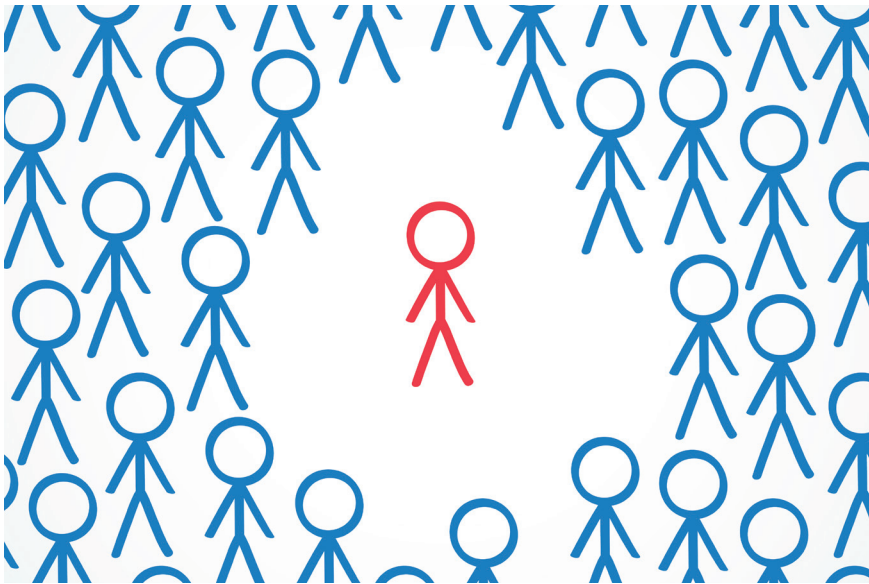


Practitioner Perspective

| One and Many: Reflections from Bion

By Alex Delogu



The fundamentally social nature of people is easy to overlook from our limited first-person perspective. In working with groups, Bion reveals some of the conflicts this social nature entails (1961). Exploring the fuzzy boundaries between self and world help to frame the individual as an ecological, interconnected entity

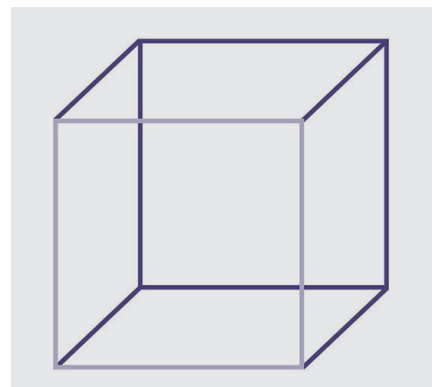
Introduction

This article is concerned with taking different frames of reference, or different perspectives, on individuals and groups. For example, individuals can be conceptualised both as an element of a group or a group can be seen as depending on the individuals that compose it. The group can be thought of as primary or the individual can be thought of as primary. Like the classic illusion of the Necker cube (Bion, 1961, p. 86-87), where you can take different perspectives on the same image. The top-right square face of the cube can be seen either as the front or the back of the cube. Neither is incorrect,

but whichever you take leads you in a different direction. This article is the result of researching these various views of identity and then searching for some resolution.

Alluding to the illusion above, Bion states that “the apparent difference between group psychology and individual psychology is an illusion produced by the fact that the group brings into prominence phenomena that appear alien to an observer unaccustomed to using the group” (1961, p. 134). This article is an exploration of that illusion. One of Bion’s fundamental starting points is that people require groups in order to feel fulfilled (1961, p. 53). The

presence of a group is enough in its own right to satisfy this requirement, it is not that the group needs to be doing anything in particular; Its existence is enough (1961, p. 54). From this one might assume then that group life would be, on the whole, quite satisfying. Bion would observe in his groups quite the opposite. There is something deeply frustrating about existence in groups (1961, p. 54). Individuals have to sacrifice some of their own desires if they are to exist in a group and they lack the sort of anonymity that solitary behaviour provides (1961, p. 54). Bion then goes on to explore this problem within the dynamics of different groups. The focus here will be more on the nature of the individual and their relation to group phenomena.



Necker Cube

The Social Animal

As described by Aristotle, man is a political animal (Bion, 1961, p.53). This can be taken in different ways, but for present purposes it is enough to consider the term “social” as exchangeable for “political”: Man is a social animal. Even this says too much. An observation of any

animal species will immediately lead one to conclude that there is in fact not much added to the idea of an animal by calling it social. All animals come from, or in, groups. The species always precedes the individual. Singular animals only exist at the rather unfortunate point of their extinction. To take the individual as the starting point and work back to the group is in some sense a mistake but nonetheless inevitable and this point shall be returned to later. Each animal has its own “level” of pack mentality. It might be assumed that dogs have a strong pack instinct and suffer acutely from separation anxiety. On the opposite end many sea creatures, such as octopuses, live mostly isolated throughout their lives (Godfrey-Smith, 2016, p. 69). The amount and quality of social interaction for humans is at the core of group therapeutic thinking. It is reasonable to assume that the social instinct in humans is not equally strong in every individual. No matter the level of isolation, every species hinges on a group phenomena and on mating. The product of such a meeting being each successive generation.

Winnicott was aware of this when he says that there is no “such thing as an infant” (1960, p. 587), there is always at least a pair. Most of the object relations school and later psychotherapy is also coming from this perspective: that the fundamental formation of the self happens through contact with others (Gomez, 1997, p. 2; Wallin, 2007). The role of the physical body and touch is not to be underestimated here. As the infant is held, in both emotional and physical senses, it starts to integrate this experience in its formation of self. “[The infant] will have a sense of coherence, of having a centre, one which may hold in temporary absence” (Waddell, 1998, p 29). In this way, similar to what was said previously, the development of the self, hinges on

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a social encounter. Again, the group precedes the individual. This very process is curious, a self emerging from an undifferentiated experience of oneness (Berman, 1989 p.25). An individual condenses from the multiple like a raindrop from a cloud.

Thus far we have development from groups in biological terms and also in developmental terms. “The pregnancy of the mother with the child’s body is in a sense replicated by the “pregnancy” of the child with its body image” (1989, p. 34). Body image here refers more generally to a unified sense of self.

The “Dividual”

There is another side to this. Things are rarely very clear. There are those who critique the existence of the self altogether and from varying perspectives (Epstein, 1995; Metzinger, 2009; Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, 2016; Wilber, 1979). More pertinent are those who understand that the self is fundamentally a group phenomenon. That does not mean that the mind is populated by different people (though it usually is, dreams for example), but that the so-called unified identity is not so unified as one might assume. Or to put it another way, the self or individual is a temporarily stable phenomena, requiring a huge diversity of structures and processes to hold together. Society, ecosystems, brain functioning, rhythmic cardiac cycles (Strogatz, 2004, p. 15-18), microbiomes (Yong, 2017) and, all underpin the unity of the self. In this sense the term “individual”, meaning indivisible, is misleading. In their co-authored introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari state

that “[s]ince each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd” (1987, p. 3). This is compelling, it is already quite a crowd with just one, but regardless of whether there is no self or it being multiple, it misses out on Bion’s thematic point that people seek connection. Even if we are a crowd on our own, there is still a draw to make contact and commune with an outside group, small or large. Though there is also this fact that there are so many people around that to actually avoid anyone at all would need to be done at great personal expense.

As can be seen there are many ways to view this. The issue of individual and crowd is inherently tricky. It seems clear that people exist in and because of groups. Yet we are only capable of accessing these phenomena through our own singular first-person perspective. We are already limited and Bion runs up against this in his description of his group experiences in that he cannot reflect from outside the group, but he can only do so from his limited perspective. The whole philosophical enterprise of phenomenology, with its rigorous investigation into subjective experience, had to go to great lengths to explain the nature of the experience of the other. By studying subjectivity, it had to counter accusations of solipsism. “Our relationship to the social world is, like our relationship to the world, deeper than any express perception or any judgement” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 421). Our social being is more fundamental than any doubts we may have about it. “As long as man is born of woman, intersubjectivity and the we-relationship will be the foundation for all other categories of human existence” (Schutz, 1966, p. 82).

Parts

In effect we all seem to be working in this way, working from the individual back to the group, but never fully

comprehending the group. All this even though the opposite is very much the case, that the group comes first. And how could we understand it? Just from a material perspective it is obvious that a part never encompasses the whole. If your gut bacteria were conscious it would not have any great awareness that it is part of a human, or at least only in some cursory way. There are qualities that can appear in a whole that are not simply the sum of its parts. For instance, the murmurations of starlings, birds collectively coordinating movement, takes on a different quality in a large group. Fire ants also, when they clump together the group behaves as a fluid, a property that no individual fire ant possesses (Gorman, 2013). Symington hits on this when he says that Bion was describing “a mode of mental functioning of the group, *not the persons who constitute it* [emphasis added]” (1996, p. 127). This does not mean we can not understand how groups operate, but simply suggests that there is always this tension of personal experience nested within a barely comprehensible group. We can not understand it fully while part of it. Though whether we can understand anything fully is questionable to begin with.

Yalom runs with this type of phenomenological formulation when he takes from Sullivan the idea “that the personality is almost entirely the product of interaction with other significant human beings” (2005, p. 21). He insists that even with one-to-one therapy the main focus is on interpersonal issues. For example, depression as the result of a person’s history of interpersonal relationships. This becomes the focus, not the “depression” itself. Yalom is quite direct with his stance on the benefits of groups and his ideas reflect what has been said thus far about the centrality of group experience. To add to this he describes people as

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“loneliness averse” and states that we never really outgrow the desire for contact, for example as we get older, connection is still sought (Yalom, 2005, p. 20). Isolation can be bad for your health. And still, being in groups is the source of much frustration and conflict. That being said, the wrong type of group could be bad for your health as well.

While in a group, Bion notices that as individuals speak on behalf of the group, there is a certain fluidity between statements (Bion, p. 50). That is, what might seem like someone speaking on behalf of themselves, they are making a statement on behalf of the group. It is likely the case that all statements function in multiple ways like this. If you are alone however there is simply no context for these meanings to present themselves. It is not clear whether this multitude of meaning is only a group phenomenon. For example, with two people speaking it might look like each is speaking for themselves, but that is simply because no one else is present. The people they may be speaking on behalf of, may not be around. When Bion uses the Necker Cube (1961, p. 86) as an example for perspective taking, it may apply just as well to non-group situations. The non-group can speak for a group even in its absence.

Solitude

One final point before moving to a close. To describe man as a social animal is too specific. Man has moments of solitude and may in fact require these. The very process of being a person is set up in this manner. The heart beats. To describe it as the contracting organ is to miss

out on the relaxation. To describe man as the social animal is to miss out on the solitude, which is in some respects as necessary. When Bion disagrees with the very notion of the recluse he has gone too far in this direction. He says “you cannot understand a recluse living in isolation unless you inform yourself about the group of which he is a member” (Bion, 1961, p. 133). He is not wrong in thinking that the group from which the recluse comes has an impact on our understanding, but in so doing he overemphasises the group and enacts a sacrifice of the individual. Like in music, there is a pleasure in the interaction between tension and release, they interact and their degree of mixing creates the tunes texture. Too much tension and the music is overbearing, too little and the music devoid of interest. In describing all human phenomena under the rubric of group experience, the nature of the non-group experience or solitude is missed. They presuppose each other, but are by no means the same thing. Another analogy would be like looking at cells under a microscope and saying they can only be understood in relation to the larger structures they belong to. The cells can be observed and new information can be revealed that would not be revealed by not using the microscope. The same with an individual and their relation to a group.

A rather striking example of solitary thinking is expressed by Cioran when he asks for “[t]he proof that man loathes man? Enough to be in a crowd, in order to feel that you side with all the dead planets” (1971, p. 122). The drive to remain alone runs counter to social aims. As quoted earlier, the whole goal of good enough attachment is so that one can survive its “temporary absence.” One of the things Bion observed in his groups was that there is no privacy in a group (1961, p. 53). Other issues include the lack of group desire to pursue lines

of thought from individuals (1961, p. 36). The individual sacrifices a lot in the group, resenting it even to the point of planetary extinction, as in Cioran's case above. While it is quite true that the individual sacrifices parts of themselves for the group the converse must also be true. Social interaction can be sacrificed for the sake of individuals' desires. This lack of participation is seen as a great difficulty by groups, as noticed by Bion in some of his groups. The spoil-sport "breaks the magic world" and is often considered worse than a cheat (Huizinga, 1949, p. 11-12).

Group tensions hinge on this group-individual divide. The individual swims the sea of the group. He might drown if in too long or may find a space and fit into the ecology. Even so the idea of individual and group are fuzzy categories, and necessarily so, they are fuzzy in reality. When Bion describes the individual as stimulated and frustrated by the group it is not clear that this is a uniquely group based experience. Any undertaking is punctuated with extremes of frustration and inspiration. Whether it is knitting or surfing there is no unobstructed

path. In a Herzogian moment: "I believe the common denominator of the universe is not harmony, but chaos, hostility, and murder" (Herzog, 2005). Perhaps a bit heavy handed, but this suggests that everything is wrought with these tensions to varying degrees. Stimulation and frustration, attack and defence, expansion and contraction; these are simply the forces that move us all the time. The analysis of groups is an elaboration of this general process under specific group settings. The same can be said of Yalom's idea of cohesiveness which he describes as essential in both one-to-one and group psychotherapy. It is also just the idea that the group continues in tact, it finds its rhythm, whatever that might be (2005, p. 55). Again, this is quite true of any activity, of finding its flow. This plays out in group dynamics in a fascinating and unique way and no doubt every group is different in that respect. The unfolding of this process in groups will also achieve a level of intensity that would be difficult for an individual.

Conclusion

To conclude, it has been shown that there is a fundamental reliance of

people on social situations, both in terms of biology and emotion in the development and maintenance of the self. Groups seem to come first and individuals come later even though consciously we think in the opposite direction. The very idea of trying to comprehend this blurry distinction between self and other is difficult both in conceptualising and navigating it in reality. There is no doubt that social experience can be healthy and that it is very much an urge for people to engage in it. On the other side, solitude is also important. Finding some balance between the two is a challenge, to be neither solely part nor whole, but to find a unique rhythm between. ☾

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Alex is a pre-accredited therapist with a private practice in South Dublin. He received his Masters in Philosophy from UCD in 2012 and went on to get his BA (Hons) in Counselling and Psychotherapy from DBS. He has a strong interest in embodiment and teaches Tai Chi and Qi Gong around South Dublin. Alex can be contacted at alexdelogu@gmail.com

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Practitioner Perspective

Unpacking e-therapy, it's here to stay: the emerging Covid-19 pandemic calls for an exploration of the potential of e-therapy to respond effectively to critical groups in Irish mental health statistics

By Dr Barbara Moore



Introduction

The rapidly evolving Covid-19 situation has placed the practice of online counselling at the centre of the profession's response to this pandemic. The discussion as to whether e-therapy is the same as 'face-to-face' counselling, has often been viewed through a comparative and sometimes negative lens. Therefore, in this current context of social restrictions due to the

pandemic, the aim of this article is to expand this conversation and shift the lens towards exploring the exponential *potential* of e-therapy! This focus is relevant as during these times of social transition in Ireland and internationally, mental wellbeing has taken up a well-deserved place in the mainstream of health discourse and increasingly our personal relationships and work lives have predominantly shifted to online

methods. The article briefly defines e-therapy and outlines its expansion in the counselling profession. Following on, the suitability of online counselling to meet the therapeutic needs of specific statistically vulnerable 'cohorts' in Ireland, such as; men, ethnic minorities and people experiencing rural isolation is examined. Finally, the government's recognition of the need for a national strategy to ensure security and ethical parameters for e-therapy underpins the expectation that e-therapy is here to stay.

e-Therapy in Context

Utilising different forms of communication to offer distance therapeutic interventions, is not a new phenomenon. In one of Freud's (1909) most famous case-studies he provided therapeutic support for a young child, by communicating with 'Little Hans' father through the sole method of distance correspondence available at the time, letter writing. Stretching forward to contemporary contexts, the 'technological revolution', is described as the most pervasive global socio/cultural shift in how humans communicate with each other, since the invention of the telegram. It is not surprising