

## Group mentality and 'having a mind'

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### **Abstract**

As a general proposition having a mind entails being able to recognise another mind. Indeed Bion's theory of alpha-function implies that the very development of a mind at all depends in the first place on another mind. Such an 'other mind' acts as a container. Thus a mind evolves from interpersonal and group dynamics. This paper attempts to explore some consequences of these propositions for group therapy and for understanding mentalization.

**Key-words:** group mentality, attachment, meaning, inversion, alpha function.

Bion was fascinated that the experience of being in the presence of another person's mind is a difficult one. Having a mind is not easy, and his contributions add considerably to the debate about what is it to have a mind. In a late paper, he described the problem of having a mind that is aware of minds:

When two characters or personalities meet, an emotional storm is created. If they make a sufficient contact to be aware of each other, or even to be unaware of each other, an emotional state is produced by the conjunction of these two individuals, these two personalities, and the resulting disturbance is hardly likely to be something which could be regarded as necessarily an improvement on the state of affairs had they never met at all. But since they have met, and since this emotional storm has occurred, then the two parties to this storm may decide to "make the best of a bad job". What this means in analysis is this.

The analysand comes into contact with the analyst by coming to the consulting room and engaging in what he thinks is a conversation which he hopes to benefit by in some way: likewise the analyst probably expects some benefit to occur - to both parties. The analysand or the analyst says something. The curious thing about this is that it has an effect, it disturbs two people. This would also be true if nothing was said, if they remained silent... The result of remaining silent, or the result of intervening with a remark, or even saying: "Good morning" or: "Good evening", again sets up what appears to me to be an emotional storm. What that emotional storm is one does not immediately know, but the problem is, how to make the best of it; this means a capacity to turn the circumstance - as I choose to call it for the moment - to good account. (Bion 1979, pp. 1-2).

This encounter is often termed 'attachment' or 'bonding', adapted from Bowlby's psychoanalytic ethology. But those are quiet terms, and it seems to me Bion is describing something far from quiet - a storm, in fact. A mind not only craves an attachment to another mind but, having found one, is then disturbed by an emotional

storm<sup>1</sup>. I think Bion is neutral about whether that is a storm of loving or of hating - or what the actual emotional tone is. But, his point is that an encounter is both craved and it is also resisted as a disturbance. It is 'minded'. And he attempted to dissect out that process of minding.

However, to not mind something interested Bion, too - how somebody manages not to do anything with their mind, both in the mindlessness of groups, and in the rubble of a destroyed mind of the schizophrenic. Because of the resistance to being 'stormed' by others, people take protective action. Psychotic patients can abolish their minds altogether rather than suffer those emotional storms. Those with personality disorders tend to exploit this kind of meeting by deliberately engaging with other minds to create such storms for specific purposes<sup>2</sup>. And those of us somewhat less disturbed manage to numb our minds in certain ways, and live in a psychic storm-shelter as it were, constructed of the familiar defense mechanisms, and live in socially prescribed rituals.

Psychoanalytic work with schizophrenic patients, in particular goes to the heart of the question, what is a mind, since somehow schizophrenics seemed to lack a proper one. It is not that they have conflicts in their mind, as do neurotic patients, they seem instead to have a mind that fails to operate as a mind (Bion 1957). In this work, Bion, at his most creative during the 1950s, decided that the deficits in mental functioning can point the way to defining the essential function of 'having a mind'.

## Meaning

The variety of different responses to the emotional storm of encounter, leave us with the question of what constitutes ordinary ways of dealing with such disturbances. In other words what is involved in living within that perpetual storm, and how can one flourish there - rather than escape from it. Bion's answer was characteristically provocative. He described the ordinary process as 'alpha function'. He offered this as an empty term, one which further work would fill with further meaning. It is a supposed mental process which creates an individual mind out of this experience of encounter. He asked of us, his readers and successors, the task to fill in his empty term.

Bion's own work has led to what is now loosely called 'containment'. Alpha-function is the transformation of the storm into material that can be used for thinking, analogous to the metabolism of the body's digestive system. He referred to those

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<sup>1</sup> By making these storms of feelings central to the working, and even existence of the mind, I am resorting to what I believe to be a fundamental psychoanalytic premise. However, in the field of experimental psychology too there is a similar position which makes 'feelings be the primitives of consciousness. [T]he idea that human consciousness depends on feelings helps us confront the problem of creating conscious artefacts' (Damasio 2000 p. 314).

<sup>2</sup> Severe personality disorders, pre-occupied as they are with abuse, can employ their sensitivity to such storms of encounter in order to express something of their terror of intrusions, violation and abuse, into others.

products of alpha-function as the 'furniture of dreams'<sup>3</sup> which, arising from the conversion of raw experience of encountering another mind, are used to create structures we know as dreams, and of which we then have a further experience. The conversion of raw experience into dream-like creations is complex, and I will only take up one element that is central to how I understand Bion. As that conversion process takes the raw experience and creates thoughts, it creates a new quality. It is a quality which dream symbols have as their essence - that quality is 'meaning'.

I suggest that meaning is the inherent quality of the thoughts which our minds work upon; and without meaning such thoughts would be thoughts; and in some cases (psychotic people) the mind does not have meaningful objects with which to think. Thus, the human mind must deal in meanings, that is to say a 'substance' or a category which is not just information, as we might say of a computer. It is a specific experience we know as the quality of meaningfulness. A mind may register an event, but so can a computer, which creates a display on its screen. But a whole lot more happens in a mind than in a computer. What is registered in that mind acquires a collateral quality - the felt quality of something being meaningful.

This is the subjective 'addition' to the more mechanical recognition, and subjective qualities are described as 'qualia'<sup>4</sup>. Whatever the ontological nature of qualia, that experience in which we say to ourselves 'that means something to me' is no doubt wired into the brain; it is something which then attaches to various experiences, memories and phantasies. The world of qualia is akin to the Kleinian notion of unconscious phantasy. An experience of a particular other person can have all kinds of associations, which derive from the accumulation of past experiences and memories of them; mother at the meal table may arouse very different meanings from mother in typing at the keyboard of her computer, or mother in the bath. Various qualia accrue to registering the idea of mother, depending on all sorts of conditions. But generically qualia are what we call a meaningfulness.

To see something which looks blue, say the mug on my desk, I recognize the colour (the shape and purpose of the mug, too), and this is normally called the secondary characteristic, the subjective experience of blue. But I also have a sense in that subjectivity that blueness signifies something to me - it has meaning. For instance when Heisenberg was asked to comment on the mathematical properties of space, he is said to have replied 'Space is blue and birds fly through it'; and he thus indicated that even a physicist finds powerful personal meanings in what he deals with.

In essence, 'to mind something' equates with 'meaning something to me'. In this view, it is the unique property of minds to give a meaning to experiences, and it produces them in the processing of those storms which mental interaction creates. Thus to have

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<sup>3</sup> Formally, he referred to the raw material, upon which alpha-function works, i.e. the storm, as 'beta-particles', and the products of alpha-function as 'alpha-particles', which are the elements with which the mind can begin to work, as in dreams.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the problems of such non-objective subjective additions, see Levine 1995.

a mind, implies dealing in meanings - not information. Nor does it deal in more material substances, as does the body, on which of course a mind must also depend. But despite depending on the body functioning with material substance, the mind functions (or alpha-functions) with meaning<sup>5</sup>.

*Representations:* This suggests a further aspect of the conversion of raw experience to thinkable objects. The combination of registering an experience with and the special quality of meaningfulness creates an object of thought, and this is represented in a mind. To simple recognition is added meaning, and this combination produces what I believe we would call a 'representation'. In the immaterial world of the mind, a 'representation' has a felt existence, a thing that feels tangible and manipulable. Representation is not just a passive process. It indicates that something has been 'minded', and that goes beyond mechanical computing.

*Having a mind:* At the same time, there is another fall-out of alpha-function. This third component, to add to registering and meaningfulness, is the sense of having a 'place' where representations reside - and can be further manipulated, processed or transformed - with subsequent further meaningfulness, in the creation of new meanings. I suggest that this additional aspect of alpha-function, is the sense of 'having a mind'. Thus Bion's transformation process (alpha-function) in creating a representation also creates the sense of a mind in which the products of the encounter exist. For Bion thoughts require a thinker, that is to say, a mind, a place where thinking can happen to thoughts. The experience of discovering a meaning, is linked to, or the other side of the coin to, having a mind. Both arise together<sup>6</sup>. The space and time co-ordinates where that thinking occurs is then identified with a specific material place - the body on which the mind depends. A lot seems to explode into existence with alpha-function - recognition, meaning representations, a thinking mind; and even one might say the basis of a personal identity, a self which is irrevocably linked to that space (mental) and location (bodily).

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<sup>5</sup> I am here adapting Bion who described the food of the mind as 'truth' - in my account it is meaning.

<sup>6</sup> It seems important to distinguish 'representations', which can be restricted to these 'things' in the mind, from symbols. Symbols are clearly related to representations. They are, perhaps external 'representations'. But they are more than representations - symbols are the conversion of representations into something that is communicable to other minds. There is a difference. Symbols are created as a result of some activity worked up representations - symbols are representations put in the form that can be externally recognized. The term symbol-formation is used, and it has something to do with Freud's notion of dream-work - that work that has to be done on the dream itself to communicate it to the analyst. It is put into words, it is converted into a formal narrative as far as possible - secondary process gets going on it. Thus symbols have three components: the real thing, the internal representation and the symbol that gives expression to the internal. This is roughly in line with Segal's formulation which she takes from Morris (1938): I find it helpful following C. Morris (1938), to consider symbolizing as a three-term relation, i.e. a relation between the thing symbolized, the thing functioning as a symbol and a person for whom the one represents the other. In psychological terms, symbolism would be a relation between ego, the object, and the symbol (Segal 1957, p. 161).

*Reversal of alpha-function*: I suggest I have not distorted Bion too much in elaborating his views in this way. His aim initially was to find the contrast with what happened in a schizophrenic where mind, meaning and identity all seem to be corrupted. He started his investigation of alpha-function in effect with the results of some sort of 'reversal of alpha-function' (Meltzer 1978). The schizophrenic dismantles his own mind by making attacks on the meaningfulness of the representations in his mind. He destroys the links that make up the matrix of meaning - the configuration of space which is blue with birds flying, for instance. As a schizophrenic once told me "the sky is emptied, that's why birds can't fly" - meaningless deconstruction of his thoughts, which might have once been the bleakness of Keats' 'La belle dame sans merci', with its chilling refrain 'And no birds sing'. In that sense the reversal alpha- function disconnects meaning; and the result is the bleakness and depression that Keats experienced in his own life.

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## Notes

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