

GROUP DEVELOPMENT: MEET THE THEORISTS

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Along with JHU students Alison Smith and Armon Jackson, Matt will be presenting the two day pre-conference video lab on group development theories, "*Group Development: What Bion, Bennis, Shepard, Schutz, Drexler and Sibbett Say About Us*" at the ODN Conference in San Juan.

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With the proliferation of pre-packaged teambuilding tools, OD practitioners are exposed to a wide variety of options for helping clients improve team effectiveness and solve group problems. Although the convenience of these instruments makes it tempting for practitioners – new and old -- to rely on them, there is often limited evidence of their validity or the theoretical model(s) used to inform them.

Without a strong understanding of group development theory, the practitioner is simply guessing at which tool will be appropriate for a given client situation. For some, the "favorite" tool becomes the solution to every group problem, leading to inaccurate diagnoses and unnecessarily limited opportunities for intervention.

By contrast, the practitioner with a solid grounding in group development theory is in a better position to accurately diagnose group problems, intervene effectively, select instruments and models with some assurance of validity, and refer back to the theories on which their observations and recommendations are based.

This article provides an overview of the group development theories of Wilfred Bion, William Schutz, and Warren Bennis and Herbert Shepard. Use them to identify what is happening within a group, inform your behavior as a consultant, and guide your selection of instruments and interventions.

Wilfred Bion

Bion's theory is based in large part on his work managing a rehabilitation unit for psychiatric patients in the British Army during World War II and later with small groups at the Tavistock Clinic. The central concept in Bion's theory is that in every group, two groups exist: the "work group" and the "basic assumption group". Bion was not referring to factions or subgroups within the group, but rather to two dimensions of behavior within the group.

The *work group* is that element of group functioning that is concerned with the primary task or work of the group. The mature work group is aware of its purpose and can define its task. Its members work cooperatively as separate and discrete members who willingly choose to belong to the group because they identify with interests of the group. This group tests its conclusions, seeks knowledge, and learns from its experience. Bion notes that this level of maturity in the work group is very rare.

Of primary interest to Bion was the question of why groups employ ineffective and self-contradicting behavior that lessens the effectiveness of the group. Bion suggests that this is because in addition to the work group, the *basic assumption* group is at play. The basic assumption group can be thought of as the “as if” group, meaning that the group behaves “as if” certain tacit assumptions were held by the members. These assumptions are hidden in the group subconscious, outside the awareness of group members. Bion identified three types of basic assumption groups – the *dependency*, the *fight-flight*, and the *pairing* groups.

Basic Assumption: Dependency Group – The primary goal of the *dependency* group is to have its members protected by one individual, usually the leader. The group’s behavior implies that the leader is all knowing and all-powerful, and that group members are ignorant, inadequate and immature. The intelligence and power of the leader are never questioned or tested by the group. Because no one can possibly fulfill this role, the leader inevitably arouses the disappointment and hostility of the group. Eventually, the group will dismiss the leader and appoint another group member in her place. Unfortunately, the new leader is destined to face a similar fate.

Basic Assumption: Fight-Flight Group – The *fight-flight* group assumes that it must preserve itself at all costs, and that this can be done only by fighting or fleeing from someone or something. The group has no tolerance for weakness and expects casualties since salvation of the group is more important than the needs of individual members. The fight-flight leader must inspire great courage and self-sacrifice, and lead the group against a common enemy. If none exists, the leader will create one. A leader who fails to afford the group the opportunity for retreat or attack will be considered ineffective and ultimately ignored.

Basic Assumption: Pairing Group – The *pairing* group assumes that the group has met for the purposes of reproduction, to bring forth a Savior or Messiah. In this group, two people (regardless of gender) get together to carry out the task of creating a new leader who will solve all the group’s problems, save the group from its own incompetence, and bring them into Utopia. A new leader or idea resulting from the union often will be annihilated by the group, allowing the group maintain an air of hope and anticipation that another, as yet unborn leader will save it from feelings of despair and destruction (both its own and others).

Implications for the Practitioner – Because of the complexity of this theory and the hidden nature of the basic assumption group, it is often difficult for a practitioner to identify which basic assumption is at play, particularly in highly structured group settings. An educated practitioner will be more likely to observe basic assumption behaviors in groups that lack structure and organization.

However, elements of basic assumption can be identified at different times within groups. The dependency basic assumption is often at play in the early stages of group life before issues of leadership and structure have been resolved. It is particularly important for the practitioner to be aware of a group’s dependent behaviors to avoid setting unrealistic expectations or presenting oneself as an omniscient expert figure.

When scapegoating occurs within a group dynamic, it is possible that the fight-flight assumption is at play. Members bond together to fight a common foe, the scapegoat, resulting in the majority of the group sharing a sense of purpose and “groupness” often for the first time. The pairing modality can be suspected whenever two individuals within a group are looked upon as the sole hope of creating a solution to the group’s problems, only to find that the solutions generated are immediately destroyed by the rest of the group.

Just as no group consistently lives up to the ideal of the work group, no group functions completely at the basic assumption level either. Instead, aspects of the work group and basic assumption group are at play at different times and with varying intensity.

According to Bion, each of us has a tendency to enter into the unconscious aspect of group life to a different degree, just as everyone has a tendency toward differing levels of cooperation within the work group. For the practitioner, an understanding of the basic assumption concepts can shape observations and help group members bring hidden assumptions into awareness so the group can begin to examine them critically.

William C. Schutz

Building on the works of Bion and other eminent psychologists, Schutz developed his model, Fundamental Interpersonal Relationship Orientation (FIRO) in the 1940s and 50’s while trying to understand and improve the working of submarine and airplane crews. The model attempts to explain interpersonal behavior in terms of the individual’s orientation toward others with regard to three interpersonal needs, *inclusion*, *control*, and *affection*, and the individual’s inclination to either *express* the need to others, or *want* to receive that behavior. According to Schutz, groups develop in response to these dynamics in predictable stages that repeat in a recurring cycle during the group’s time together.

Phase 1: Inclusion – At the beginning of group life, members are primarily concerned with whether the group will accept them or not. To reduce anxiety around inclusion, group members will share harmless facts about themselves and will engage in small talk and joking. Members with a high need for expressed inclusion will initiate conversations with others, involve others in projects, offer helpful information and “tips”, and make sure the accomplishments of others are recognized. Members with high levels of wanted inclusion will try to join in conversations and activities, seek recognition or responsibility, or go along with the majority opinion to “fit in”. Members with low levels of expressed or wanted inclusion may resist these activities.

Phase 2: Control – Once issues of inclusion have been resolved, the group begins to focus on issues of leadership and structure. Members with a high need for expressed control tend to compete for airtime, assume positions of authority, advance ideas within the group, and try to influence others’ opinions. Members with high wanted control may ask for help, involve others in decision-making, request precise instructions and defer to the wishes of others. Members with low wanted control may become frustrated with rigid structures and resist pressure from the team to engage in these behaviors.

Phase 3: Affection – During the final phase, group members become concerned with building emotional attachments between members. In healthy groups, this often occurs around parting, whether at the end of a group meeting (or segment of a meeting), or at the end of the group’s lifecycle. Members with a high need for expressed affection will reassure and support

colleagues, demonstrate concern about the personal lives of others, and share personal and private feelings and opinions. Members with a high need for wanted affection may be flexible and accommodating, listen carefully to others, share feelings of fear and anxiety, and engage in “people pleasing” behaviors. Members with low wanted or expressed affection will find this behavior too “touchy feely” and will become dissatisfied.

Implications for the Practitioner – Schutz’ FIRO theory led to the development of the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation-Behavior (FIRO-B) and successor instruments that help people understand their interpersonal behavior. The FIRO-B is a useful tool for management and leadership development, coaching, and teambuilding. The validity and reliability of this instrument have been well documented, which makes FIRO theory and the FIRO-B instrument a good choice for consultants working with teams and teams leaders.

Another strength of the FIRO cycle of *inclusion*, *control* and *affection* is that they are predictable stages that most groups experience, and can be applied to the design of development sessions and teambuilding interventions as well. For instance, at the beginning of a session, when participants are concerned with acceptance and inclusion, the practitioner can incorporate icebreakers and other activities designed to answer the question, “Who are we, and how do we relate to this task?”

Once tension around inclusion has been resolved, the group will begin to focus on issues of leadership and structure. Signs that the group is in the *control* phase include competition for airtime, attempts to redefine the group’s task or restructure its work, attempts to persuade others or build coalitions around ideas or outcomes. The practitioner’s attention to assisting the group in establishing ground rules and processes with which to manage group problem solving are central to issues of control.

During the affection phase, particularly after the group has experienced some success in resolving issues during the control phase, the group will focus on strengthening the emotional bonds with each other with expressions of consensus and a sharing of personal feelings. In healthy groups, this occurs to ease the tension around parting. The knowledgeable practitioner can incorporate into the workshop design a process for the group to acknowledge each other and affirm its success.

One additional note: the FIRO theory is recursive, in that the cycle of inclusion, control and affection will repeat itself throughout the group’s time together. Typically, this will happen at micro and macro levels during each segment of the workshop. When participants return from breaks, inclusion issues are likely to surface (“Are we all here?” “Can we proceed with the people who are here?”) and the cycle will repeat itself through the control and affection stages. The practitioner who keeps this in mind will be better prepared to identify and respond to the behavior of the group.

Warren Bennis and Herbert Shepard

Based on their work with training groups, Bennis and Shepard incorporate concepts from Bion, Schutz and others into their theory that outlines six distinct stages of group development in which members must resolve two major areas of internal uncertainty: *dependence* (authority relations) and *interdependence* (personal relations).

Phase 1: Dependence – During this phase, the group resolves authority issues in three sub-phases: i) *Dependence-Flight*, ii) *Counterdependence-Fight*, and iii) *Resolution-Catharsis*. Three types of members emerge: 1) *Dependents* – who are comforted by authority structures, 2)

Counterdependents – who resist authority structures, and 3) *Independents* – who are unconflicted in this regard.

Subphase i: Dependence-Flight – The group attempts to identify a shared goal and demonstrates security-seeking behaviors to alleviate tension created by forming. Dependent members expect the trainer to provide procedure and direction, while counterdependents look for trainer behaviors that will offer grounds for rebellion.

Subphase ii: Counterdependence-Fight – Counterdependent expressions are overt and the group becomes polarized into subgroups in conflict over the need for leadership and structure.

Subphase iii: Resolution-Catharsis – As the group moves toward breakdown, the trainer is asked to step down and become “just another member”. This act allows the group redefines power in terms of member responsibilities and contributions to group goals. For the first time, members feel a sense of “groupness”.

Implications for the Practitioner – The consultant who has no stake in the outcome often adopts the role of the independent member in helping the group to resolve issues of authority and control. During this phase, the consultant should be careful to resist pressure to direct the group and provide all the answers.

Interventions focused on helping the group to develop goal clarity, assign formal roles, identify member competencies, and develop creative problem-solving and decision making strategies, will help alleviate anxiety and move the group toward task completion. However, the group’s intense task focus often creates pressure to ignore covert maintenance issues. The consultant must be keenly aware of issues of inclusion, membership, dependency, risk of openness, physical and psychological comfort, contributions, and group identity.

Phase 2: Interdependence – During this phase, the group resolves interpersonal issues in three sub-phases: i) *Enchantment-Flight*, ii) *Disenchantment-Fight*, and iii) *Consensual Validation*. Three types of members emerge: 1) *Overpersonals* – who are uncomfortable unless a high degree of intimacy is established, 2) *Counterpersonals* – who withdraw from interpersonal intimacy, and 3) *Personals* – who are unconflicted in this regard.

Subphase i: Enchantment-Flight – The group works to maintain a sense of togetherness, but underlying tensions mount due to unresolved issues within the group. Overpersonals are concerned with maintaining harmony at all costs.

Subphase ii: Disenchantment-Fight – Counterpersonals resist further commitment to the group and two subgroups form in conflict over the degree of intimacy required for group membership.

Subphase iii: Consensual Validation – The need to complete the group’s work on time often results in compromise solutions designed to alleviate anxiety and give the group a sense of closure. Consensus, when reached, is the result of discussion and decision making rather than an impulsive attempt to relieve tension. Highly personal or counterpersonal members can hinder the group’s ability to resolve interdependence issues.

Implications for the Practitioner – The focus in Phase 2 shifts to interpersonal behaviors that inhibit the group’s work, thus increasing differences and conflict within the group. As the unconflicted, personal group member, the consultant should anticipate more frequent maintenance

interventions in the areas of participation, commitment, satisfaction, diversity, dysfunctional members, conflict and confrontation, etc.

The consultant must resist group pressure to lose sight of the task, and should initiate maintenance interventions only in service of the task. Upon completion of the group’s work, the consultant should offer the group opportunities celebrate accomplishments, explore lessons learned, and express feelings about the end of group life.

Knowledge of the progression of members’ concerns with leadership to their concerns about interpersonal relationships will help the practitioner to identify interventions that will help the group move from one phase to the next. The client situation, in consideration of the stages of group development, will dictate the extent of direction and involvement provided by the practitioner.

Conclusion

These models provide the practitioner with a much richer understanding of group behavior than most commercially available team building tools, and the popular and well publicized Tuckman (1965) model of forming, storming, norming and performing. The three theories cited here are better based in research and allow for more complete insight into complex group dynamics, selection of instruments, and that interventions are rooted in a sound theoretical base.

References

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Table 1: Bion’s Basic Assumption Groups and Behaviors

DEPENDENCY	FIGHT-FLIGHT	PAIRING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members passively look to trainer/leader for all answers Members provide partial or inadequate information Group insists on simplistic solutions to problems Group eventually demonstrates hostility and disappointment toward trainer/leader Group searches for alternative leaders when original one fails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group demonstrates paranoid tendencies Group refuses to examine itself critically Group creates an “enemy” real or imagined Individual members may be sacrificed or scapegoated for the “good” of the group Weaknesses (as perceived by the group) are not tolerated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group relies on two individuals for all creative effort Group members express hopeful anticipation using cliches such as “Things will get better when....” Group members are attentive and interested in the creative process Solutions or leaders generated by pairing are sabotaged and destroyed by the group

Table 2: The FIRO-B Six Cell Model and Behaviors

INCLUSION	CONTROL	AFFECTION
<p>Expressed Inclusion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talking and joking with others Involving others in projects and 	<p>Expressed Control:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assuming positions of leadership Advancing ideas within the group 	<p>Expressed Affection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reassuring and supporting Giving gifts to show appreciation

2004 OD Network Annual Conference

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> meetings Recognizing others' accomplishments Incorporating everyone's ideas and suggestions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taking a competitive stance Managing the conversation Influencing others' opinions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrating concern about other members personal lives Sharing personal feelings and opinions
<p>Wanted Inclusion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frequenting heavily trafficked areas Seeking recognition or responsibility Getting involved in high priority projects Going along with the majority 	<p>Wanted Control:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asking for help on the job Involving others in decision-making Requesting specific instructions or clarification Asking for permission Deferring to others' wishes 	<p>Wanted Affection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being flexible and accommodating Listening carefully to others Sharing feelings of anxiety Trying to please others Giving others more than they want/need

Adapted from Sweeney, N. (ed.), *Introduction to the FIRO-B in Organizations*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1993.

Table 3: Bennis and Shepard's Group Development Model and Behaviors

Phase 1: Dependence (AUTHORITY RELATIONS)	PHASE 2: INTERDEPENDENCE (PERSONAL RELATIONS)
<p>Subphase 1: Dependence – Flight</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members search fruitlessly for a common goal Members share harmless facts and information about selves, doodle, yawn or intellectualize Group discusses interpersonal problems as if they are external to the group Members look to trainer/leader for approval and direction 	<p>Subphase 4: Enchantment – Flight</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members are happy, cohesive and relaxed. Coffee and cake may be served at meetings Group plans events such as group parties and outings Group may create poems or songs to commemorate important persons or events in the group Disagreements and issues are misinterpreted or ignored
<p>Subphase 2: Counterdependence – Fight</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group splits into two opposing subgroups. Attempts to impose structure by electing a chairman, creating agendas, forming committees, etc. are thwarted Members frequently vote or suggest that group is too large and should split up Members openly question trainer/leader's competence Members openly express hostility and dissatisfaction 	<p>Subphase 5: Disenchantment – Fight</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group splits into two opposing subgroups Members go out of their way to join in a conversation with a subgroup rather than speak to the whole group Counterpersonals make disparaging remarks about the group, or demonstrate absenteeism or boredom Overpersonals insist they are happy and may speak in religious terms about "Christian love", consideration for others, etc.
<p>Subphase 3: Resolution – Catharsis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group suggests trainer/leader leave group "as an experiment". Alertness and attention is heightened Group discusses member roles and responsibilities Group refers to removal of trainer as "the time we became a group" or "a turning point". 	<p>Subphase 6: Consensual Validation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> External pressures and group-shared goals force group to examine itself. Unconflicted members provide a breakthrough by making a self-assessment, requesting an assessment of their own role, or expressing confidence in the group's ability. Members enter into meaningful discussion and problem solving and demonstrate awareness of their own involvement and of the group's processes.