as the poet George Barker (1962) said of his mother:

*...a procession no one can follow after  
But be like a little dog following a brass band.*

My sense of anticipation arises from the importance, to me, of this endeavour to see this body of work whole, although that is impossible, and to achieve the kind of distance which is necessary to produce a map of a large territory (Barker's mother is 'as huge as Asia'). It is important because of the degree to which I have become identified with this frame of reference: writing this chapter provides me with an opportunity to look critically at my own practices and concepts, and in so doing to raise questions about the limits of what I shall call the Tavistock paradigm.

My dismay may be readily understood. The relevant body of work is large, with a growing literature in many countries and languages; there are already several accounts available (to which I shall refer); and it is impossible to characterise the generic elements of the Tavistock approach in an uncontroversial way. Furthermore, I am not an impartial observer: I have worked closely with many practitioners in this tradition, but know of others only through what they have written or by hearsay<sup>1</sup>. So this may be what Vega Roberts has called a 'self-assigned impossible task' (Obholzer and Roberts, 1994, p 110).

Accepting the ambiguities of the undertaking, I shall approach it in this way:

- I shall seek to characterise what I take to be the Tavistock *paradigm*, focusing upon the socio-psychological development within that paradigm (see p 2); I shall not attempt to describe every ramification of Tavistock-inspired theory and practice;
- I shall restrict my attention almost entirely to the *British literature*;
- I shall *not expound the basic theory* in detail, assuming the reader has access to the several excellent accounts;

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<sup>1</sup> The writer is a member of the Tavistock Association, and has been a staff member of many Leicester-type group relations conferences, and a fieldworker on a Tavistock Institute research study. He is a Professional Associate of the Grubb Institute and was a member of its professional staff from 1962-1982. He is also a member of OPUS (Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society), and of the Working Group on Groups and Organisations, which is affiliated to the Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research..

- I shall suggest lines of approach to a *critical* account of this work, as I go along and through three case studies.

## II The Tavistock tradition as a paradigm

Within the Tavistock literature and oral tradition a number of early, definitive ventures have become exemplars for subsequent practice and theorising. They can be seen as elements in a Tavistock paradigm, using the term 'paradigm' in the sense defined by Kuhn (1970): a body of 'recognised achievements', which 'provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners'. A paradigm defines the terms in which assertions about reality are framed, and legitimates the practices which are accepted as means of exploring that reality. Much present-day psychoanalytic work with organisations, in Britain and beyond, is rooted in this Tavistock paradigm.

The 'recognised achievements' of this paradigm include the experimental regimes at the Northfield military psychiatric hospital, Wilfred Bion's studies of group dynamics, the Glacier Metal project, the study of longwall coal-mining of Eric Trist and his colleagues, Kenneth Rice's work with the Ahmedabad company in India, Isabel Menzies Lyth's study of nursing, and the 'Leicester' and Harold Bridger working conferences on group relations (eg Bion, 1948-1951; Jaques, 1951; Trist and Bamforth, 1951; Rice, 1958; Menzies Lyth, 1959; Rice, 1965; Bridger, 1990a). The list could be extended; Menzies Lyth, for example, frequently refers to the more recent Baric experiment of Alistair Bain (1982). This list privileges what Trist (Trist and Murray, 1990) has called the socio-psychological emphasis within the Tavistock tradition, with which I am most familiar; his own anthology of definitive Tavistock papers, which was still incomplete when he died, includes volumes on work with socio-technical (Trist and Murray, 1993) and socio-ecological emphases.

I want to use the term 'discursive formation' to refer to the constellation of terms through which descriptions and interpretations are constructed within this or any paradigm. A discursive formation provides the content of a corresponding 'discursive *practice*', by which objects and concepts are generated, assembled in statements, and authorised. The terms are derived from Michael Foucault (1972). By 'discursive formation' he means what might more loosely be called the specialised *language* of the paradigm, or the practitioners' distinctive 'way of talking' (Babington Smith and Farrell, 1979)<sup>2</sup>. The corresponding term 'non-discursive practice' refers to the context of institutional arrangements and practical know-how within which descriptions and interpretations are articulated (see also Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982; Palmer, 1996).

The Tavistock paradigm is an action research paradigm, drawing upon several social science disciplines. Its purpose was defined retrospectively by Emery (1976) as 'the mutual enrichment of social science and practical affairs'. It thus incorporates other discursive formations besides that of psychoanalysis. This paper focuses upon the

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<sup>2</sup> A discursive practice creates the objects which constitute the 'furniture' of any paradigm or discipline, as well as the concepts which characterise them and describe their relations. So for example there is now an extensive literature about stress. This can be seen as a discursive practice which creates stress as its object. (The word 'object' is not used here in a psychoanalytic sense.)

psychoanalytic dimension, but must necessarily take this eclecticism into account. It must also consider not only how Tavistock writers conceptualise behaviour in organisations, but also how they conceptualise their own practice.

### III Core concepts of the Tavistock paradigm

Several writers in this tradition summarise the conceptual framework within which they work (eg Miller and Rice, 1967; Richardson, 1973; Grubb Institute, 1984; Klein and Eason, 1991; Obholzer and Roberts, 1994). I suggest that the following concepts are constitutive of the Tavistock paradigm:

- A predominantly Kleinian account (eg 1959) of the individual, and the mechanisms of defence, in particular splitting, projection and projective identification, introjection, denial, the interplay of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, and Bion's (1970) concept of the container and the contained. We should probably also include Winnicott's (1965, 1971) concepts of the holding or facilitating environment, and of transitional spaces and objects.
- A concept of **role** distinct from that which is dominant in psychology and sociology (cf Edward Klein, 1979, p 99). Reed and Armstrong (1988) write:

*To take a role implies being able to formulate or discover, however intuitively, a regulating principle inside oneself which enables one, as a person, to manage what one does in relation to the requirements of the situation one is in, as a member of this organisation or group.*

Reed (1972, p 166f) distinguishes between work roles, understood in this way, and roles like that of scapegoat or magic leader assigned to individuals under the sway of basic assumption mentality.

- Bion's account of **group processes**, and in particular his distinction, in *Experiences in Groups* (1961), between work group and basic assumption group mentality. Work group activity is similar to that which Freud (1911) attributed to the ego, and is seen as oriented towards reality. The concept of the work group is not developed in *Experiences in Groups*. It has been elaborated by Armstrong (1992), drawing upon Bion's later writing, and in the institutional sphere by Hoggett (1992). Several writers have described additional basic assumptions, including Turquet (1974), Hopper (1989), and most recently Lawrence, Bain and Gould (1996). Reed (1972, 1995) has used Bion's concept of the **specialised work group** to develop a theory of the function of churches in society
- A theory of the **use of social systems as defences against persecutory and depressive anxiety**, developed by Jaques (1955), who draws upon Freud's (1921) theory of identification as applied to institutions. The theory provided a means of articulating the observations of early Tavistock practitioners in several key projects, including the Glacier Metal, coal-mining and nursing studies already mentioned (p 1); it makes it possible to articulate the dilemma<sup>3</sup>, inherent in organisational life,

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<sup>3</sup> This is one of three fundamental dilemmas described by Boxer (1994a) as inherent in the processes by which organisations are constituted as objects of experience.

between adherence to professed definitions of purpose, and recognition of 'unthought' purposes (Bollas, 1987) concerned with providing the subject with an identity - purposes which, when threatened, arouse primitive anxiety.

- The concept of **boundary**. Elizabeth Richardson (1973), for example, asserts that the concept is central to the theoretical framework of her study of a British secondary school:

*Whether we are looking at the person, who can live as a human being only in so far as he is able to relate his own inner world to its outer environment, at the group, which exists by virtue of some kind of membrane that separates it out from other groups, or at the institution, which exists in the community... by virtue of what it has been created and set apart to do, we must be concerned with defining boundaries.* (p 16)

The concept is linked to that of the depressive position, at and beyond which the ego 'can define the boundary between what is inside and what is outside, and can control the transactions between the one and the other' (Rice, 1965).

- A **systemic** or holistic view of groups, organisations and larger collectives, going back to the work of Kurt Lewin (eg 1951) who insisted on 'the importance of studying the "gestalt" properties of groups as wholes' (Miller, 1990, p 170)<sup>4</sup>.
- The organisation as an **open system**: that is, as a system of activities which is open to transactions with an environment, and which survives by successfully regulating these transactions. As an open system, an organisation has a fundamental *raison d'être* or **primary task**, defined as the task it must perform in order to survive. An optimum organisational structure is a structure which most effectively supports the performance of the primary task (eg Miller and Rice, 1967). This concept of a system is derived from von Bertalanffy's (1950) theory of physical and biological systems. It was developed by Trist, Rice, Miller and their colleagues in response, I imagine, to the practical necessity of finding a way of constructing models of the institutions they studied and advised.
- The open systems model proved to be a powerful conceptual tool. From this model Trist, Emery, Rice and their colleagues developed of the concept of the **socio-technical system**. This represents a working unit with a technological component, such as a coal-mine (Trist and Bamforth, 1951) or an operating theatre (Klein and Eason, 1991, pp 25ff), as comprising a social and a technical system, each with its own internal logic. The aim of organisational design is to achieve a best fit between the conditions for optimal functioning of the two systems.
- The concept of the '**organisation in the mind**' (eg Lawrence, 1979, p 228; Stokes, 1994; Hutton, 1995). This and related terms were introduced by Pierre Turquet, in unpublished briefing notes for a group relations conference, as a way of conceptualising the images and fantasies of the organisational context which

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<sup>4</sup> The first issue of *Human Relations* contained two posthumous papers by Lewin (1947). His influence on the formation of the Tavistock paradigm was considerable. It seems likely that Bion's focus upon the group-as-a-whole goes back to Lewin, and also his use of the term 'valency', which appears in Lewin (1935, p 51).

determined relations between the individuals and groups within it. The concept thus invites the exploration of unconscious images of an organisational context. Its importance lies in its potentiality for relativising all descriptions of organisations, since all descriptions, including those of Tavistock consultants, are products of the minds of individuals with particular interests, positioning themselves within a particular discursive practice. It has been illuminatingly examined by David Armstrong (1995), who concludes that the term denotes:

*...not the client's mental construct of the organisation, but rather the emotional reality of the organisation that is registered in him or her, that is infecting him or her, that can be owned or disowned, displaced or projected, denied, scotomised: that can also be known but unthought (p 9).*

- Concepts of **authority and power**. These two terms stand for a cluster of related notions. Some time after the publication of his account of the 'Leicester' group relations conferences, Rice (1965) concluded that they were fundamentally concerned with questions of authority. As I remember it, he was concerned with the authority attributed to an interpretation. Ideally, as he saw it, the speaker takes authority for the validity of his or her interpretation, and the listener takes authority for assessing and either accepting or rejecting it. The paradigm also includes a distinction between authority as an attribute of role, and power as an attribute of persons, which is central to the work of the Grubb Institute (eg Reed and Armstrong, 1988) and has also been elaborated in Jaques' concept of 'requisite organisation' (eg 1989).

#### IV Core practice

There seem to be few systematic accounts of Tavistock practice (but see for example Menzies Lyth, 1988a, Klein and Eason, 1991 pp 16ff, and Gould, 1991). This gap is partly filled by the many published extended case studies, which provide illuminating glimpses of practitioners at work. I see these elements as constitutive of Tavistock practice.

- **Working with groups** as a preferred method of diagnosis and intervention. This has its roots in the paradigmatic projects already referred to, in particular the studies of group behaviour published by Bion and developed in the 'Leicester' and Bridger working conferences. It involves a distinctive form of process consultancy, in which the consultant works interpretatively with the 'material' presented by the client group.
- Availability as a **temporary holding environment** and **container for client anxieties** (individuals, teams, management groups). It is assumed that, if they can use the consultant to contain and give meaning to their persecutory and depressive anxieties, they will be regain their wits, and be released to use their resources to address their own difficulties. Thus Lionel Stapley (1996) writes:

*In any extensive change process the culture and the holding environment can be severely disrupted. The consultant can assist the client by providing a substitute for that holding environment until it and the culture have reintegrated (p 178).*

- Working with or in the **transference**. This entails mobilising and recognising a transference relationship with the client system, and working through it to a collaborative relationship which acknowledges the autonomy and capabilities of consultant and clients. The term 'transference' is not widely used in Tavistock writings. My impression is that transference is thought of as a process which may arise *within* a consultancy assignment, rather than as the precondition of there being a consultancy relationship at all<sup>5</sup>.
- Working with the **counter-transference**; that is, interpreting and using one's own feelings, fantasies, impulses and behaviour as indicators of having become not only in but of the client system. For example, Lisl Klein (Klein and Eason, 1991) describes an assignment in which she spent a weekend preparing a report for a client organisation, and 'was filled with a growing sense of pressure and anxiety':

*Eventually, the consultant stepped back from the situation to ask some questions: 'What are they doing to you, that you are spending Sunday, your so-called free time, trying to deal with this impossible task? Knowing that you have taken on more than can possibly be handled in the time? Eating margarine sandwiches because you haven't allowed time to buy and cook food? [...]' The answer came, 'They have turned you into a mini-version of the company! This is what they do'. (p 20)*
- This is one example of how practitioners **work interpretatively** with their experience of the client system. Practitioners differ about whether and how they work, privately or publicly, with their interpretations.
- **Working through**: as we have seen, there is a core assumption that individuals use organisational forms to create an identity for themselves (as a defence against anxiety), so that moves to change these forms arouse persecutory anxiety manifesting itself in resistance to change. Jacques (1951) describes the practice of enabling client groups to recognise and work through these resistances:

*The method used was to draw attention to the nature of the resistance on the basis of facts known to those concerned. Opportunities were taken to illuminate in the specific situation the meaning of the feelings (whether of fear, guilt or suspicion) that constituted the unpalatable background to anxieties that were present about undergoing changes that were necessary. (p 306)*
- Defining and clarifying **boundaries**. It is assumed that articulating and enacting a coherent array of roles and task systems is functional for organisational work. (For an elegant worked example in which the boundaries of systems serving overseas students in the United Kingdom are defined, see Reed, Hutton and Bazalgette, 1978.)

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<sup>5</sup> Cf Evans (1996) p 214: 'Thus it is contradictory to claim that the transference can dissolved by means of an interpretation, when it is the transference itself which conditions the analysand's acceptance of that intervention: "the emergence of the subject from the transference is thus postponed *ad infinitum*" (Lacan, *Ecrits* p 231)'.

- Designing and installing new forms of **organisation**, based on the open system model, in relation to new or clarified definitions of primary task. (For a diverse series of worked examples, see Miller and Rice, 1967).
- **Designing experiential learning events**, most characteristically, training in group relations. Historically, several large-scale interventions in institutions based on group relations eventually activated their immune systems and were rejected. On the other hand the Menninger Clinic ran an influential programme (Menninger, 1985), and some universities in the UK are currently incorporating group relations training in degree courses.

## V The bounded organism, with an inside and an outside, as a root metaphor within the Tavistock paradigm

This whole discursive practice generates a 'reality' which is internally (fairly) self-consistent, but which inevitably leaves things out - or rather, does not constitute some aspects of 'what-is-going-on' as things, or relations between things, at all. What I earlier referred to as the 'furniture' of this discursive practice - the objects which the rest of the language is about - are individuals, groups and institutions, conceived of as bodies or organisms, with an inside and an outside and a skin or membrane between the two. The idea of this bounded object is, as I see it, a root metaphor within this paradigm: it structures the perceptions and interpretations of those who work within it<sup>6</sup>. It is also a dead metaphor, like the metaphor of a container and its contents in the statement 'Bion was in the army': we don't hear a statement like this as metaphorical, even though it is impossible to point to containers called armies which people are literally *in*. And it is a pre-psychoanalytic metaphor, adopted by Freud and Klein from the metaphor-pool of their day, which shapes the conceptual scheme at every level - the individual person, the (individual) group, the (individual) organisation.

With respect to the person, this has the effect of collapsing the distinction between the individual as a physical organism and the person as a social being, and of locating the subject within a boundary. Similarly, in the domain of groups and institutions, Blackwell (1994) has pointed out that the term 'boundary' is used in a way which makes no distinction between physical skins or membranes on the one hand, and limits defined in language by rules and conventions on the other. (See also the discussion of 'Internal reality', in Hinshelwood, 1989, p 330f.)

Once social reality has been divided into an inner world and an outer world, psychoanalysis becomes the analysis of the inner world, and of its traffic with the outer world through projective and introjective processes. This has the effect of privileging the inner world relative to the outer world. This is evident in the neglect of the outer world in Melanie Klein, and the lack of development of the concept of the work group in Bion,

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<sup>6</sup> It is an example of what Lakoff (1987) calls the 'container' schema. This is 'a schema consisting of a *boundary* distinguishing an *interior* from an *exterior*.... We understand our own bodies as containers - perhaps the most basic things we do are ingest and excrete, take air into our lungs and breathe it out. But our understanding of our own bodies as containers seems small compared with all the daily experiences we understand in container terms.' (p 271)

and of the environment of the institution in Rice (*eg* 1963). It is also evident in the emergence of the concept of the group or organisation 'in the mind': if the organisation is not out there, there is nowhere else to put it but in here.

We can distinguish several processes here:

- i. That of creating distinctions between me and not-me, us and not-us, without which it is difficult to imagine how human life could go on.
- ii. That of forgetting that these distinctions (or boundaries, in that sense) are conventional and intentional<sup>7</sup>. The metaphor becomes a dead metaphor.
- iii. That of valuing what is included in the boundary so drawn, and devaluing what is excluded by it - a manifestation of an individualism characteristic of much Western thought (see for example Wolfenstein, 1990; also Wilden, 1972, pp 217ff).

## VI Intimations of alternative paradigms

No discursive practice is watertight. Within the literature there are glimpses of alternative ways of describing and interpreting social life. For example:

- Joan Riviere (1955) speaks of the inner world as an unconscious phantasy. She also refers to it as a psychoanalytic concept, implying a recognition that the inner/outer distinction exists only in the language (or discursive formation) which the analyst brings to her understanding of the patient.
- Bion speaks of the gathering of a group of people in one place as having 'no significance whatsoever' for the observation of group *phenomena* (1961, p 132), and of belief in the *existence* of a group as a sign of regression (1961, p 142), . However, neither he nor Riviere maintain a consistently critical distance from these constructions.
- In the nineteen-sixties Emery and Trist (1965, 1975) developed a typology of the environments of institutions, making good the neglect of the environment in earlier Tavistock work. They sought to conceptualise the turbulence which is now a 'given' in organisation theory. This thinking was not however incorporated into the theory of organisations of Rice and Miller. Philip Boxer and I have revisited this typology in a recent account of a consultancy assignment (Boxer and Palmer, 1997).
- S H Foulkes introduces the concept of the group matrix, which is like a neuronal network within which 'the individual is conceived as a nodal point' (1964, p 118). He is in effect proposing an alternative root metaphor .
- Grubb Institute (1984) writers distinguish between the biological individual which 'is born, matures, grows old and dies', and the person, as an 'information system', which 'extends through a network of social relations' (p 55).

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<sup>7</sup> Or, in Lacan's terms, constructed in the domain of the Imaginary (the domain of the ego and its images): *People are separate, atomistic individuals only on the Imaginary level, which is the level of the ego. On the Real and Symbolic levels there is no boundary that can be drawn between them.* (Wilden, 1972 p 277)



- There is an interpretative move which reframes the reported experiences of individuals as the voice of a larger system; in other words, the line between inner and outer is recognised as imaginary, and redrawn. This could be restated in terms of Foulkes' metaphor. Thus David Armstrong (1996), describing an intervention with a group of university staff, writes:

*What had begun as an expression of one individual's dis-ease with his own relation to the University could, now, be reframed and given new meaning as a representation or registration within the individual of a more pervasive experience of dis-ease within the whole institution.*

- The metaphor of the Möbius strip has now entered organisation theory (Sabel, 1991). Möbius-strip organisations are those for which, 'as with a looped ribbon twisted once, it is impossible to distinguish their insides from their outsides' (p 25).

One of the inherent dilemmas of consultancy work is that between working within an established paradigm and 'trusting the method', and working across and beyond the limits of the paradigm, with the risk of losing one's way entirely. Unwillingness to risk transcending these limits leads to a Procrustean approach in which new problems are chopped or stretched to fit old theories. The challenge to those of us who work within the Tavistock paradigm is I believe to welcome and develop lines of thought like those above, without insisting that they are incorporated into one coherent scheme. This creates the possibility for what David Armstrong calls 'co-evolution' of the paradigm and its contemporary context<sup>8</sup>.

## VII Case Study 1: Disturbances of Rationality in Groups

It would be possible to amplify and comment on this complex apparatus of theory and practice, and these glimpses of alternative paradigms, from many points of view. Following Emily Dickinson's (1929) injunction to 'Tell all the truth, but tell it slant', my own comment will take the tangential form of three case studies, two from the work of the early practitioners and one from my own. Several other case studies have been left on the cutting-room floor. They would have suited my purpose equally well, which is to show the edge and the beyond of the Tavistock paradigm, as they can be discerned in these pieces of work. (They are also illustrations of the paradigm in use, but I shall not draw attention to this.) This edge is what Kuhn (1970) describes as

*the growing sense that an existing paradigm has ceased to function adequately in the exploration of an aspect of nature to which that paradigm itself had previously led the way. (p 92)*

My first case study is an episode in a group therapy session described by Bion, involving six patients and himself (1961, pp 143-146). A member suggests that 'it would be a good idea if members agreed to call each other by their Christian names'. Her suggestion is initially received with approval, but 'within a few minutes', he says,

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<sup>8</sup> In conversation: I am grateful to David Armstrong for a large number of illuminating comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

*the discussion has languished, and its place has been taken by furtive glances, an increasing number of which are directed towards me... The mood is now a compound of anxiety and increasing frustration. Long before I am mentioned it is clear that my name has become a preoccupation of the group.*  
(p 144)

The proposition that Bion is setting out to explain is that this session shows evidence of mental activity which he calls Work Group activity - activity which in this case is soon disturbed by what he calls basic assumption activity. So he is seeking to elucidate the *patterning* of the behaviour he is describing: not just *what* happened, but a way of reading the *form* of what happened. He is developing a language, a system of distinctions, for making sense of what happens in groups. In what groups? Well, it is most likely to be useful in his groups, but his later invitation to readers (p 146) to think about a committee or other gathering they have attended indicates that he believes this is pertinent to a wider range of gatherings.

While Bion's group-as-a-whole perspective is expected to be new to us, we are expected to recognise the shape of the theory. Of the Work Group he says: "Its characteristics are similar to those attributed by Freud (1911) to the ego." So when he comes later to the Basic Assumption group he can expect readers to think: "This must be analogous to the id". This homology with the Freudian psyche suggests a model in which the activity of the ego - Work Group function - is disturbed by 'powerful emotional drives' which erupt or insinuate themselves from an id-like group unconscious. Trist (1985) describes the origin of this idea:

*At one of these pub discussions he began to talk of a new concept he was developing, tentatively called 'the group mentality'. Disowned and disavowed responses of the patients which were hostile to the purposes of treatment were split off from what they would consciously acknowledge in the group and collected anonymously into a pool which constituted a negative unacknowledged system - the group mentality.*

### Analysis

The disturbance of the Work Group can thus be seen as a symptom of what is accumulating in this sump of negativity to which all the group members contribute. It is a symptom (or sumptom!) of something attributable to processes within its imagined boundary. This way of framing the description does not invite the reader to wonder how this disturbance might be attributable to processes beyond where this imaginary line has been drawn - outside the physical boundary of the room, as it were.

It is possible to construct another reading of this episode. (I am not suggesting that this reading is 'right', but simply indicating the kind of story which is excluded by the line which Bion draws round his field of enquiry.) For this meeting does not take place in a vacuum. It is a meeting, probably in a clinic, between someone designated as the doctor and six other people designated as patients. Whatever Bion has so far done to probe this assumption, the meeting is taking place in a context in which, as Tom Main (1989, p 129) says of the Northfield hospital, there is 'the usual hospital convention of regarding all the staff as being totally healthy...; and all the patients as being totally ill'. We can imagine

that this ambience is underlined by the way appointments are administered, where patients wait, the old copies of *Punch* and *Country Life* which they read while they are waiting, how they are addressed, and so on.

The fate of the proposal to use first names can therefore be attributed, not just to archaic images accumulating in a group sump, but to contemporary experiences, and to the culture of the medical milieu within which those designated as patients meet. Perhaps the discussion languishes because the patients are taking on the dominant societal code around medicine. but have no way of saying this. As soon as the wish for a more friendly, first-name atmosphere finds a voice, they begin to despair. There is no way Bion is going to say: 'Call me Wilfred'. Probably they think and speak of Bion as 'Dr Bion'. Every time they say his name they are reminded that he is the doctor. Is it his name or his title that they are concerned about? Whatever 'therapeutic need' dictates one member's suggestion of pseudonyms, he may also be speaking ironically, sending the whole situation up. Another member withdraws, Bion says: Dr Bion will never hear what they are inarticulately seeking after, so what's the point?

Bion is not unaware of the institutional context of his groups, but his references to it have an ironical quality which it is possible to misread; for example he says: 'It was disconcerting to find that the Committee seemed to believe that patients could be cured in groups such as these' (p 29). The impression remains, for me, that he ignores the power of the symbolic universe within which he acts, even while he is questioning it.

Main (1989, p 131) describes how, in his view, Bion's inward perspective led to the end of his tenure at the Northfield Military Hospital:

*The unpublished secret is that Bion was sacked from Northfield. Neither the commanding officer nor his staff were able to tolerate the early weeks of chaos, and both were condemning and rancorous about Bion's refusal to own responsibility for the disorder of others... Bion had been therapeutic for his ward but anti-therapeutic for the military staff, successful in his ward, a lower-order system, but highly disturbing to the hospital, the higher-order system.*

Bridger (1990b) believes that Main overlooks the fact that Bion was confronting the Unit with radical contradictions in its view of its work, but nevertheless concludes:

*Bion, in my view, was not at ease with the group as an open system. He was not at ease with the implications of ecological change in groups, institutions and communities. (p 75)*

It is arguable that this limitation in Bion's way of constructing his reality has had a pervasive influence within the tradition of which he is a founding father. If that case were more carefully argued, we might for example conclude that the focus on behaviour in the 'here and now' in group relations working conferences perpetuates this tendency, by adopting a literalistic notion of what is *here*. So there is a pervasive slippage between what is physically 'here' and what is psychically 'here', corresponding to the confusion between physical limits and psychological boundaries which we have already noted. In other words, practice tends to focus not only upon *behaviour* which is here and now, but

upon *explanations* constructed in terms of conscious and unconscious processes imagined to be contained within a physical space.

### **Case Study Two: Innovation and Conflict in a Coal Mine**

This is an episode in an eight-year action research project carried out by Eric Trist, and colleagues at the Tavistock Institute, in the British coal mining industry in the 1950s (Trist and Bamforth, 1951; Trist *et al*, 1963). It can be seen as an expression of the intention of the Institute at that time, to bring to bear the resources of the social sciences upon the economic problems of post-war Britain. It is a paradigmatic study in the development of the concept of socio-technical systems.

The Tavistock team were engaged as researchers, and not primarily as consultants to individual collieries. It is not clear to what extent they influenced decisions in the collieries they studied. Their task was to conceptualise what was being learned about work organisation as new technology was introduced into the mines, and to make their findings available to the industry as a whole. It is interesting, therefore, in view of my previous comments on Trist's work, that the intervention is aimed at developing the knowledge *environment* of all the production units in the industry, rather than at helping individual collieries.

The incident concerned the introduction, in an unnamed village colliery, of a new form of work organisation known as 'composite working', in which, Trist (Trist *et al*, 1990) says, teams working at the coal-face

*are multi-skilled...; they can thus exchange shifts and practice task continuity (deploying themselves as necessary to carry on with succeeding tasks); they share equally in a common pay note. Teams are self-regulating and practice what we called 'responsible autonomy' (p 478).*

Previously coal-face teams had worked under the instructions of managers, and had been allocated single-skill roles. The innovation 'occurred spontaneously in three different coalfields and heralded what Emery has called a "new work paradigm"' (p 476). Although composite working had been introduced at a neighbouring colliery with 'phenomenal success', the innovation ran into serious difficulties in the colliery in question, and did not reach an acceptable level of production for about a year. Trist's paper sets out and analyses this 'chronicle of how things went wrong' (p 486).

Interestingly, this case study has been published at least four times: in an extended form in *Organizational Choice* (1963), and subsequently as a paper in various journals and anthologies, in 1989, 1990 and 1993. We may wonder why it has proved so popular. One reason may be that it provides a clear worked example of how dysfunctional behaviour in an organisation can be explained in terms of Bion's theory of basic assumptions. If so, why it was necessary to go back to material from the 1950s to find such an example? But the republication of the case study turns out to be illuminating in another way, in that it gives us an opportunity to see how, through small amendments, Trist reassesses the episode after thirty years.

### History

The new production unit at the village colliery was opened under singularly unpromising circumstances. The geological conditions were extremely difficult. The team were drafted rather than self-selected, and had no previous experience of the technology or of composite working. The local community was totally dependent on the colliery. Trist infers that there was a pervasive fear that the new 'drift' (horizontal shaft) would fail, and that this would lead to the death<sup>9</sup> of the colliery and hence of the village.

The new drift was in difficulty from the first day. Progress was slower than expected, so the manager assumed direct control of the work. After six days twenty yards of the tunnel collapsed and a fortnight was lost digging the face out again. This should have given 'a big enough shock to cause a radical reappraisal of the whole undertaking' (1990, p 489). Instead, the manager took firmer control, overruling the time-honoured convention by which the men allocated tasks amongst themselves. The men perceived this as an attack and began to oppose management decisions, bringing the management and the lodge (trade union) into increasing conflict, with the threat of a dispute. At best the team had been meeting 50% of its production target; in the eleventh week it was down to 30%.

In week 12 the Area Labour Relations Officer was called in, the mood changed, and a settlement was reached by invoking a higher authority in the person of the Area General Manager, who was a 'good object' to everyone in the pit. From this point on productivity began to improve, although it was eleven months before the production target was being consistently reached. Even after eighteen months the managers and the Tavistock researchers reckoned that the team had not attained the level of responsible autonomy of the successful neighbouring team.

### Analysis (1963)

The researchers' original reading of what took place was this:

- i. From the start, and even in face of major setbacks, the management, the lodge and the members of the team assumed and acted as though the drift was an ordinary production unit, to be run in the ordinary way. When things went wrong, the unit

*was treated throughout as a production unit under difficulties, rather than perceived for what it was - a training and development unit working under the stress of a demand for full production* (1990, p 486)<sup>10</sup>.

The researchers interpret this 'assumption of ordinariness' as a collusive defence, suppressing the intense anxieties aroused by the demand to make radical changes in working practices, in circumstances where failure to achieve production targets was believed to threaten the future of the colliery and of the community which depended on it.

- ii. When, in about the ninth week, the project had reached an impasse, basic assumption fight/flight took over and suffused the behaviour of managers and workers. 'Management and workers fought each other in common flight from the problems that

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<sup>9</sup> The word 'death' was not used in the 1963 version.

<sup>10</sup> References are to the 1990 text of the 1963 account.

had to be solved in the real task situation' (p 490). By this time a quarter of the team had left, so the tendency to flight had emerged earlier. In week 12 the intervention of the Area Labour Relations Officer triggers a transition to basic assumption dependence, in which the 'good' Area General manager can reach a settlement with the men<sup>11</sup>. The residual problem in the colliery appears to have been that, having mobilised basic assumption dependence by invoking familiar outside authorities, managers and workers were then unable to establish the culture of responsible autonomy which was essential to the composite working method - a culture which can be seen as entailing the mobilisation of fight/flight, in a sophisticated way, against the day-to-day challenges of mining the face.

- iv. It is not clear from the 1963 account at what point the researchers arrived at the interpretation of what was going on which they subsequently published. This account concludes with the observation that the prevailing work norms permitted the crisis to be resolved, but did not provide

*any precedent, or 'tool kit', for analysing factors in the socio-psychological system in a way that would have broken down the assumption of ordinariness in the starting situation and avoided the consequent tensions and loss of production (p 492).*

#### Analysis (1989-1993)

The versions of the chapter published from 1989 onwards include this further observation:

*The Institute had begun its studies of group dynamics in industrial settings by feeding in appropriately timed interventions as the work proceeded. This followed the psychoanalytic tradition and had been successful in projects such as the Glacier Project (Jaques, 1951). This, however, had not been concerned with an order of change that constituted a paradigm shift, as did the change from conventional to composite working in longwall coal-mining (1990, p 492).*

The 1993 American version of this chapter concludes with a summary of Bion's theory of the sophisticated and basic assumption groups, and the statement that:

*The function of a consultant is to help the group become aware of its ba [basic assumption] activity, so releasing the learning process (p 175).*

The 1990 version of the chapter concludes differently:

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<sup>11</sup> Trist may also have in mind Bion's notion of emotional oscillation in a group (1961, pp 124ff). Bion proposed that the members of a group may find themselves torn between the belief that their leader is dependable and the belief that he is mad (or, in this case, that composite working under present conditions was both necessary and impossible). They damp down the resulting emotional oscillation by bringing in outside authorities as 'inert material', so that 'the new and much larger group ceases to vibrate' (p 125).

*The present project points to one set of conditions under which the psychoanalytic model of intervention has to be transcended in action research in organizational settings* (1990, p 493).

Trist is proposing that it is necessary to transcend the Tavistock paradigm, in order to be able to support members of an organisation in making what he calls a paradigm shift. When the organisation of the client system is not in question, the practice of interpreting defensive strategies and working through may be successful in enabling people to extricate themselves from repetitive, dysfunctional patterns of behaviour and to learn from their experience. But when they are confronted with a demand to develop a new organisation, there is 'a cognitive as well as an emotional problem in making the shift' (p 492). This 'double difficulty' creates confusion, and requires a different kind of intervention through which:

*they can clearly envisage the alternative as an articulated systematic whole and find that it is suitable for them'* (p 492).

The purpose of the whole research programme was to develop and disseminate this 'articulated systematic whole'.

On the basis of this case study we can formulate a number of propositions:

- The theories of Jaques (1955) and Bion (1961) provide ways of understanding dysfunctional behaviour in the workplace, but such understanding of unconscious processes is not always a sufficient condition for an intervention which enables the client system to develop from a stuck situation. This proposition is affirmed most forcibly by Jaques himself (1995), in his later repudiation of a psychoanalytic approach to organisations:

*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. The reason is that there has never been an adequate foundation for understanding of organizations per se. We have simply not yet learned how to construct adequate organizations. That job is only just beginning* (p 343)<sup>12</sup>.

- Practice within the Tavistock paradigm may not meet the challenge of the client situation, when - for whatever reason - that situation requires what Trist calls a paradigm shift in organisation. This is because members of the client system may be unable to conceptualise the change required, particularly when they are defensively identified with the existing structure. (This is not the whole story, since the first collieries developed the composite method of working without outside assistance; it was only later that the new model was conceptualised by the Tavistock team.)
- Trist speaks of transcending the psychoanalytic mode of intervention, Jaques of rejecting it. My present view is that what they wish to transcend or reject is *one particular psychoanalytic discursive practice and the non-discursive practices which supports it*, that is, the Tavistock paradigm. They are right in asserting that

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<sup>12</sup> Jaques does not comment on the value of psychoanalytic understanding in the process of *installing* new and more adequate forms of organisation, when 'pathological forces' are likely to be aroused..

practitioners frequently require knowledge and skill in addressing the design of the social and technical systems of the organisation in their own right. They are mistaken if they mean to imply that the forms in which these systems are constructed and explained are outside the domain of psychoanalytic enquiry. Autonomous work groups and requisite employment hierarchies are expressions of strong ethical and political commitments on the part of those who design and sanction them. From a psychoanalytic position we cannot foreclose on the question of the unconscious desire which animates these ideals and necessarily goes beyond every attempt to articulate them<sup>13</sup>.

### **VIII Case Study 3: Professional identity in a health care setting**

My third case study is a reading of an assignment of my own. It is shaped by the supposition that I was unable, from within the Tavistock paradigm, to articulate the challenge the client system was facing with sufficient clarity. The case study is thus an attempt to illustrate how some of the problematics explored in this chapter were experienced from the inside.

The client was a group of senior psychologists responsible for the psychology, psychotherapy and counselling services provided by a Trust within the National Health Service. They approached OPUS for help in meeting a requirement of their senior manager that they should identify objectives for the unit for the next two to five years.

The first meeting with the head of the unit and his four colleagues presented me with a more complex array of concerns. These included anxiety about the possibility of becoming a 'limping service', if they were unable to secure the posts they needed and recruit and retain staff for them. In particular they were concerned about their continuing ability to attract psychologists in a competitive market. They were ill at ease at their limited discretion within a Trust wishing to set stringent business targets. Some wanted to explore the possibility of becoming part of an autonomous directorate, which would stand or fall by whether purchasers wanted to buy their services. In a note which I wrote afterwards I summarised the concerns they had expressed. I also commented on an ambiguity in the way they used the word 'we' in various statements they had made: were they speaking as the managers of a unit, or as the senior members of the psychology profession, within the Trust?

In response to my report I was engaged for a total of about four days' work. The task of establishing objectives remained on the agenda, but I understood that what I was being asked to do was to enable them to engage with the questions which surfaced in the first meeting. Over a sixteen month period I participated in five meetings with the group of five, and although I also had conversations with the head of the unit, and interviewed the four section heads, attending their senior psychologist meetings and responding to what arose in them became the dominant method of intervention.

When the funding initially agreed ran out, we had not achieved a breakthrough in understanding their circumstances. We parted on good terms, but they did not renew the

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<sup>13</sup> Cf Lacan (1973): chapter 20, 'In you more than you'.



contract. In response to an earlier draft of this case study, the head of the unit said that he thought I underestimated the value of my intervention. Whatever that value may have been, I believe that, as Winnicott (1965, p193) put it, I did not succeed in 'meeting the challenge of the case'.

### Analysis

As I now see it, the department was confronting the kind of transition which Trist refers to as a paradigm shift, in this case from a *modus operandi* based on professional assumptions, to one based on managerial assumptions. The objective-setting process they had been asked to undertake was symptomatic of this shift. As it turned out, they were requiring their consultant to make the same order of shift himself. If I had recognised this, I would have been better placed to collaborate with them in articulating what they were up against.

One way of reading this story is to say that the 'challenge of the case' was to work with the group to *identify and conceptualise their emergent strategy* - that is, the strategy they were already adopting in response to changes in the demands of the Trust, their purchasers, government, and the community of their catchment area. It meant assuming that they were *already learning*, in response to these pressures, acknowledging the anxieties that this was generating and finding ways of sustaining them. If we could arrive at an interpretative description of what they were already doing, and articulate the assumptions implicit in this, we might then be able to look critically at these assumptions and so establish a position from which they might work out a strategy for their future activity.

If we look at the situation in this way, this is what we find:

- They were already in the process of reconstituting themselves as a multi-professional service, which included psychotherapists and counsellors as well as clinical psychologists. This was calling into question their distinctive competence - not necessarily to undermine it, but to require them to articulate it in public debate. This meant being able to dis-identify with being psychologists. This can be seen both as a challenge to the individual, and also as a challenge to problematise clinical psychology as a system of discursive and non-discursive practices. This meant living with a lot of anxiety: 'people fear extinction', the head of the unit said.
- The department had already been renamed: it was no longer the Clinical Psychology Service, but the Psychology, Psychotherapy and Counselling Service.
- This reorganisation went beyond reconstituting themselves as a multi-disciplinary team. They were adopting a form of organisation in which all these disciplines would be integrated within a department with an explicit and negotiated aim, objectives and performance criteria - in Tavistock terms, under an explicit definition of the primary task of the department.
- There was evidence of the pain of these changes, and the resistance of the team to them, in the way they continued to refer to themselves as a senior psychologists' meeting rather than a management meeting, and did not involve other disciplines in their strategic thinking (at least with me), and in the head of the unit's talk of taking early retirement.

- Without finding himself living on margarine sandwiches like Lisl Klein (p 6), the consultant was uncomfortably aware of a counter-transferential process, by which he also felt himself being overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness and incompetence. However, a working note to the team in November 1994 shows that at that time he already saw the unit as in a transitional state, between forms of organisation based on professional and on managerial values, and attributed his anxiety to that:

*Threats to the quality and to the viability of the service, and the possibility of being impaled on one or the other horn of this dilemma, provoke considerable anxiety, which has made it difficult to think straight, and has at times certainly got to me! In particular it is difficult to pursue an objective-setting process looking two to five years ahead, when the enemy are already at the gates, or inside: the merger with other therapy disciplines has already happened, staff are already leaving, proposals for three per cent cuts had to be ready by Friday.*

- As this note indicates, I was aware that the department was receiving contradictory injunctions: on the one hand, to think up to five years ahead (as though the rate of change in the environment of the Trust was negligible or predictable), but on the other hand to prepare plans for absorbing substantial budget cuts to come into effect within a few months (implying a turbulent environment in which it was impossible to look even one year ahead).

### Critique

Why then was I unable to construct and implement some such strategy? Looking back, it is possible to see several limitations in my mode of intervention, including the ways in which I fell in with the clients' budget, and in which I let go of the original objective-setting task. In the terms developed in this paper, however, I would pick out four ways in which I was both constrained by, and seeking to transcend, the Tavistock paradigm.

- i. Although I felt constrained by it, I was unable to extricate myself from the role of consultant to meetings of the client group. In consequence I hooked into the paradigmatic method of **working with groups** (cf p 5), and became over-preoccupied with the internal dynamics of these meetings. The head of the unit was himself a group analyst, so that he also may have had a bias towards this approach. After the first of these meetings I did in fact recognise that I needed to take the initiative in gaining a greater understanding of the work of the department, and arranged to interview the heads of the four sections about the services they provided. Significantly, however, I never recycled the picture built up back into the whole group, so that this work was not as fruitful as it might have been.
- ii. My preoccupation with the internal affairs of the senior psychologist group was reinforced by the **emptiness of the concept of the environment** within the Tavistock paradigm. I had no conceptual tools for describing the complexities of the department's environment, within the Trust and beyond. Modifying Jaques' statement (p 15), I did not have an adequate foundation for the understanding of organizations *and their environments*, or more precisely of organisation-environments as fields of enquiry which can be cut into inside and outside at many points.

- iii. I was unable to conceptualise the transition the department was going through as a radical change in discursive and non-discursive practices. Nor was I sufficiently clear at that time about the **inadequacy of the containment and interpretation consultancy strategy** (pages 5f) in the kind of circumstances Trist had recognised (p 14). The situation can be seen as requiring an intervention, similar to that identified by Trist, through which *'they [could] clearly envisage the alternative as an articulated systematic whole and find that it [was] suitable for them* (p 15). (I was in fact already familiar with Boxer's series of organisational transitions, which bring successive levels of organisational assumptions within the arena of explicit examination and debate (eg Boxer and Palmer, 1997). I was however unable or unwilling to take the risk of trying to make this theory work for me with the client group.).
- iv. In particular I was unable to conceptualise the transition the department was going through, in a way which related the managerial performance criteria they were adopting to their assumed professional and personal commitment towards promoting the good of their clients. They experienced the transition from professional to managerial values predominantly as a loss. A practice which focuses upon defences against anxiety (p 3) is sharp in articulating ways in which people in organisations resist change, but **weak in articulating the unconscious desire** which animates their work and which they may be tempted to give up on when the landscape of their work changes. Boxer identifies what he calls a 'relational strategy', which is the strategy necessary to be responsive to a turbulent environment, and to needs and demands of clients which can never be fully specified in advance. It thus goes beyond concepts of organisation based on primary task, and requires a corporate openness to the needs of clients analogous to that of the professional mental health care worker at the individual level<sup>14</sup>.

For the department to work towards a relational strategy would have entailed conversations with others involved in mental health services about what members of the community wanted from them. Such conversations would have had to take into account the desires which focus upon mental health services, including - to paraphrase Anton Obholzer - the wish for a 'keep-madness-out-of-sight' service<sup>15</sup>. In an early note to the team I in fact proposed that they should set out to:

*...articulate an aim (which wasn't just a motherhood statement) for mental health in [the locality] - one which all services could identify with - an answer to the question 'What are we trying to do?', in which the 'we' is all those broadly concerned with mental health services... If the overall vision is clear, concern about professional identity may fall into perspective.*

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<sup>14</sup> Thus it appears that the shift towards a relational mode of control can reconnect practitioners with a client-centred ethos which is lost in a positional mode - although they can no longer think in terms of my client. There is an analogous process in the coal-mining study, in which, according to Trist *et al* (1963), miners drew upon the ethos of the pre-mechanisation era in evolving the composite method of working.

<sup>15</sup> Obholzer suggests that the National Health Service is unconsciously expected to be a 'keep-death-at-bay' service (Obholzer and Roberts, 1994, p 171).

We eventually attempted to do this, and it did produce motherhood statements, because the intervention was not based on an understanding of the significance of this move. Moreover, the whole point of such an activity would be that it made possible a shift of attention from the concerns of the unit to the needs of the community - what might be called a decentering of the unit as a subject. This could only be achieved if new voices were brought into the conversation.

## **IX Inconclusive Postscript**

To attempt to summarise the conclusions of this chapter would be to succumb to the very wish for completeness which it has sought to question. It must speak to the reader through its gaps and prevarications and what it takes for granted, as well as through what is clear and coherent. For the writer it has crystallised a number of propositions:

- i. It is possible to characterise the Tavistock approach to organisational behaviour as a paradigm which includes certain identifiable model examples of practice and theorising, key theoretical concepts, and core practices - in spite of the fact that this characterisation cannot do justice either to the depth and diversity of the work which has been done within this paradigm, or to significance of the dissensions and divergences from it.
- ii. It is possible to adopt a critical position in relation to this paradigm, by viewing it as rooted in a discursive formation of which the basic building blocks (objects) are persons, groups and institutions conceived as bounded entities with an inside and an outside; in which the inner 'reality' so constituted is regarded as the domain of psychoanalytic enquiry and is elaborated in detail, while the excluded 'outer reality' is left to other disciplines.
- iii. It is possible to begin to delineate a new paradigm for psychoanalytic understanding and practice in organisations, which reframes key elements in the Tavistock paradigm - a new paradigm which acknowledges the necessity of drawing boundaries in order to think and act, but in which the consultant (manager, practitioner) does not identify with these boundaries, regarding the whole field of inner/outer and individual/environment as accessible to psychoanalytic enquiry.

12 May 1997

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