

# **'Open People', 'Homo Clausus' and the '5th Basic Assumption': Bridging Concepts between Foulkes's and Bion's Traditions**

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## **Abstract**

In this article I tried to bridge the split between the Foulkesian and the Bionian traditions, hence overcoming the outworn dispute between these two theories and practices.

The main hypothesis in this article is that W.R. Bion and S.H. Foulkes tried to achieve the same goal, albeit coming from a different, yet complementary, direction. The metaphor which is being used describes Bion and Foulkes as two miners digging a tunnel under a river, each of them starting from the opposite bank. Bion and his followers tried to overcome the pathologies of groups which take control over individuals and abolish their individuality (Basic Assumption Groups), while Foulkes and his followers tried to overcome the pathologies of Individuals devoid of relational and communal existence ('Closed People'; 'We-less-I's').

In order to overcome the split between these two traditions I discuss and develop Gordon Lawrence's (1996) discovery of 'Me-ness' , the 5th Basic Assumption in the Bionian/Tavistockian tradition regarding the psychic condition of individuals in groups, and Norbert Elias's (1939) social/psychological theory of 'Homo Clausus'('Closed Man'), the fundamental basic assumption in the Foulksian Group-Analytic tradition regarding the social/psychological condition of individuals (and patients) in groups of modern societies.

**Key-words:** Homo-Clausus; We-less-I's; Me-ness; Isolated-Individuals; Relational-Individuals; Work-Group; Common-Matrix.

## **1. The argument**

Gordon Lawrence, Alastair Bain and Laurence Gould (1996) discovery of 'Me-ness' , the 5th basic assumption in the Bionian/Tavistockian tradition regarding the psychic condition of individuals in groups, and Norbert Elias's (1939) social/psychological theory of 'Homo Clausus'('closed man'), the fundamental principle in the Foulksian group-analytic tradition regarding the social/psychological condition ( *habitus* ) of individuals (and patients) in modern societies, are twin concepts which describe the same phenomena, and can finally bridge the split and the rift between the Foulkesian and the Bionian traditions, hence overcoming the outworn dispute between these two theories and practices. Both concepts describe modern people's self-experience and self-image , respectively, as living in a sealed container separated from other human beings; an image and experience which control modern people's 'Individual and

Social Unconscious', therefore indicating the urgent need for group therapy and group work in our culture, giving this discipline its fundamental justification.

If we take this argument a bit further, we can go on and claim that W.R. Bion and S.H. Foulkes tried to achieve the same goal, albeit coming from a different, yet complementary, direction. We can imagine Foulkes and Bion as two miners digging a tunnel under a river, each of them from an opposite bank. Traditionally, Foulkes and his followers tried to overcome the defensive self-image, actions and pathology of Individuals devoid of relational and communal existence ('closed people'; 'we - less I's'), while Bion and his followers tried to overcome the defensive self-experience, actions and pathologies of Groups which take control over individuals and abolish their individuality (basic assumption groups). Surprisingly, they "meet" in the midst of the river "sailing" towards an alternative self-image of "open people", working and communicating in dynamic fertile spaces and networks which Bion called "The Work Group" while Foulkes called "The Common Matrix". The crux of the matter in both traditions was to find ways of giving full space, at the same time, to the uniqueness of every individual in the group, and to the uniqueness of every group made-up of unique individuals.

The central difference between these two men lies in the way they acted to achieve their goal. Bion's tried to discover defensive unconscious group dynamics which prevent group work and individual's responsible participation, while Foulkes's tried to discover defensive unconscious individual dynamics which prevent free-floating communication and individual's cure and growth.

## **2. The uniqueness of the fifth basic assumption ( Me-ness ) among the other four basic assumptions**

W. Gordon Lawrence, Alastair Bain, and Laurence Gould (1996) introduced a new 5th basic assumption, in addition to the four basic assumptions already existing. They focused on ba Me-ness as a cultural phenomenon and contrasted it with Bion's three basic assumptions (baD; baF/F; baP) and Pierre Turquet's 4th basic assumption of One-ness (ba O). They write: "As the opposite of One-ness 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".

Their working hypothesis is that baM is a tacit, unconscious assumption that the group is to be a non-group, the group has no reality. The only reality to be considered 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.

For our present purpose of seeing the 5th basic assumption as a bridge between the Bionian-Tavistockian tradition and the Foulksian-Group Analytic tradition, we have to distinguish the 5th basic assumption from all the other four basic assumptions.

Gordon Lawrence, Alastair Bain and Laurence Gould write:

"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 defense against the anxiety of experiencing and testing realities in a W(ork) configuration, a baM culture is an unconscious system of defense against both the experiences of W and other ba groups" (1996).

We can summarise these insights in one short formula:

All 4 basic assumptions = Individuals are lost

The 5th basic assumption = Group is lost

### **3. Me-ness: finally. a group-analytic basic assumption!**

My personal incentives to write this paper originated simultaneously from two directions. The first was my intensive reading of Norbert Elias's discoveries and ideas, which stand at the roots of group analytic theory and practice; I wrote, debated and discussed on these subjects intensively (Lavie 2005a; Dalal 2005; Lavie 2005b; Hopper 2006). The second incentive came from Gordon Lawrence, Alastair Bain and Laurence Gould discoveries as I described above, and especially from a personal conversation which took place between Gordon Lawrence and myself, during a workshop on 'social dreaming' in Israel in 2005. Gordon told me about him being a student of Norbert Elias during the sixties in the sociology department of Leicester University. He added that the influence of Elias's discoveries and ideas on his thinking were enormous, and he recalled with a touch of nostalgia and humor that Elias had opened almost every lecture with the same saying: "life is like football, unpredictable and filled with surprises; success in the game depends on the interdependency and openness of the players towards each other". So this was Elias's whole theory in a nut shell!

If so, my personal talk with Gordon Lawrence along with my interdisciplinary comprehensive reading, gave me the rare opportunity to hypothesize about the 5th basic assumption being a phenomenon, which can finally, after 50 years of dispute, build up a stable bridge between this tradition and Foulkesian group analytic tradition. Never before, as I know, it was mentioned in the group analytic literature that Elias's central concept of homo clausus (or better said the homo clausus habitus) stands as a basic principle in group dynamics in general, and as a corner stone in the theory and practice of group analysis.

This point deserves some more elaboration. We all know that group analytic psychotherapy gets its own clinical and practical justification from the ideas and findings about man's social nature; the central argumentation goes like this: If man's basic condition is social, than we should treat his ailments in social conditions, i.e. in groups. Well this is true! But not enough! This statement is too general and not

sufficiently accurate. We need more specific arguments, because if one takes this general argument as his starting point; why shouldn't he treat the social nature of patients also in individual therapy? He does not need a specific group situation. Therefore, the more specific statement is about modern man's tendency to deny his social nature, to disavow his basic interdependency with other human beings, to over-idealize his separateness and unique individuality contrary to his communicative and relational inherent nature. The emphasis has to be on the mechanisms of denial, disavowal and idealization. This basic and all pervasive unconscious self image of homo clausus (closed man) needs to be counterbalanced in a specific situation, i.e. in a group situation. This specific situation can help to change this engrained self-image by replacing it with another shared image and shared experience of homini aperti (open people cooperating in the Work Group and communicating in the Common Matrix).

#### **4. Foulkes's 'social unconscious': a group-analytic concept embracing Lawrence's 'Me-ness' and Elias's 'Habitus'<sup>1</sup> and 'Homo Clausus'**

In a lecture at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1966, Foulkes displayed his basic conception of the 'social unconscious', emphasizing the denial of the social nature of man and his anxious clinging to his individuality, as one of the basic building blocks of his theory of group analysis and of his notion of the social unconscious.

Foulkes writes:

"There is quite a considerable resistance against such a perspective, that the ego and the superego, the very core of the personality, are socially conditioned, as soon as it becomes real and concrete in our daily lives and profession! Modern man clings anxiously to his individuality and identity, and quite erroneously assumes these to be threatened by such observations, instead of realizing that they are threatened, on the contrary, by the rift between the group and its individuals in our culture. This transmission from generation to generation is an unconscious process. The individual tends to remain unconscious of it in his own person, and well defended against its recognition. I have called this the 'Social Unconscious'. The ego cannot see itself, just as one cannot look into one's own eyes, except in a mirror" (1968).

We can read in this paragraph two things:

1. That Foulkes adopted Elias's notions of the habitus of homo clausus vs. homines aperti but changed them to psychoanalytic terms.
2. That we can read Foulkes post factum as a foreseeing the 5th basic assumption.

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<sup>1</sup> I will give here two definitions of Habitus: Habitus introduced by Marcel Mauss as "body techniques" (techniques du corps) and further developed by Norbert Elias in the 1930s. Habitus can sometimes be understood as those aspects of culture that are anchored in the body or daily practices of individuals, groups, societies, and nations. It includes the totality of learned habits, bodily skills, styles, tastes, and other non-discursive knowledge that might be said to "go without saying" for a specific group.

So let's read Foulkes and Lawrence again side by side in order to grasp the similarity between the two and in order to see the possibility of bridging between their own traditions.

Foulkes writes (1968):

There is a considerable resistance against such a perspective, that the ego and the superego, the very core of the personality, are socially conditioned . Modern man clings anxiously to his individuality and identity . The individual tends to remain unconscious of it in his own person , and well defended against its recognition. I have called this the '*Social Unconscious*' (my italics).

Lawrence Writes (1996):

Basic assumption Me-ness is a tacit, unconscious assumption that the group is to be a non-group, the group has no reality. The only reality to be considered 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 (my italics).

## **5. Elias's legacy as a bridge between 'Isolated Individuals' in the Foulksian/Group Analytic tradition and 'Me-ness' in the Bionian/Tavistockian tradition**

Gordon Lawrence writes:

"baM (the 5th basic assumption) has social and intellectual roots, which have come to justify this particular psychic position, in Eliasian terms: *Habitus* " (1996).

We can astonishingly see here, how for the first time, Gordon Lawrence brings a very unique psychosocial term (see footnote 1 above) into the Bionian\Tavistockian discourse about group dynamics. This term - '*Habitus*' - is in different words (in group analytic terms) the '*Social Unconscious*' anchored in every individual's '*personal unconscious*' . I am quite sure that Foulkes was familiar with the notion of "*Habitus*" , yet he preferred to use a more psychoanalytic/group-analytic concept such as the "*Social Unconscious*" .

Lawrence continues, giving Elias's findings and theories a very precise exposition which never before had been so clearly portrayed in the group-therapeutic literature:

"The intellectual roots (of Me-ness, J.L.) 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 '*we-less 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" (1996).

Foulkes and Anthony, in their monumental classical book *Group Psychotherapy: The Psychoanalytic Approach* (1957, revised edition 1973), write about the origins of the basic concepts of group psychotherapy, putting the cultural origins of the 'Isolated Individual' as their starting point:

"In recent times, since the end of the renaissance and in a community which stresses individual property and competition, a configuration has arisen, which created the idea of an individual person as if existing in isolation. He is then confronted with the community, the world, as if they were outside him. The philosophy of Descartes starts from this premise and its strict subject-object juxtaposition is still responsible for many pseudo problems of our time. Yet one of the surest observations one can make is that the individual is preconditioned to the core by his community even before he is born, and imprinted vitally by the group which brings him up. This concerns even his genetic inheritance, and still more his psychology, in so far as this is developed in the interaction between him, objects and persons. The present writer's insight into this deep-going interrelationship between the individual and his group or community was stimulated by his contact with sociologists such as the late Franz Borkenau and particularly his intimate exchange of ideas over many years with Norbert Elias" (1957; revised edition: 1973).

How amazing it is to see such a resemblance between these two texts, written by different authors from different times and apparently from different backgrounds! I believe that such a similitude is due to their fundamental influence from Elias's multidisciplinary sociology, which integrates social, psychological and historical facts.

We have to remember that Norbert Elias was not just an intellectual influence on Foulkes and the group-analytic and the group-therapeutic establishments. He was actually a founder member of the group analytic society in 1953 with S. H. Foulkes. Elias fought all his life against the widespread conceptions, that individuals have an innate knowledge or innate categories of perception and thought, and against the belief that they develop their individuality from within. On the contrary, he asserted that individuals learn everything from their historically determined environmental contexts through the ordinary processes of maturation, i.e. individualization through socialization (Lavie, 2005).

Lawrence, Bain and Gould (1996) also cite Elias's biographer, Stephen Mennel, one of the leading scholars of Eliasian sociology. Mennel writes: "Elias in *The Civilizing Process* (2000) 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 self experience and has existed since Renaissance times. The philosophers' *homo clausus* is just an externalization of this mode of self - experience: the sealed container in which we sense ourselves is sealed with the iron

bands of the civilized self -controls forged in a long -term process" (Mennel, 1992, p. 193).

## **6. Elias's discoveries and theories: an intellectual and practical foundation for the evolution of group psychotherapy in the twentieth century**

W. Gordon Lawrence, Alastair Bain, and Laurence Gould (1996) elaborate on the "Eliasian image of the sealed container closing the individual mind, as being an organising theme of the twentieth century literature" (italics mine, J.L.). Walt Whitman for example glorifies this image as 'the principle of individuality'. Lawrence and his collaborators claim that the 20th century has been the century of the celebration of personal self actualization, because it is believed that only the individual can work out his or her destiny in isolation, and that this isolation produces its own existential pain. They continue to elaborate that the theatre of the absurd explores one aspect of this anguish which is the inability to communicate.

I would take these elaborations a bit further and compare them to Foulkes's deep influence from the forerunners of the theatre of the absurd: Anton Chekhov and Luigi Pirandello. Foulkes wrote a lot about his love for theatre and especially towards modern writers of the 20th century, which struggled with the loneliness of the individual in modern societies and with his inability to communicate. Foulkes adopted this theatrical mode of associative communication characterizing the absurd theatre and its plays, but turned it from an obstacle to a merit (Lavie, 2004). The growing ability of individuals in group analysis to express their existential anguish and their isolating psychopathological symptoms, first in a somewhat absurd uncommunicative associative manner and, as time goes by, in more and more communicative and coherent fashion, stands at the basis of practice and cure in group analysis.

So we see here another beautiful link between the two traditions, the Bionian/Tavistockian and the Foulksian/Group-Analytic. In the Bionian tradition we aim to rescue people from the grip of the 5th basic assumption Me-ness, and bring them to act in the cooperative work group, while in the group analytic tradition we aim to facilitate a group analytic communicative matrix, which help to take people out from their existential isolation and out from the grip of their isolating symptoms. To sum up in a nut shell, we can see both traditions fighting against the overemphasis of the 'I' and the 'me' and against the exclusion of the 'we' and the 'us'.

## **7. Summary and conclusions: a fresh look at both the genius of Foulkes and Bion and their personal destinies which shaped their legacies**

As I argued in the beginning of this article, Bion and Foulkes tried to achieve the same goal, albeit coming from a different, yet complementary, direction. I believe I could show in this article that both man tried to enable individual human beings to participate in groups and develop their uniqueness and personal responsibility, and at the same time develop their communality and social responsibility.

Bion on the one side was aware of the destructive forces in groups and the constructive power of individuality . He set himself to discover these destructive forces in groups, masses and societies ('basic assumption groups'), and to facilitate the emergence of the 'work-group', which explores and studies communicatively these destructive forces; a process which gives adequate place to groups of creative relational individuals .

Foulkes on the other side was aware of the destructive forces in individuals and the constructive power of groups and communality . He set himself to discover the destructive forces in people's hyper-individualism (which is manifested in their psychopathological mirror reactions and isolated locations in the group), and to facilitate the development of the therapeutic group matrix, in which participants explore and study their destructiveness; a process which gives adequate place to groups of creative relational individuals .

It's a common, yet superficial, way of saying that Bion was mainly interested in groups and Foulkes was mainly interested in individuals. This is not true. Both of them were interested in groups as well as in individuals. Although both men, were the sons of the same generation - a generation which poets and historians called "The Lost Generation" - each of them came also from a different background and had different personal experiences. This fact of sameness and difference, created two levels of comparison between Foulkes and Bion. On a surface level we can see opposition but on a deeper level we can see complementariness<sup>2</sup>.

Wilfred Bion was deeply influenced by the destructive effects of human masses on human individuals. Bion (1982, 1987) experienced these effects as a combat soldier in the mass murder which took place during the First World War, especially in the fronts of the 'Maginot Line'. As part of the western democratic world, Bion and other intellectuals were afraid of the destructive forces in groups, and saw them primarily as masses, thus missing the constructive powers of groups. Lawrence, Alastair and Gould write also about the subject of groups and masses:

". 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

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of habit or habitus refers to 'the durable and generalized disposition that suffuses a person's action throughout an entire domain of life or , in the extreme instance, throughout all of life - in which case the term comes to mean the whole manner, turn, cast, or mold of the personality' (from: Wikipedia).

Hinshelwood (1999) asked a challenging question: "how Foulksian was Bion?"; I am arguing that Bion wasn't Foulksian!.. And Foulkes wasn't Bionian!; They were very different yet complementary!

conglomerate. It denies them the individuality which we ascribe to ourselves and to people we know" (1996).

So in this cultural atmosphere, Bion set himself to discover the unconscious, destructive forces in groups which deny people's individuality.

S. H. Foulkes was deeply influenced by the destructive effects of Fascism and Nazism which brutally tore people from their original communities, and simultaneously denied their individuality in favor of the totalitarian leader. Foulkes, as a young man, became a refugee when he escaped from Nazi Germany in 1933, thus, uprooting himself from his original roots and his original community, on the way to find a new community, to strike new roots and to create a new individual identity in these new circumstances. So in these conditions Foulkes set himself to discover the unconscious constructive powers inhered in groups; forces which facilitate people's communality and individuality at the same time. Therefore, if we take the genius of Foulkes and the genius of Bion cooperatively together, we will find a complementary approach to human beings as individuals and as groups.

### **8.A fresh look at the future: The emergence of a new paradigm which replace the reified concepts of 'Individuals per se' vs. 'Groups per se', to a more realistic comprehensive notion of 'groups of relational individuals'**

In one of my recent publications (Lavie, 2005b) I argued that Elias's breakthrough in the social sciences created a new interdisciplinary paradigm. It dealt with both parts of the equation; the individual and the group; the reification of 'The individual' and the reification of 'The group'. In order to demonstrate this new paradigm I cited from Elias's classic book: What is Sociology ?

" Looking through sociology textbooks one find many technical terms which convey the impression of referring to isolated and motionless objects; yet on closer scrutiny they refer to people who are or were constantly moving or constantly relating to other people. . The very concept of society has this character of an isolated object in a state of rest . The same goes for the concept of the individual. Consequently we always feel impelled to make quite senseless conceptual distinctions, like 'the individual and society', which make it seems that 'the individual' and 'society' were two separate things, like tables and chairs, or pots and pans. Yet on another level of awareness one may know perfectly well that societies are composed of individuals, and that individuals can only possess specifically human characteristics such as their ability to speak, think, and love, in and through their relationships with other people - 'in society'." (pp. 113, 1978)

Reading this instructive and clear passage, we no longer have to wonder why Norbert Elias's interdisciplinary (psycho/social/cultural/historical) discoveries and theories became the missing link, the mediator, between the Foulkesian/Group-Analytic tradition and the Bionian/Tavistockian tradition.

It took almost 45 years for the Bionian/Tavistockian tradition to discover the central and essential place which Norbert Elias took in 1953, when he joined Foulkes and

few other professionals in the foundation of the Group Analytic Society. In the last 10 years authors from both traditions find Elias's thinking fundamental to Group Psychotherapy in general and Group Analysis in particular (Lawrence, Bain and Gould, 1996; Dalal, 1998; Pines, 2002; Stacey, 2003; Lavie, 2005).

So after all, we can see Norbert Elias and Gordon Lawrence as a possible bridge between the Bionian and the Foulksian traditions. We can also learn here an important lesson that it doesn't matter where you start; it matters where you aim. Bion and Foulkes aimed to reach the same goal albeit they started their work in different grounds. So, either if we started our work in the Bionian tradition or started educating in the Foulksian tradition, we all stand now on the same grounds giving full space to either the communality of the human being or his unique individuality, thus seeing human beings as relational individuals, forming groups during all their personal life, and across generations.

Therefore, in the end of this article, I would recommend us to change our conventional way of thinking, to a more realistic and accurate way, which can be summarized in the following short sentences:

There are no 'isolated individuals' per se!

There are no 'groups as a whole' per se!

There are only 'groups of relational individuals' !!

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## Notes

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