

## **Homogeneity of the protomind**

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### **Abstract**

Considering the homogeneous nature of the group (traumatized war veterans at Northfield hospital) that first led Bion to study the group function and the contribution of the social and primitive mind to cognitive processes and psychic evolution, the contribution first examines the etymological and historic notion of homogeneity, going on to compare it with the main psychoanalytic models that have used it in their theoretical treatment as an element significant to the psychic mechanism; and, finally, this dimension (of indistinction) is observed as a function that contains its own reciprocal (the fluctuating impulse toward individuation) and that will tend to behave in psychoanalysis as a "probe" (Bion, 1970) by means of which exploration of the unknown object, knowledge of the object and the birth of the unknown object that explores and is explored all take place in unison.

**Key-words:** homogeneity, protomind, indistinction, social mind.

### **Bion's experience at Northfield in a homogeneous ward**

Bion's studies on the group as a single organism, which he described as a body contained within its own skin and endowed with its own organs and thinking, processing mind, began in the presence of a "homogeneous" group at Northfield Hospital where he and Foulkes worked as British Army psychiatrists reorganizing a ward for the treatment of military personnel afflicted with war-related neurotic disorders.

One might wonder what, in the end, Bion's considerations and thoughts on this situation were, and whether the social reorganization and orientation of a ward for patients with the same major condition—the psychological wound of having had to retreat from the front, and the resulting dishonour they suffered—may have held some specific importance for him.

Some of his patients' shared features—military discipline, propensity to fight and win, terror of the enemy and the anxiety associated with fulfilling the mandate of their society, the ability to form a compact military force to combat a powerful and evil enemy, along with the collective aim of liberating their nation from threatened oppression (Nazism) and the hope that this might regenerate the freedom to cultivate relationships—will surely have helped Bion in the formulation of many of his assessments. His reflections pivoted on the hypothesis that those conditions had a deep and unifying psychic resonance that could be identified and re-elaborated if those conditions were recreated, with a view to achieving the common goal of reorganizing the ward and the essential focus of group treatment (even though, as

Bion indicates in his *Experiences*, despite the overriding expectations of the group entrusted to his care he rejected the idea of being the provider of a cure).

The question, therefore, is whether considering a group on the basis of what it shares superficially, in order to then consider it in relation to what unites it far beneath the surface, could help the analyst to identify the principal elements in the treatment and analysis of that group.

Within the context of the notion of homogeneity and the homogeneous mind, perhaps the matter is not only one of basic assumptions: the theoretical background created by Bion for representing and categorizing those psychosomatic functions that better correspond with the primitive levels of activation that the primordial and social mind stimulates in the presence of the group. It is also, in general, a matter of considering how, in the presence of homogeneous groups (for apparent, transitory, superficial, or instead profound, homogeneity see Marinelli in *Gruppi Omogenei*, 2004), the phenomenological links between the developmental stages through which the group passes (ritual, myth and so forth) are more easily discernable when placed in constant relation with the development of more deep-seated shared content: the feelings, images, memories and thoughts with which that development is associated.

Presumably, by foregrounding this element each group could be identified as having a sub-series of basic assumptions, whose content and function are pertinent to the main basic assumptions but which would tend to introduce specific and preferential positions and elements. The function of these repeated and specialized elements would be to restore identity and continuity to the group, with a view to defining and conserving the framework of that which risks being abandoned in favour of developmental change. The group's inevitable liberation from its baggage of identity would indeed make the change (from this homogeneous unity) seem like a serious loss, a terrifying threat-but a, nevertheless, desired one.

### **The notion of homogeneity**

Departing from this field of research, it would be useful to re-examine the notion of homogeneity from three different points of view:

- a) The first of these is based on nomenclature and etymology and takes into account the current definition of the term and its specific and etymological definition viewed in relation to its use in various contexts.
- b) The second is the historical point of view drawn from the literature on homogeneity, the undifferentiated element of the mind, and the study of how it functions. This point of view examines Freud's idea of the exploration of the individual's unconscious relationship with the unconscious "homogeneous mass" of the social group, and the subsequent transformation of that idea by Bion and Foulkes.
- c) The third point of view concerns verticality, i.e. the depth of the psychological probe as it explores the unconscious at various levels of the intricate system of the primordial mind.

This last point of view involves Bion's description of psychoanalysis, not as a container, but as a dynamic probe exploring the unconscious—a probe that is regenerated, not contained.

"This is a characteristic of the mental domain: it cannot be contained within the framework of psycho-analytic theory. Is this a sign of defective theory, or a sign that psycho-analysts do not understand that psycho-analysis cannot be contained permanently within the definitions they use? It would be a valid observation to say that psycho-analysis cannot "contain" the mental domain because it is not a "container" but a "probe" (Bion, 1970).

"This means that the products that we use in the analytic process, from those closer to the experience (line C), to those more sophisticated ones (?line H), even though they have the same function of containing and conveying elements of already given knowledge (already known), should preferably be used as an instrument for probing the unknown (the not yet known)" (A. Bruni, quoted in Nanni, 2006)

Defining the homogeneity of the unconscious from this standpoint means calling into question the very definition of the unconscious and the relationship between the unconscious mind, consciousness and the alpha function. Mindful of Bion's admonition, we can reiterate here that the psychoanalytic probe launched into the space-time homogeneity of the unconscious system does not perform the function of knowing, but that of "being" a fragment of that same system. The resulting gain is a series of opportunities to generate other unconscious systems, other spaces and times, and new fragments (see the idea of dreams as producers of unconscious in Bion and others). It could thus be pointed out that the homogeneous system, understood as primordial chaos and archaic blur, is nothing more than a working hypothesis that takes into consideration a series of objective data such as an-albeit partial-knowledge of brain function and of the active relations between its differentiated and undifferentiated parts, and the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious, in order to give dynamic image and shape to the analytic enterprise.

If the unconscious is homogeneous it can have but one counterpart: non-homogeneity, i.e. the same quality reversed but whose mode of functioning is the same. But if the homogeneous unconscious is assumed to be capable of producing other possibilities by means of alpha function, it is possible then that the transformation of the homogeneous element could produce an element not homogeneous with itself, generating and separating from the undifferentiated mass not a static and objective element but a new function.

Any treatment of this theme would extend into theoretical fields that it would be impossible to thoroughly address here, and it is only suggested as an indication of the depth of the backdrop against which the homogeneous element can be defined, along with the possibility of identifying this element (homogeneity) not as an abstraction but rather as an active and definable function.

The following is a brief examination of some contexts in which the notion of homogeneity takes on various meanings: first its etymological definition and

derivation, then its traditional definition and, finally, an outline of those models referring either directly or indirectly to it within the context of psychoanalytic theory. Webster's International Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language cites homo- as a combining form with the meaning of "same; similar; equal, and is followed, among others, by terms such as homochromatic, homophonic, homogeneity, homograph, homologate, homonymy, homosexuality, homotype, homozygosis . The item homogeneous , in particular, is defined as being "1. Of the same composition or character throughout. 2. Of the same kind, nature, etc. (with another); like; similar; opposed to heterogeneous . 3. Math . Having all its terms of the same degree, as an algebraic equation."

In an extended figurative sense, a homogeneous group of persons is comprised of individuals with similar features, which could be ethnic, social, cultural, etc.: a harmonious and homogeneous class. In a more specialized and technical sense: a body or set of bodies displaying uniform chemical or physical properties.

### **History of the notion of homogeneity**

The notion of homogeneity appeared in the psychoanalytic literature when Freud, like many before him, began to feel the need to expand the one-to-one analytic model to the social group: could this model, based on the theory of the individual mind as a topical system, be extended to the relationship with a collective subject and between its individual components?

At the moment when Freud was inventing it, this form of study was a response to a series of requirements (Neri, 1995) both of an internal order, concerning the emerging body of psychoanalytic doctrine, as well as with regard to the possibility of allowing this latter to be shared by disciples and handed down as a comprehensive theoretical system open to modifications and contributions. Taken into consideration, therefore, were the conceptualizations being formulated by social psychology (stimulated by the major economic and organizational changes under way at the time), and other theories being put forth in anthropological and sociological spheres and from revolutionary discoveries in physics (Lewin, 1936).

The term "homogeneous" in these early objective studies indicates, above all, a tendency to describe the social and collective phenomenon and its workings as something corresponding to a homogeneous "mass", which is distinguished from the individual subject and its way of functioning by a lack of rational capacity; it is susceptible to emotional excitement (Freud, 1921) rapid contagion (Le Bon, 1985) and identification with a leader (Freud, *ibidem* ) who guides it and gives it cohesion (Freud, 1921).

### **The notion of homogeneity viewed in relation to the idea of matrix**

The two most significant concepts Foulkes used to describe social communication in groups-the matrix and the network-contribute, above all, to the possibility of combining a vertical dimension with a horizontal one. The matrix refurnishes the

group with content at various levels of inventive exchange and unconscious fantasy, while the network distributes them, refracts, mirrors, amplifies or restricts them to the level of relational exchanges and encounter between individual "values" (the term used by Bion).

The homogeneity of the matrix in the small analytical group is associated with the function of planning developmental stages capable of arranging differentiated processes.

The homogeneous/non-homogeneous relationship as related to the process of separation/individuation

In the field of classical psychoanalysis and the study of the individual mind, if we take the separation process as described by Margaret Mahler as the peak, the idea of homogeneity would belong to the field of elements constituting the undifferentiated biological mass in which the mother/child system originates. The system would then tend to evolve toward the various subsequent stages in which the two components gradually become differentiated, moving from reversible and undefined stages, plunged into disarray and sustained by the expectant tolerance of the evolving pair system, into others founded on stability and individuation and on a certain safe distance from the reversible systems of the unconscious. Within this framework, regression and fluctuation are necessary in order fully complete the process.

### **Homogeneity and the transitional object**

A further useful consideration on homogeneity concerns the quality of Winnicott's transitional object, which is homogeneous with neither mother nor child, containing the needs of both but belonging neither to the maternal system nor to the embryonic one of the maturing child, even though it is imposed as a created and creative third party vis-à-vis each of the two participants. The transitional object is born of the infant's defensive desire in reaction to his own impotence and fear of solitude, and is sustained by the mother who identifies it, or dreams it or intuits it, as a vehicle conveying her into the obscure world of her child (and her own, through regressive identification) through mediation. This mediation is facilitated by the shared desire to deepen the experience of the bond and of participation, which is made more complex (and is simplified) in the course of differentiation. This object contains the child's incapacity to conceive what is real as entirely separate (non-homogeneous) from his immature self and is invested through his capacity to substitute the most inaccessible portion of this experience with elements of the subjective desire for creative participation. This desire for active intervention results from the elaboration of needs: the infant makes sure that the reality of his needs, and of his distance from what could really satisfy them, does not annihilate him with its total revelation and does not abandon him to an inadequate separation entirely inactive and at risk of annihilation; if the mother shares this need to alter the void deriving from dependency, she may accept the child's request to represent himself as participant-through those needs-in their satisfaction and to produce a creative illusion, as if he were the providing mother or the source itself of satisfaction.

Viewed from this perspective, the experience of being homogeneous with the moment of need becomes an element that contains the conception of the reality that precedes it, and of that which follows it, and which allows transition from the anxiety of dependence to the active management and sequential organization of depending, which also includes the experience of activity, of the possibility of recognizing one's separateness and, thus, the possibility of elaborating anxiety and the representations associated with the states of dependency and solitude.

It could be said that homogeneity or non-homogeneity is not a question of a state of being but of an evolving process, and of the active transformation of the elements that make it up. Perhaps this intermediate and creative dimension described by Winnicott resembles the possibility of creating an interval between two notions and two positions, each of which is necessary to the subject having the experience and is used to differentiate the impact of this encounter with what is different from him, with the object, with the other-and all the more so if the subject is immature and highly dependent. Winnicott even speaks about "furtive penetration" to describe how a subject's entrance into a space leads to physiological intolerance and expulsion and can therefore only take place by means of furtive, circumscribed penetrations, poised to change route and retreat. The encounter with what is continuous, contiguous, nearby, non-homogeneous is not traumatic; encounter with the non-homogeneous can only occur, after the necessary precautions have been taken, in a separate, protected area created in an illusory, but existing, space and time between two realities, each of which is ascertainable. The experience, the development, before coming to rest on the certain and stable foundation of new acquisitions, passes through a region created subjectively, which, nevertheless, contains adequate notions regarding the quality of the experience itself. The transitional object contains real environmental qualities that have been imagined and expressed indirectly and partially, and the knowledge of these qualities gradually increases as the need for the illusory interval and the postponement of a complete encounter with the object diminishes. This process is continuous and, in a certain sense, constant, even though its main core dissipates over the physiological time of immaturity and subjective vagueness.

Thus from the standpoint of the transitional object, we could say that the vague subject (or the level of vagueness of a differentiated subject), characterized by immature homogeneity, foresees non-homogeneity before encountering it and intuits its features. Above all, he has the fundamental experience of being able to make use of illusion as a form of waiting, of interval, and not as falsehood, deceit or inadequate defense, to the extent that, under conditions in which encounter with non-homogeneity tends to create rupture and trauma, he is able to avail himself of the resources and protection it offers. The interval that the "transitional" subject creates between homogeneity and non-homogeneity-between a tried-and-true representation of the self and a new and unknown one, or between a more acceptable self and an intolerable one-becomes not a space-time interval but a place of the mind, a stance, a point of view from which to elaborate: in a word, a function, capable of producing

new times and spaces for the development of experience and the development of representations of the self.

### **Homogeneous mind, protomind, system**

Bion made use of the notion of homogeneity and non-differentiation at various levels of his research and theoretical discourse; in particular, the change he introduced by extending Freud's concepts regarding the individual unconscious and the analytical pair to groups, transforming the concepts themselves while, at the same time, not rerouting them on to an alternative track. This was an encounter between homogeneous and non-homogeneous that only an ingenious mind such as Bion's was able to sustain.

In a certain sense, by transforming the concept of the group as an unthinking homogeneous mass lacking in developmental ability and dominated by the leader-father introduced by Freud in Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, Bion seems rather to connect with Freud's other seminal work Totem and Taboo, developing the idea of the Primal Horde as the primitive community that transforms its social and moral base through a collective act (the brothers kill off the father and usurp his powers) in order to found an organized and regulated co-existence.

The way in which Bion described the group's unconscious contains Freud's description and is contained within it while, at the same time, employing a new system of thought: that of the proto-mental element, of basic assumptions and of the proto-mental system in which the group's basic assumptions are rooted. Freud's unconscious also has characteristics that are included in the idea of the proto-mind. But by describing a system underlying the workings of the group, which is not in line with the idea of the mass rendered homogeneous by its mindlessness, infected by emotions and activated in a manner entirely independent of the idea of a leader, Bion also re-describes the individual unconscious within the social (not collective and archetypal) terms of systems whose orbits interact and mingle, creating fractal objects accessible from various systems and with multiple points of intersection and simultaneity.

Bion's study of the primitive mind, which began precisely with the concept of the group as a unit, not only allowed him to develop several concepts regarding the individual mind-above all, that of projective identification and of position and reciprocity of positions-which, in turn, allowed him to approach the psychotic mind using a model that both contains it and transforms it; it also helped him create a concept of the individual (unconscious) as located within a multi-dimensional system based, by means of "values", on exchanges with other systems, which are homogeneous in substance but rendered different in time and space by the alpha function.

This clinical-theoretical edifice, designed for the observation of transit and oscillation between levels of regressive and archaic homogeneity and of non-homogeneous individuation, seems, among other things, to have the particular appeal of not having been constructed with rigid supports and walls; instead it is based on a space-time

concept that reproduces at each of its stores, from the deepest cellar to loftiest roof-deck, a system in which contact with the others is built in. This aspect poses the idea of a development of psychic space and time in which complexity and simultaneity prevail, and which foregrounds a here-and-now analytic approach; not as in Freud's temporal-sequential act or Klein's linear-spatial concept of the inner world, and neither as an act associated with intra-psychic verticality as opposed to relational horizontality, but as a unique, individual act of infinite dimensions.

Bion's analytical act is linked with its subject (transformation, or being in O) by means of a function that holds both subject and object, or analyst and patient, in a state of suspension, in such a way that their reciprocal transformation can continue to regenerate itself as a process.

Despite the fact that this quality exists within the Freudian system, it can be asserted that Bion observed it and qualified it in such a way as to render it entirely specific and suitable to overcoming the problem Freud raised of the psychotic patient's incapacity to form a therapeutic relationship

### **Homogeneity in Bion's container-contained relationship**

We have looked at homogeneity in relation to the psychoanalytic probe, and observed the relationship between the two terms according to the reciprocal and dynamic function that tends to transform the relationship. We shall now consider the notion of homogeneity in relation to Bion's container-contained concept and make several preliminary observations.

It is important to imagine the container-contained configuration both as a function and as a relationship, so that if and when the transition from immobility (homogeneous) to movement (non-homogeneous) takes place, and how that happens, it can be represented. Paradoxically, a containment link between a subject and its object could develop within a given space-time continuum, according to the factors of which it is a function, without leading to the real transformation of either of the two components in the relationship or of the relationship itself, or there could be an involutorial transformation.

Let us look at some of the configuration's characteristics:

A. The container-contained function can be applied or designed at various levels of group function or of the analytic or mother-child relationship. The relationship is open to development and, therefore, to transformation into a knowledge (K) link and link to the knowledge of ultimate reality, in as much as it is in unison with (O).

B. The homogeneity of the two components of the container-contained function is a function of the relationship itself, which remains constant.

C. If one of the two components changes condition, arrangement, position or quality it spurs the other to change in relation to this mutation or else it changes in order to remain participant in the relationship and function.

D. We could hypothesize that if one of the two participants in the container-contained relationship changes to the extent that he oversteps the boundaries of the relationship

itself, then he is bound to come into contact with "catastrophic change". Indeed, the place and function occupied by this relationship will either be vacated or occupied by other functions, and the container-contained relationship previously formed and subsequently suspended will continue to seek a new space and function in which to take shape; or else a new container-contained will be formed, along with a new space in which to locate itself.

E. In this sense we could say that the homogeneity of a pair of elements belonging to the same container-contained relationship has a dynamic homeostasis and, therefore, the possibility for developmental oscillation.

F. Could it be said that there is a measure of homogeneity in every container-contained relationship, i.e. that every element, even the most developed ones of Bion's grid, is an element only because it has been imagined and is imaginable in relation to the container-contained function and to its measure of un-transformable unconscious?

G. In other words, it could be that one psychic element more developed than another contains a greater quantity and quality of oscillation and (catastrophic) change processes in relation to an initial and original homogeneity, which continues, also at higher levels of development, to be part of the system and of the function itself.

H. Homogeneity, in turn, acts as a static element, or one tending toward homeostasis, only if placed in relation to the object on its way toward change (non-homogeneity), and the object (container or contained) on its way toward change only draws developmental qualities by remaining in relation to the homeostatic thrust and to both components of the relationship.

In order to better understand the experiential aspect of the elements described we could use the example of the individual or group clinic, the social group, and an important example could be drawn from the social group to which we ourselves belong.

We could describe, for example, how the process of oscillation between a group defending itself from development through the use of basic assumptions, and a group facing true transformation, can either develop tighter defences and more lies (Bion) or developmental skills and capacities. In terms of the container-contained relationship it can be said that, in coming to grips with the developmental process, the modern/age-old society, and its technological content, is behaving like a false, rigid container that tends to place itself as a substitute for the real experience of transformation, continually annulling it, postponing it or altering it, in favour of the defensive creation of global, authoritarian, depersonalized and hyper-concrete systems, and of virtual ideals and rewards. This could be said for all the other instances of sexual evolution or involution, which seem to be increasingly divided between the appearance of a tendency toward relaxed morality-which is instead counter-phobic-and a profound and destructive phobic immaturity (Gaburri, 1992) associated with issues of fragile identities, emptiness and dependency, resulting in the development of violent behaviour and tendency to act. In a certain sense one could

speak of an inverted, negative, container-contained relationship (Bruni, 2002) resulting in regression and pathology and not development.

### **Notes on interpretation**

Before describing the meaning that Bion attributed to psychoanalytic interpretation, it may be helpful to consider the various qualities and functions this can generally have. Examining the various aspects of interpretation and referring also to the different technical models and theories commonly accepted in clinical practice, it can be asserted that psychoanalytic interpretation applied during the session can fulfil various functions:

- a) as a bridge, tending to foster further developments;
- b) as a form of sharing , such that, in order to go forward, the patient avails himself of the support provided by the analyst and the relationship;
- c) the transformation of an individual psychic object through the activation of a transfer, or of a psychic condition deemed preparatory to subsequent transformation;
- d) silence : in this case interpretation is wordless and expressed through sound signals that tend to underline the emotional expression in the patient's words (Soavi and Neri).

Bion always describes interpretation as transformation, in as much as it tends to move from the "K" knowledge system to the "O" system, i.e. "being" one with the ultimate reality rather than interacting with it. When the analyst's mental content and the development of his work as analytic container run simultaneously along the two coordinates of the Grid, the mental state that generates the interpretation is anchored to the system "without memory, without desire and without understanding". This mental state is associated with the alpha function and is suited to generating and encountering dreams. It seeks the values with which to connect in order to develop new elements to add to the process of transformation. Passing through this transformational dream state the concept that could be introduced or formed in order to encounter a preconception, which was unaware of being there (in the mind of the analyst or in the analytic relationship) but which is ready to be activated for encounter, does not have saturation qualities; rather it allows for a realization that contains new transformational processes. Then the system is once again set in motion.

At this point it would be interesting to imagine another grid in which the transformation of the two coordinates were, in turn, placed in relation to the transformations accomplished in the transition from the state of calm (of the analyst's mind and of the status of the analytic relationship) to the active state and to increased activity, toward development or, inversely, toward regression, interruption or the unforeseen obstacle (De Toffoli, 2000).

The fact that Bion treats interpretation as a dynamic probe allows the individual analyst to locate his mental activity and his interpreting register at any given moment

he considers advisable, without the risk of exhausting its function. Moreover, the idea of the probe evokes that tendency toward insaturation and the non-personification of, or inability to personify, the mind that employs it.

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