

# The fifth basic assumption

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It has been a remarkable text, Wilfred Bion's *Experiences in Groups* (1961); a landmark in thought and conceptualization of the unconscious functioning of human beings in groups. The working hypotheses he formulated on the mental activity of members of groups have robustly stood the test of time. In part, this has been because of the Working Conferences on Group Relations which started from his ideas and whose staffs have elaborated them over time. But even if there had been no such conferences his related writings, lectures, and memoirs assure him a place in the history of the development of psychoanalytic thinking about social groups, institutions, and society.

The most recent history of the development of group relations education in the Bion-Tavistock tradition has been presented by E. J. Miller (Miller, 1990). There is little point in repeating that history save to say that working conferences were developed at first by Leicester University and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in 1957. Subsequent conferences owe their paternity to the late A. K. Rice. His clarity of conceptualization gave working conferences their stamp which lasts to this day (Rice, 1965). In the final analysis, however, whatever group relations education has become is based on Bion's thought, which provides the heuristic perspective for unravelling the unconscious functioning of groups.

We write from our experiences in our roles as consultants to and directors of such working conferences in addition to our practices as social scientists, organizational consultants, psychoanalyst, and university teachers. We have been associated with group relations education for most of our adult lives and each has tried to contribute to thinking on groups through participation and writing. In recent years our roles in conferences have been both those of directors and consultants. Though we thoroughly enjoy the

challenge of directorship, we find we are quite content to take up consultant roles to small groups, large groups, etc., because there is so much which is unknown about group behaviour. It also allows us to keep in touch as directly as we can with what is going on in groups of people who belong to later generations than ourselves. For us there is a symbiotic relationship between our practices and group relations education. What social phenomena of an unconscious nature we find in one context we test in the other and vice versa.

It is out of these experiences that we are now able to propose a fifth Basic Assumption Group in addition to the Work Group and three basic assumption groups which Bion adumbrated and the one which Pierre Turquet discovered. This fifth basic assumption group we have named Basic Assumption MeNess (baM).

The purpose of this paper is to work out and explicate baM in groups, institutions, and societies following the Bion tradition. BaM is linked to all other ba groups and the W group. We can but reflect the particularised contexts in which we live and work. We are

aware that within the field of psychoanalysis there is a burgeoning interest in the treatment of narcissistic disorders. However, we do not want to explain away baM in terms of individual narcissism, as can be found in analysands and patients, because we are focusing on baM as a cultural phenomena. More pertinent for us is the kind of social critique of post-industrial society made by Christopher Lasch in his *Culture of Narcissism* (1978), by Robert N. Bellah and his colleagues in their *Habits of the Heart* (1985) and by John Carey in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992).

### **THE WORK GROUP AND THE BASIC ASSUMPTION GROUPS OF BION**

There are many renditions of Bion's formulation about groups but none can replicate the richness of the original. Like his Brazilian and New York lectures, for example, *Experiences in Groups* requires close and repeated attention. Nevertheless for the purposes of this exposition there is a need to give yet another account of his working hypotheses.

Bion's major hypothesis was that when any group of people meet to do something, i.e., a task, there are in actuality two groups, or two configurations of mental activity, present, at one and the same time. There is the sophisticated work group (referred to as the W group) but this group is 'constantly perturbed by influences that come from other group mental phenomena' (Bion, 1961, p. 129) which are primarily what Bion called the basic assumption groups (referred to as the ba groups).

What is the experience of being in a W group? It is to be in a group in which all the participants are engaged with the primary task because they have taken full cognizance of its purpose. They cooperate because it is their will. They search for knowledge through using their experiences. They probe out realities in a scientific way by hypothesis testing and are aware of the processes that will further learning and development. Essentially, the W group mobilises sophisticated mental activity on the part of its members which they demonstrate through their maturity. They manage the psychic boundary between their inner and outer worlds. They strive to manage themselves in their roles as members of the W group. Furthermore, the participants can hold in the mind an idea of wholeness and interconnectedness with other systems. The participants use their skills to understand the inner world of the group, as a system, in relation to the external reality of the environment. In a W group the participants can comprehend the psychic, political, and spiritual relatedness in which they are participating and are co-creating. The W group can be seen as an open-system. The major inputs are people with minds who can transform experiences into insight and understanding.

Groups which act in this consistently rational manner are rare, however, and, perhaps, are merely an idealised construct. In actuality the behaviour of the people in the group is often on another dimension. This is ba behaviour. The genius of Bion was to recognise that people in groups behave at times collectively in a psychotic fashion or, rather, the group mentality drives the process in a manner akin to temporary psychosis. Isabel Menzies Lyth makes the point with clarity:

The subtlety of Bion's intuition was in pinpointing the less obvious but immensely powerful psychotic phenomena that appear in groups that are apparently behaving sanely,

if a little strangely, groups that are working more or less effectively and whose members are clinically normal or neurotic. (Menzies Lyth, 1981, p. 663)

The term 'psychotic' is being used in this context to mean a 'diminution of effective contact with reality', to borrow Menzies Lyth's phrase. This is a group mentality that has such a culture that the individual, despite his or her sophisticated and mature skills, can be caused to regress to and be temporarily caught up in primitive splitting and projective identification, depersonalization, and infantile regression.

Bion adumbrated three ba groups. The members of the group behave 'as if' they were sharing the same tacit, unconscious assumption. Life in a ba group is oriented towards inner phantasy, not external reality. To identify a ba is to give meaning to the behaviour of the group and elucidate on what basis it is not operating as a W group. The three ba groups of Bion are: ba dependency (baD); ba fight/flight (baF/F); and ba pairing (baP).

In the life of a group the participants will oscillate between the culture of the W group and among those of the ba groups. Each individual has a 'valency' for a particular ba; 'a capacity for instantaneous involuntary combination of one individual with another for sharing and acting on a basic assumption' (Bion, 1961, p. 153), be it dependency, fight/flight, or pairing.

What is the emotional experience of being in baD, in a culture of dependency? The aim of the members of the group, and the assumption on which they work, is that they are met to have a feeling of security and protection from one of their members. This leader is invested with qualities of omnipotence and omniscience. He or she is idealised and made into a kind of god. The feeling is that only the leader knows anything and only the leader can solve the reality problems of the group. Such a leader is a magical person who does not need information-he or she can divine it. In such a group the mentality and culture are such that the individual members become more and more deskilled as information on realities becomes less and less available. There is an air of timelessness about the group which results in the feeling that it will never end.

One phenomenon associated with this kind of group culture is that one person is made into the really stupid one, the 'dummy', who has to be taught everything by the others, the collective 'mummy'. A similar process is to set up one member as being the object of care which other members proceed to deliver. A variation on this is to create a 'casually', i.e., someone who is made inadequate, even to the point of temporary breakdown.

The experience of being in a basic assumption pairing (baP) culture is to be in a group enthused by the idea of supporting two members who will produce a new leader-figure who will assume full responsibility for the group's security. The wish, in unconscious phantasy, is that the pair will produce a Messiah, a Saviour, either in the form of a person or an organising idea round which they can cohere. The gender of the two people constituting the pair is immaterial. The ethos of the group is one of hopefulness and expectation. The crux, however, is not a future event but the feeling of hope in the immediate present. The group lives in the hope of a new creation-a Utopia; a utopian thought that will solve all their problems of existence. There will be no feelings of destructiveness, despair, or hatred. But nothing must be created in actuality; otherwise the hopefulness will vanish.

The third basic assumption group of Bion is that of fight/flight (baF/F) which he sees as two sides of the same coin. What is the experience of being in such a culture? The unconscious assumption of the group is that they are met for action which is to preserve itself by fighting someone or something or by taking flight from these. The individual is less important than the preservation of the group. Understandably this ba culture is profoundly anti-intellectual and will decry as introspective any behaviour which attempts to reach self-knowledge through self-study.

The leader in such a culture is of central importance because he or she is a leader for action: either into fight by attack or into flight. The ideal characteristic is that the leader be paranoid, without any hint of depressive qualities, and be able to name sources of persecution, even if they do not exist in reality. The leader is expected to identify danger and enemies unerringly and to feel hatred towards them. The group gives the leader the ability to turn it from fight to flight and back again, like the Grand Old Duke of York marching his men. The leader has the power because he or she can play on the overwhelming panic that the members of the group feel.

### **THE BASIC ASSUMPTION ONENESS GROUP OF TURQUET**

To these ba groups of Bion, Turquet added a fourth which was basic assumption oneness (baO). BaO is a mental activity in which 'members seek to join in a powerful union with an omnipotent force, unobtainably high, to surrender self for passive participation, and thereby feel existence, well-being, and wholeness' (Turquet, 1974, p. 357). In the same paper he adds that in baO: 'the group member is there to be lost in oceanic feelings of unity or, if the oneness is personified, to be a part of a salvationist inclusion' (Ibid., p. 360).

This wish for 'salvationist inclusion' can be seen to operate institutionally when, for example, religious people give themselves over to charismatic movements. They wish to be at-one with God; to have no boundary between the human and what may be the divine; and, for example, to speak in tongues. As the opposite of Oneness we are proposing another basic assumption group that emphasises separateness; that hates the idea of 'we'. To state this over-neatly: baM equals ba not-O.

### **BASIC ASSUMPTION ME-NESS: THE CONTEXT**

BaM, we hypothesise, is becoming more salient in our industrialised cultures. Here, we are underlining that we understand baM to be a cultural phenomenon engendered by conscious and unconscious social anxieties and fears. In particular we are putting forward the idea that as living in contemporary, turbulent societies becomes more risky so the individual is pressed more and more into his or her own inner reality in order to exclude and deny the perceived disturbing realities that are of the outer environment. The inner world becomes thus a comforting one offering succour. It is, perhaps, in this inner world that well-worn clichés can be held on to and rehearsed without fear of them being tested. 'England is a green and pleasant land!'; 'man's home is his castle!' can be believed in because the changing reality of the real environment and real experience of external reality are denied.

While there are always differences in national cultures there are striking similarities, particularly in those which share industrial histories and aspirations. What they all share is an ambience of persecutory, loosely called stressful, feeling. In Britain, America, and Australia there have been economic recessions which have hit the middle and lower classes. Unemployment has eroded the confidence of the managerial class who led themselves to believe that their job would always be secure. In Britain, the record of bankruptcies is unprecedented. So for people who tried to take responsibility for their lives by taking a risk in setting up a small business the result has been that they have lost their livelihoods and, in many cases, their homes.

In the United States of America, during recent years, the harsh impact of economic recession fuelled the politics of hate. Interest rates plunged, bank failures soared, and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation was dangerously underfunded. Homelessness increased dramatically. In the face of all this, there was manic buying of shares which drove the stock market upwards as individuals tried to secure a financially sound future for themselves.

In Europe we can only regard with misgivings what is happening in the former Eastern Bloc countries which now share aspirations for the capitalist way of life. Russia itself is economically bankrupt and teeters on political collapse. Slovaks are now separated in what the newspapers call a 'velvet divorce' from Czechoslovakia. Within Slovakia there are 600,000 Hungarians who will want to assert their rights. In Transylvania there will likely be rivalry between Romanians and Hungarians.

Balkan politics, which so preoccupied statesmen and politicians before the Second World War, are being fought out again. One scenario of possible escalation might be that Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey get involved in a war as effects of the Bosnian conflict flows into Kosova, which is a Serbian ruled province with an Albanian majority. War could start in Macedonia where there are multiple rivalries; or in Sandzak which is Serbian but inhabited by Muslims; or in Croatia.

The major social phenomenon which is appearing in these former Eastern Bloc countries, we hypothesise, is that there is a process of 'tribalisation' which is causing people to reaffirm their primary national identity. The process is complex because there is no neat coincidence between national identity and national territory. In Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, there are large populations of Russians left over from the days of the Soviet empire. In countries such as Poland and the Czech Republic there are Germans marooned as the result of historical processes and near-forgotten peace treaties. Predictably, Jews are beginning, once again, to suffer persecution as they are accused of undermining whatever country they are resident in. This is particularly so in Hungary where one politician is using the same language and metaphors which the Nazis used.

As the monolithic political structures crumble in all these countries we see individuals being pressed into forms of Me-ness which are becoming frenzied, as in the former Yugoslavia. The more general point we wish to make is that given the kinds of turbulence being experienced in all industrialised societies-and we have just given headlines-so the individual loses faith and trust in any structure, whether good or bad, that is greater than the individual. In short, as the environment becomes more persecuting in reality one response is for individuals to make themselves more cut-off from the effects and to

withdraw into the inner world of the self. Another way of expressing this is to say that we are witnessing *socially induced* schizoid withdrawal. This is not to say that the individuals are schizoid in themselves but that they are being made to behave so because of social and political conditions.

At the same time we want to hold on to what may be positive and we can regard baM as a temporary cultural phenomenon, salient at this time in history. We can see the future as holding many challenges for the nature of the advanced industrial societies in which we live. These challenges are economic, political, social, ecological, and spiritual. They arise from cumulative changes in our environments which interact together systemically. We are witnessing the creation of large unified economic markets, increasing international competitiveness, changing political, social, and cultural ideologies, shifting religious affiliations and beliefs, and continued revolutions in technology. As we have indicated there is a reframing of relations between East and West and the Northern and Southern hemispheres. Consequently we, in the West, cannot afford to harbour any ambitions, or even phantasies, of colonization, i.e., mobilizing baD, but have to try to find ways of creating symbiotic relations that foster interdependence and collaboration, i.e., eschewing all the ba configurations.

The repercussions of these changes can be interpreted as the beginnings of the ending of advanced industrial societies as they have been known in the past and the beginnings of societies that will have to be discovered. The turbulence of the eco-environment, in which peoples of the world conduct their affairs, paradoxically presents an opportunity to initiate transformations which use the best that has been learned from history and the best of thinking about desired futures.

At its most benign, we postulate that the experience of the culture of baM may be one that has to be gone through in order to achieve the kinds of societies which would be associated with a W culture. Just as the French Revolution mobilised baF/F to reach forward towards republicanism and democracy, just as Cromwell broke the baD assumption of the British on the divine right of kings, so may baM be a transitional, cultural experience.

### **BASIC ASSUMPTION ME-NESS**

Our working hypothesis is that baM occurs when people-located in a space and time with a primary task, i.e., meet to do something in a group-work on the tacit, unconscious assumption that the group is to be a non-group. Only the people present are there to be related to because their shared construct in the mind of 'group' is of an undifferentiated mass. They, therefore, act as if the group had no existence because if it did exist it would be the source of persecuting experiences. The idea of 'group' is contaminating, taboo, impure, and, in sum, all that is negative. The people behave as if the group has no reality, and cannot ever have reality, because the only reality to be considered and taken account of is that of the individual. It is a culture of selfishness in which individuals appear to be only conscious of their own personal boundaries, which they believe have to be protected from any incursion by others. The nature of the transactions is instrumental, for there is no room for affect which could be dangerous because one would not know to where feelings might lead.

A major difference between baM and other ba groups is that in the former it is the group which is invisible and unknowable whereas in the latter cultures it is the individual who is invisible and unknowable. In the cultures of baD, baF/F, baP, and baO the individual becomes lost in them. In baM culture the overriding anxiety is that the individual will be lost in the group if it ever emerges. While ba groups in general are unconscious systems of defence against the anxiety of experiencing and testing realities in a W configuration, a baM culture is an unconscious system of defence against both the experiences of W and other ba groups. In a sense, baM may have come into existence because the others were previously in existence. To state this as an exaggeration: it may be that baM is a result of the historical process of working conferences which have now been running for nearly forty years. People attend these conferences because they want to know about group functioning. They also believe that to experience ba behaviour is to be caught up in process that they believe they cannot control. They wish to attain W behaviour as quickly and as effortlessly as possible. That is why they are present in the conference. There are powerful aspirations to know but also as potent reasons for not-knowing. Hence, the emergence of baM which is a resistance to both ba and W behaviour. The paradox is that while the architectonic belief is that only the individual can come to know anything, this belief causes the individuals to co-create and co-act in a ba group. So they enter a ba group in spite of their efforts to avoid this experience.

In baM it is as if each individual was a self-contained group acting in its own right. A baM culture can never tolerate the collective activities of a W group because a baM culture has only individualistic preoccupations. A baM culture is more likely to pay attention to private troubles than ever it would to public issues, to use C. Wright Mills's classic distinction, because they have no relevance for the individuals.

Our elaboration of baM starts from Turquet's idea of the singleton. Turquet (1974) was writing in the early '70s and what he had to say was valid and for particular members it is still a way of understanding the transformation process they can go through as a result of membership experiences in a large group.

Turquet in his analysis of the phenomenology of the individual's experiences of changing membership status in the large group describes how the conference member comes into the large group as an 'I'; more particularly the 'I' enters as a singleton wishing to make relations with others even though not yet part of the group. While we fully accept Turquet's formulation we are beginning to think that, nowadays, it is the 'me' part of the 'I' which is increasingly being mobilised. There is, we postulate, a stage preceding Turquet's analysis of the progression of the individual through the life of the group because the individual does not want to have relations.

Our working hypothesis, now, is that there is a new phenomenon in that particular individuals can get caught up in a mental activity that does not allow them to enter the 'I'/singleton state and holds them in what, we are to call, the 'me'/singleton state because they never want to experience membership of a group.

The pronoun 'me' is the accusative and dative form of the pronoun of the first person. This fits the meaning we want to give to baM because the 'I' becomes an object to itself-a 'me', governed by the prepositions 'to' or 'for'. Furthermore if it was the 'I' which was being mobilised the 'I' could empathise with the individual 'I' of other members in the group;

could acknowledge that they too have feelings, perceptions, and understanding; could conceptualise that if a 'we' was possible the group could exist and achieve its primary task.

In using the idea of 'Me-ness' we are harking back to the time when an infant becomes a unit able to distinguish between the inside and the outside. Winnicott with his usual perceptiveness writes:

The idea of a limiting membrane appears, and from this follows the idea of an inside and an outside. Then there develops the theme of a ME and a notME. There are now ME contents that develop partly on instinctual experience. (Winnicott, 1988, p. 68)

Our view is that this stage of development is echoed when baM is mobilised in the group.

The evidence for this basic assumption group started to become firmly apparent about eight years ago. We give evidence from two sources: from the behaviour of members and staffs of working conferences; and from what we have observed in societies. We offer 'because clauses' (to use Pierre Turquet's phrase) to link the inner psychic states of individuals to the kinds of societies, institutions, and groups which people are co-creating in Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom which are the countries we know best.

### **EVIDENCE FROM WORKING CONFERENCES**

It is a large group. For most of the sessions one woman participant always sits outside the arranged configuration of chairs. She looks attentive as she sits. For the most part, bolt upright, often on the edge of her chair. When asked by other members of the large group why she has this seat she replies that she wants to be separate. One assumes that she feels that she is not being trapped by any structures. She states that in her view the consultants are imposing this structure. She attends the large group, and all the other events of the conference but she never becomes a member. As the days go by one has a picture of a woman who will not join any institution as she wants to keep her version of freedom and her individuality. She gives the impression of being the observer watching everything from behind a glass screen-detached, objective, unmoved, apparently content to be alienated. Withdrawal and dissociation seem to be her way of life. It is difficult to guess what her experiences may be because she never offers them, but one assumes she is processing them in some way.

In the same conference another woman says that she had never really existed as a child for her parents. She had been a non-person for them. It was not a matter of rejection; she had never been accepted. One could understand why there was a necessity to hold on to a version of 'me' in order just to have survived as a person. This pressure to hold on to the 'me' part of oneself, in the sense that we are trying to give meaning to the distinction between "I" and "Me", can be seen in other contexts as we have tried to demonstrate above and will continue to show in what follows.

In one session of a large group one member said that she dreamt of the film *Broken Mirrors*. She told the participants in the group what the film was about. The story of the film is about a sadistic murderer who captures women, ties them up, and takes photographs of them while starving them to death. One of the features of the film is that



there is *no* interaction between the photographer/murderer and the victim. The room in which the film takes place is covered with photographs of previous victims starving to death.

At one level, the volunteering of this film story of the relationship between murderer and victim represented the transference relationship which was felt to exist between the consultants and the members of the group. In phantasy, members experienced no interaction between consultants and the members of the group and so the consultants were busy engaged in an activity that was akin to making a film of the mental life of the group as an object of study.

At another level we would suggest that the relationship between the murderer and the victim is a paradigm for the individual caught in baM. By this we mean that there is a sadistic photographing part of oneself which is busy taking snapshots of a suffering, starving part of oneself and there is no interaction between the two. So the consultants come to be seen as sadistic by victimising the members who are starving for insight.

In this conference it was noticeable that participants had great difficulty in talking about their feelings about themselves in any roles, the context in which they were working and about others. Feelings seemed to be being held in abeyance during the working sessions. This led on a number of occasions to people saying things like, 'If I was to feel angry I would say "X".' In baM people do everything in their power to distance themselves from their feelings, take a 'photograph' and present that to the rest of the group and the consultants as the 'evidence' for what is going on within themselves. This is a logical consequence of baM which can begin to be unlocked only when the members give their feelings of their experience. This would lead to an exploration of their relationships in the group and elicit their images of the group in the mind.

The activity of note-taking is unusual in working conferences. One member did so constantly during all the sessions. This same member had a dream which he reported to the large group. His dream was that the director of the conference had a pimple on his forehead directly above his nose and that when the pimple was pressed more and more pus came out of the pimple. It is perhaps significant that the site of this pimple is the presumed position of the 'third eye' end, on reflection, we wonder whether it represented an attack on participants' own capacity for insight which was then projected onto the consultant who also had the role of director. The notes, in this case, and the photographs in the other, replace insight. We can speculate that the model for this behaviour is that of the classical scientist regarding everything objectively, striving never to contaminate the findings with feelings, observations, and any activity that might skew the results.

Another member reported a dream in which she was having a baby which was the child of a homosexual pair. In a baM culture 'like links with like' (a phrase to which we shall return) and the only kind of birth that seems possible is a phantasised 'birth' through homosexual pairing. It is also not true homosexual pairing. We would hypothesise that the real relationship is 'me with me' and that this is projected into a homosexual pairing. In a session towards the ending of this particular large group males were linking with males, and females with females, to the extent that one woman sat on another woman's lap. Mental heterosexuality, so to speak, and appropriate interaction and relating such that a 'true baby' of insight could be born was taboo.

In an institutional event which has the primary task of studying the relationships between members in groups of their own choice and the management of the event who are the staff, we found that the membership formed three groups. In each of these groups we found that there was no internal differentiation of roles for task except that each had appointed a firm doorkeeper who kept all visitors to the group waiting outside the door of the group room. The groups were homogeneous in character. The three groups seemed to be turned inwards as though their task was to explore the interior life of the group and not explore inter-group relations. The three groups in their concentration on their interior life represented an acting-out of baM at an organizational level. Another way in which baM was acted out was when one member formed a group of his own of himself.

The management of the institutional event found that the three groups had formed themselves consciously as sociometric chains. While it is an interesting way of forming groups it avoids the pain of personal selection and rejection. It is apparently scientific and objective. The sole criterion is liking. Individuals ask others whom they *like* to join them. and so on. The nature of the group so formed was that they were 'linked by liking'.

The management, at one stage, had the working hypothesis that the model of learning being acted-out was one of cohesion through adhesion, with like attracting like. This was seen as being akin to the pseudopodial process. This metaphor we take from zoology. A pseudopod refers to, for example, certain protozoa which form protrusions of any part of the protoplasm and so develop temporary processes for locomotion, for the purposes of grasping and attaching, or for the ingestion of food. This pseudopodial process is physical as, for instance, in certain mosses which develop a pedicel or footstalk in order to elongate. In baM culture it is a psychological way of relating.

Learning as a baM activity also seems to be a secretive process. What is learned by one person cannot be shared. The learning is for oneself alone. If any learning was to be shared the phantasy appears to be that it will be stolen, taken away from one and possibly be added to by another with the result that the uniqueness of the individual learning is destroyed. Even worse, if one accepts thought or learning from another one might have to express one's gratitude. Learning thus has to be acquired anonymously, preferably in as comfortable a fashion as possible with the minimum of psychological disturbance. This means that differences have to be avoided because these might lead to conflict. It seems better to be in a state of *anomie*, just not understanding, than having to engage in either cooperative or connictual relations.

This illustrates a major problem when the activities of baM are predominant in a group. There cannot be a joining with others to create something new, which is not simply an extension of or owned by oneself. This is why we suggest that the model of learning in such a culture is pseudopodial because learning is not true reaching out and internalising, but a temporary and opportunistic 'attaching to something that is supposedly like oneself.

BaM represents an attack on the possibility of learning from relating to others. There is a difficulty just in 'taking in' and all interpretations are experienced as persecutory due to the consultant's failure to acknowledge the 'plumage' of the members, that is to say their 'marvellous Meness'. This is because participants are behaving as if the group is not relevant and can never be used for their mutual advantage. In one sense baM can be regarded as an unconscious attack on any idea or person which could give dependability

and be a resource for learning. This is because of the fear of basic assumption dependency. A baM group becomes a world of self-contained, autodidacts selecting what they want to know from whom they choose.

The group, of course, loses vitality, as it has an air of futility, because the taking up of role for the purposes of the work of the group is seen as *depriving* others and, of course oneself. Hence, the development of 'creative apperception' (Winnicott, 1971, p. 65) within the individual, the group and the enterprise are precluded for the preoccupation is with the 'me' in its selfish state. The 'me' is starving and deprived, to be sure, but the unconscious assumption is that it will likely be fed only by its own self-reliant efforts.

When baM is the dominant basic assumption there can be no exploration of authority. We have noticed (in our various roles as directors of conferences and as consultants to events) an increasing resistance within member groups to differentiate roles, and thereby authority, in order to work at primary task. Notions that authority may be exercised differentially within a group and that this may help to press the task forward are often submerged in a rhetoric of pseudodemocratic egalitarianism which can be viewed as one collective manifestation of baM.

The resistance to testing out boundaries and the limits of authority in a baM culture takes the form of withdrawal and passive aggression. Speaking one's thoughts takes place outside the stated events during breaks for coffee and meals. Within the events the consultants may be induced into the illusion that the membership is present simply because their bodies are physically present. It would be more true to say that there is a 'mental absence' within the group and that the members have taken up a spectator role, i.e., the photographer. When members of a group are united in unconscious baM they are acting to deprive the consultants of material to work on. There is no sense of a mutually interdependent, symbiotic relationship. Consultants may be trapped into feeling that they have to fill the gap with more and more working hypotheses about flight (baF) which serve only to unite further the group in baM and passive aggression. The group 'starves' the consultant while the consultant tries to 'feed' the group which is not there to be fed (cf. *Broken Mirrors*). It all smacks of the parasitic relationship which Bion identified (Bion, 1970, p. 95). One feels one is in a pseudogroup.

Consequently, in a baM culture members may believe that they are communicating when in fact they are not. One member reported to one consultant after her small group had ended that she had felt 'quite emotional' during the small group and that this must have been obvious to the consultant. He was astonished as she had appeared within the group to be the very opposite. This led him to think that in baM there is an unconscious belief that if something is going on in 'me' others will know that it is happening without it having to be communicated.

Not surprisingly when baM is dominant there is little capacity for gratitude. There is no true interaction so there can be no 'baby' to symbolize learning, which if felt to have been gained has been so thorough a process similar to leeching, i.e., similar to percolating. In a Meness culture there is no learning from history, from authority figures or role models in the past, from one's own experience or that of others. Psychic pain is minimised; one quotes from others but has forgotten the source; learning is instantaneous. Metaphorically

it passes, as used to be said about some kinds of teaching, from the notebook of one to another without passing through the minds of either.

When discussing the feasibility of baM with Lawrence, Jonah Rosenfeld described his experiences in a German working conference in which he had taken part as a consultant. He said that he had never heard so many examples of cruelty recounted by members. One woman told of how as a child the meal consisted of boiled eggs. Each was set in an egg cup. When she opened hers she found an embryonic chicken which she was made to eat. A man told of how as a fouryearold he had been at the seaside with his parents. While they sat on the beach he had ventured into the water, got out of his depth and was drowning when a man came and rescued him. The man deposited him on the beach. The rescuer did not tell the parents and neither did the boy. He had never spoken about the incident until being in a group with Rosenfeld.

Rosenfeld's observation was about the cruelty of parents to their children that was sometimes witting, more often not. We speculated why he had been given this information. We thought it was because he was a Jew and an Israeli citizen, and that the German members were describing their experiences of cruelty to someone whose religious and cultural group had suffered because of the Nazi regime. But the more Rosenfeld reflected on the evidence the more he felt that he was being given evidence of how people's experiences had made them preoccupied with their individual survival and the necessity to hold on to the Meness of the 'I'. The 'I' could be violated abominably but not the 'me', the essential core identity of the self.

A supplementary working hypothesis for the incidence of baM is that this propensity for Meness is based on a split; the classical split between the *imago* of the good mother and the bad mother. The bad mother is splitoff into society, or rather projected into it, and badness is located in society, or any of its intermediate institutions such as work, the government, the economic market. External objects can then be blamed for the individual's unhappiness. Sadism comes into it because of this construction of a failed environment. A probable, logical sequence of thinking is: 'You have owed me; you have failed me; you will therefore pay for it'. By such thinking ruthlessness and selfishness become justified.

Any social figuration such as the group, society, thus comes to represent the damaged and damaging object. The group is construed as an antagonistic object because it is deemed to be phobic. Consequently, the 'me' who feels impotent and vulnerable, with real anxieties about obliteration, takes up a counterdependent position to the group which is succeeded by a denial of its very existence; only 'me' has reality. This seems to be of the essence of baM.

Part of the experience of being in baM is of being present in a room with a set of other people who must never form a group because it is by unconscious definition a nongroup; must never achieve a language that can make use of 'we'. It is to be in a scientific posture of observing an object. The object is always potentially threatening and damaging. It can never carry hope. It is disappointing and always frustrating. In such a situation there is no space for concern for the mood is fatalistic-whatever happens, happens! All that one can do in such a situation is survive by keeping the goodness in and the dirty, messy, contaminating, reality of the other out. There is no place for emotions because the concern

of the participants is that feelings be notexperienced and that they be notexpressed. Hence, life in a baM culture is ordered, calm, polite, and androgynous.

When baM is salient and activating the life of the group, the consultant to the group is made to feel that he or she has to work harder and harder giving working hypotheses, and that each interpretation has to be better than the last one. The members seem to have retreated into apathy and the consultant feels pressure to rescue, or save, the group from its arid, futile life. The consultant is made to feel, 'If only I could make the right interpretation to unlock the stalemate'. The consultant may continue to give working hypotheses which may to him or her seem 'good enough'; in fact they may be pertinent, but they have no effect. In actuality the interpretations are likely to be about flight (baF) which is what the behaviour feels like because the flight is from the reality of the group as a group. Such interpretations may very possibly have a reverse negative effect in that the group solidifies increasingly into withdrawal and Meness. As a consultant one is made to feel that one is not making contact with any members of the group; one is isolated, alienated. In a real sense the consultant is either not present for the members in a culture of baM, or felt to be a threat to individual survival, i.e., the preservation of Meness. (Survival we can understand to be the *meta* ba.) This consultant experience is a reflection of the fact that members are not psychically, politically, or spiritually present for each other.

We have been noting in recent years the dangers of a baM culture in working conferences. When we were not sure about our thinking we could only describe our experiences in terms of dissociation, or of *anomie*, or of alienation, or of schizoid phenomena. Now we are more certain. We see that there is a tendency for some consultants and directors to act in such a way that they occupy space and become a central object of concern and admiration, needing to be nurtured constantly by other staff and by members of the conference. This, at its simplest, is the wish of some staff to be star performers; but we can now suggest that they are acting in a baM mode.

Bain has used the term 'space invader' to refer to the kind of teaching situation where the teacher invades the space of the child, rather than allowing the child to learn and to work out for themselves what he or she can do (Bain, Long, and Ross, 1992). This concept applies also to the inappropriate use of director or consultant's Meness in relationship to the primary task of conference events.

When this mental relationship of baM exists between group and consultant the chances are that preemptive interpretations (Lawrence, 1985a) come to the fore. These are interpretations that cut off further exploration of reality because they are presented as a definitive statement, a final assessment or summary, an indubitable psychological fact; and spoken sometimes quite punitively. Consequently, there is no space, because it is now invaded, for what can be called mutative interpretive work, i.e., the offering of working hypotheses that themselves can be changed and which will initiate transformations in the culture of the group. Another way of putting this is to say that preemptive interpretations are disguised 'attacks on linking'. What it also means is that there is no potential for group reverie which is so critical for participants if they are to be able to make themselves available for thought and to develop thinking.

Bain reports that during a followup meeting to a Working Conference in Perth, Australia, a member said to him, 'It's marvellous you're able to be here!' while Bain thought that

there might be a wish of this exmember to be dependent on him it might be more that there was a need to flatter the director's marvellous 'Meness' - 'the plume he wears so well'.

Here, it is worth drawing a parallel with psychoanalytic practice. Neville Symington in an essay on Sandor Ferenczi says that repeatedly Ferenczi emphasised the need for the analyst to be free of narcissism. If in the context of groups the consultant is caught up in his or her Meness they feed into and off the baM culture. The group cannot be related to in an adaptive way. 'We all know that in a love relationship there has to be a continual process of adaptation, because without it there can only be selflove or narcissism' (Symington, 1986, p. 195).

Participants can be 'driven into Meness', as Jon Stokes of the Tavistock Clinic suggested during a discussion of the evidence for and against baM. This telling phrase captures not only our experiences of groups but also increasingly our experience of living in contemporary societies when we consult to industrial, educational, and church organizations. What Stokes's phrase signposts is the cultures which we have cocreated in our contemporary, industrialised societies that cause people to behave as they do which, in turn, creates the culture that reinforces their behaviour. In Bion's terms, the culture of the group is such that the individual's valency - that 'spontaneous, unconscious function of the gregarious quality in the personality' (Bion, 1961, p. 170) for baM is mobilised.

## **EVIDENCE FROM SOCIETIES**

It begins to be evident that we are living in societies which increasingly reward Meness behaviour. The 'yuppies' of the Thatcher years are a case in point. Bain notes this rewarding of Meness behaviour in relation to the career concerns of public servants in Australia. For many in the public service there has been a loss of a sense of task and a consequent loss of organizational purpose and structure which leads to destructive greed and envy. The losses experienced have eroded the idea of 'I' as a system relating to others; all that matters is how these changes have affected 'me'. This fosters a culture of baM. There are, then, limited psychic, political, or spiritual bases for developing social concern. Therefore, the main preoccupation of civil servants becomes that of advancing their personal careers, and less attention is paid to public policies which they might shape and for which they might take responsibility and authority.

The more that the individual is driven into Meness the more selfish individuals become for this is the only way that they can survive in the social world. We note other instances of survival behaviour in our societies. For example, there is an increase in the bullying that takes place in offices which Andrea Adams and Neil Crawford describe in their book *Bullying at Work* (1992). The victim is driven to helplessness and despair, impotence, murderous feelings, and has fantasies of killing the bully who can be a headmaster, a senior manager, a head of department. The bully will have had a childhood of relationships with abusing authority figures. His or her history will be one characterised by depression, anger, and violence. He or she recreates these experiences when in positions of power because the bully is the only *imago* of authority he or she can elicit from his or her inner world. The bully's selfdefinition of Meness is such that he or she can have no conception of ruth for other persons who are objects to be manipulated.

For some time Lawrence has been referring, halfjokingly, to the 'PostThatcher Sadism Syndrome' (PTSS) in Britain. This arises from the Thatcher government and its successors preoccupation with efficiency and value for money. While this preoccupation is supportable, what is not is the way in which the policies that ensue are implemented. For example, there is a reorganisation in a hospital. People are invited to apply for the jobs which they may have been executing for a number of years without complaint from their senior management, their colleagues, and patients. They are interviewed and rejected. One aspect of this is that one set of people (managers and consultants) determines criteria which selects and rejects others in the system. More precisely, as we understand the matter, use is made of doctrines of Quality Assurance and the Patient's Charter to implement policies with, what is experienced as a vicious judgementalism.

We see another version of this Meness also in the ruthless, opportunistic behaviour of some business managers. The Guinness scandal would be a case in point. The most recent case in Britain is the 'dirty tricks' campaign of British Airways in relation to Virgin Airways. British Airways wish to succeed caused them to think only of themselves and how they could win supremacy in their domain. Here we can speculate that there was an oscillation between baF and baM. One distinguishing feature of baM is that the enemy becomes an object which has to be annihilated, not just conquered, by any means. There is, we think, a psychopathic element present in baM which is much stronger than in baF; a total absence of conscience. Ethics and morality are merely words. If British Airways had been successful one assumes that the management would have celebrated with no thought for the wrecking of a competitor who might provide a better service for the consumer.

The first inklings of baM came from the experience of working with religious (nuns and priests) on a series of actionresearch projects 20 years after Vatican II. During these projects Lawrence had the first glimpses of the phenomenon we now call baM. The key factor in all these actionresearch projects was that the majority of the known structures of the religious life had been removed because of Vatican II. At the time, Lawrence was preoccupied with the existential crisis that religious were in and wrote that they were experiencing the loss of a social world which had been ordered, regular, and had a purpose. While this loss was a release for some because it brought freedom-as expressed in liberation theology, for instance-for a great many it was causing feelings of grief and mourning. We can argue against the quality of religious life before Vatican II and give evidence to show that it had many disadvantages in terms of the human development of religious because the emphasis was on baD. That is secondary to our main point which is that, whatever its quality, the then structures of religious life provided a container into which uncertainty could be projected and certitude received back, or introjected. With the erosion of these structures individuals were driven back into themselves, within their own personal boundaries, as the only sure anchor in a world of uncertainty (Lawrence, 1985b). With hindsight it can be interpreted that religious were thrown into baM as a mode of survival.

As time has passed one can see that this baM experience became for some a necessary, temporary, basic assumption for it has allowed many nuns and priests to come to redefine the religious life as in, for example, their taking of the 'option for the poor'. This has enabled them to redefine their apostolates and change their lifestyle accordingly. So they have been able to reaffirm themselves in the new versions of the religious life which are now more orientated to revelation through the processes of interpreting the Word in the

light of the changing circumstances in the environment. There is, then, a sophisticated use of baM which can lead to a redefinition of Work and new activities to further that work.

## **SOME SOPHISTICATED USES OF BA MENESE FOR WORK**

Like all the other basic assumptions baM can have its temporary uses for the ultimate furtherance of W. In the same way, for instance, that baO can be a transitional state that leads into transcendent experience so can baM be of value for exploring realities. There is a necessity for all of us to withdraw deeply into ourselves, to plumb our own inner worlds in order that we can reengage with the external environment. Sometimes this is called regression in the service of the ego. There is a necessity that periodically we assess the nature of our own feelings in order to disentangle what we may feel is being introjected into us and what we may be projecting. Although we have difficulty in ever identifying them with any certainty we try to isolate what may be our countertransference feelings in order to find out what the transference feelings may be in whatever human context we are participating

There is this work to find within ourselves what could be called 'the moment' which is the capacity to arrive at a clarity of insight which cannot be avoided or gainsaid because it is as near truth as can be. That, of course, we are struggling with lies is not to be denied. BaM can be the temporary mental space we need to have in order to be out of the world to mentally and spiritually recuperate so that we can reexplore external realities without memory, desire, or the wish that they be other than they are.

There is a sense in which baM can be viewed as a dependency on oneself and one's own resources in order to have a basis of dependability to participate in and hearken to the realities of the environment. It can be a necessary withdrawal into the self to be able to make oneself available for thoughts and thinking and to be able to be attentive to external reality BaM can become an introspective activity which, for example, is difficult to achieve in a baF/F culture

Bion makes reference to Freud's idea that particular specialized work groups make use of the activities of particular basic assumptions. Bion goes on to say that the Church or an Army has to hold on to basic assumption mentality *and* work group activity at one and the same time. Just as a Church is prone to interference from baD and baO activity so is the Army from baF/F phenomena. Bion goes on to suggest that these ba groups are budded off by the main Work group of which they form a part. The Work group's purpose is 'the translation of thoughts and feelings into behaviour which is adapted to reality' (Bion, 1961, p. 157). Here we are puzzling out the relationship between baM activity and Work group activity recognising that 'basic assumption mentality does not lend itself into action' (Ibid., p. 157). Tentatively, we are suggesting that baM activity is part of the necessary experience an individual has to have as a self with a boundary in order to engage in terms of Work with whatever is the reality of the Other; be that other persons, the group as other, or the environment. We can see this operating in any group. One example is in a religious retreat where baO and baM activities have to be budded off into specialised groups; otherwise the overarching W of a religious retreat would be destroyed. We see baM operating in a consultation to a business enterprise which is having to reorganise its resources for its future in an uncertain market environment. BaM activity, again, has to be budded off into subgroupings so that the human resources of the enterprise can be



rediscovered in much the terms which have been used above. The W of the consultation which is to engage with changing realities is thus furthered.

## **HOMO CLAUSUS VERSUS HOMINES APERTI; HOMO INDIVIDUALIS; AUTONOMOUS MAN**

BaM has social and intellectual roots, we are hypothesising, which have come to justify this particular psychic position. Our concern is to find cultural explanations for baM rather than to reduce everything to narcissism. The intellectual roots lie in our immediate experiences of contemporary societies as we have tried to indicate. There are, however, more profound reasons that are part of the emergent fabric of twentieth century societies. Since Plato through Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Hume, Kant, Husserl, and Popper there has been an endless circular argument about the individual and society; about the individual as the subject of knowledge and how that individual gains knowledge of the objects in the external environment. This solipsistic viewpoint carries the image of the individual being inside a closed container looking at the world of other individuals, each with minds, guessing at what is inside the others' sealed minds. Norbert Elias calls this conception *homo clausus*. This conception of the isolated ego, of what he calls 'weless I's' (Elias, 1987, p. 266), he rejects and for his own conceptual base proposes *homines aperti* (open-people) who are linked together in various modalities and in varying degrees.

Open people recognize that their knowledge does not begin with them as individuals but that individuals learn from their historically determined environmental contexts through the ordinary processes of maturation and socialization. As Stephen Mennel (1992) points out, Elias in *The Civilizing Process* (1987) analyses the relationship between changes in the structure of human relations in societies with the concomitant changes in personality structure as part of a societal process. The image of *homo clausus*, however, is a persistent one because it accords with selfexperience and has existed since Renaissance times.

The philosophers' *homo clausus* is just an externalization of this mode of selfexperience: the sealed container in which we sense ourselves is sealed with the iron bands of the civilized selfcontrols forged in a longterm process. (Mennel, 1992, p. 193)

The sealed container has been an organising theme of twentiethcentury literature. Walt Whitman identified this as 'the principle of individuality, the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself-identity-personalism' (quoted in Tanner, 1976, p. 19). This has been the century of the celebration of personal selfactualization because it is believed that only the individual can work out his or her destiny in isolation. That isolation produces its own existential pain. Indeed, the theatre of the absurd explores one aspect of this anguish which is the inability to communicate.

A gloss on this metaphor of the sealed container has been the twentiethcentury intellectuals' dismissal of the masses. John Carey suggests:

that the principle around which modernist literature and culture fashioned themselves was the exclusion of the masses, the defeat of their power, the removal of their literacy, the denial of their humanity. What this intellectual effort failed to acknowledge was that the masses do not exist. The mass, that is to say, is a metaphor for the unknowable and invisible. We cannot see the mass. Crowds can be seen, but the mass is the crowd in its metaphysical aspect-the sum of all possible crowds-and that can take on conceptual form only as a metaphor. The metaphor of the mass serves the purpose of individual self-assertion because it turns people into a conglomerate. It denies them the individuality which we ascribe to ourselves and to people we know. (Carey, 1992, p. 21)

The intellectual is in the sealed container and so can assert his individuality because whatever is outside is a conglomerate. This echoes the psychic and nonpolitical and non-spiritual position of the participant in baM. The group of other people is an undifferentiated mass in which people have no individuality and are not worth knowing. There is an element of contempt present in baM which is not so evident in other ba groups.

The paradox is, however, that while this has been the century of *homo clausus* it has also been the century of communication. Human relations in contemporary societies are importantly influenced by the plenitude of the mass media. This abundance of information can generate anxiety because the television viewer of, say, the Gulf War or events in the former Yugoslavia is left with a feeling of impotence. At the same time, the viewers have to make up their minds about the rights and wrongs, the truth or falsehood, of the information they receive which is often complex and contradictory. Because we are living through the collapse of dogma and received belief and, as Umberto Eco has identified, a multiplication of ideologies, the individual is pressed into becoming an autonomous man-*homo individualis* (Teglen. 1992, p. 159).

While this has many positive advantages in that the individual who can assimilate the information which is available can have an unprecedented mental richness, questions arise as to what the nature of social life will be in the future. We feel that this trend points to the emphasising of the 'I' and the 'me' to the exclusion of the 'we' and the 'us'. There are, it appears, a number of factors which increase the risk of baM phenomena in societies that, we have to remind ourselves, is truly psychotic.

A related reason for the emergence of baM phenomena lies in our beliefs as to how we gain insight and knowledge. Simply stated, the engagement in baM, as we have hinted, may be a throwback to a scientific methodology that we associate with Newtonian science. The methodology of Tavistock Working Conferences celebrate different ways of coming to know what reality might be. The emphasis in conferences is on participation, paying attention, and hearkening which involves the participant as a whole person. This methodology which sounds vague, nearmystical, obscure, and is downright subjective may be a contributory factor in driving people into Meness which is the posture of the nonparticipating, objective observer, regarding the group as a conglomerate, a mass.

Bion's hypotheses derive from a psychoanalytic knowing of groups. This has enabled us to see connections between basic assumption behaviour and the interpretation of what reality might be. Basic assumption behaviour is psychotic, albeit temporarily. The more permanent it becomes, however, the more that mature, healthy individuals capable of social contribution, because they have a capacity for rush, are swamped in the basic

assumption cultures of groups, organizations, or society. Donald Winnicott was alive to this over 40 years ago when he showed how fragile democracy is as an achievement because it is always struggling against the psychotic which may become the majority force in a society at any time (Winnicott, 1950). The more that we can identify through experience and come to know basic assumption behaviour, the greater our chances of interpreting the realities in which we live and transforming them so that human beings can become more mature through the quality of their contact with realities. Notwithstanding the sophisticated uses of baM, the major consequence of baM behaviour becoming salient and perseverative is that possible explorations of W and ba cultures are prevented and their potential experience rendered unattainable.

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In social psychology, shattered assumptions theory proposes that experiencing traumatic events can change how victims and survivors view themselves and the world. Specifically, the theory " developed by Ronnie Janoff-Bulman in 1992 " concerns the effect that negative events have on three inherent assumptions: overall benevolence of the world, meaningfulness of the world, and self worth. These fundamental beliefs are the bedrock of our conceptual system and are the assumptions we are least aware of and