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‘From where I’m looking it just seems like two people have missed the boat...’: Understanding set behaviour from a socioanalytic perspective.

Gary Shepherd*

The School of Psychological and Social Sciences, York St. John University, Lord Mayor's Walk, York YO31 7EX. Accepted 22nd October 2017

ABSTRACT

Accounts of practice within the action learning literature tend to omit the more mundane session-to-session details of the inner-workings of the action learning set. As well as concentrating on the problem, individuals in all sets spend some of their time in unproductive interpersonal exchanges. These exchanges may be considered trivialities and not worthy of mentioning within an account of practice. The behaviour could, however, hold the key to understanding how the action learning group manages its unconscious anxieties associated with problem solving. In this article, using empirical research from his PhD dissertation, the author explores how the insights developed by Wilfred Bion (1962) on groups, their unconscious behaviour and the anxiety of problem solving can help both action researchers and set participants better understand the working of their sets.

KEYWORDS: Action learning, Bion, unconscious, group-as-a-whole, critical reflection

Introduction

Upon analysis of several accounts of practice (AoP) within the action learning literature, it is clear that most narratives tend to concentrate solely on the workings of the group and its efforts to reflect, act and solve organisational problems in sensible ways. It seems an almost unwritten rule within the AoP community that the projects researchers describe should be recounted as if their participants were always fully focused, always acted rationally and always had the best interests of the set in mind. Many set members actually spend some of their time competing and opposing one another, establishing themselves within the hierarchy of the group and distracting themselves and others from the problem-solving task in hand.

After a long-term research project, the action researcher sets about classifying and coding their transcription data which is often quite a confusing task. Usually a researcher who has lived through the set has a fair idea of the way in which the group initiated change and generated reflection and learning. The raw, unedited transcripts of the set comprise of both extremely ‘valuable’ insights, which added together forms the narrative of the research project itself, and quite ‘mundane’, unhelpful interpersonal exchanges which seems to add nothing to the outcome of the research. This ‘mundane’ type of data traditionally has no place within the finished AoP article and is almost always omitted from the final text.

What if researchers were somehow missing vital data by ignoring what goes on within the set when interpersonal conflict, irrelevancies, power-plays and allegiances arise within the group? What if the extraneous content so many researchers assign to the waste paper basket were important. Maybe this content could hold the key to improving the group’s ability to reflect, act and learn.

*Email: g.shepherd@yorksj.ac.uk

This article will explore the way in which groups problem solve through the lens of Critical Reflection Action Learning (CRAL) and socioanalytic theory. The pedagogical approach adopted will juxtapose CRAL with socioanalytic theory using several examples derived from a PhD thesis in two organisations where the author's role was set facilitator.

Critical reflection questions the taken-for-grantedness of the action learning set as a rational, orderly, machine-like process. It is often extremely difficult for human beings working together in groups to behave rationally and to work cooperatively without a level of conflict being present. , both problem solving and reflection may be enhanced by acknowledging such conflict and seeking to understand and explore its effects within an action learning set (Leitch & Day, 2000).

Other authors have observed competing dynamics within groups they studied. Jehn and Mannix (2001), for instance noted conflict arising from a number of predictable 'incendiary' points when groups members became engaged on tasks. Individuals experienced conflict as a result of the type of relationships group members had with one another. They also clashed over disagreements concerning the tasks they were involved with and came into conflict with how the process of the task was managed within the group. Tuckman (1965) is another researcher who identified the way in which groups come into conflict with one another. Tuckman noted that many groups often pass through a 'Storming' stage in their development which can be experienced as quite shocking to individual members. The storming stage often occurs after a group has had sufficient time to get to know one another but has not had enough time to develop a group hierarchy. Challenges in this stage often arise around disagreements over group boundaries, the limits of acceptable behaviour and the use or misuse of key resources. This stage typically sees group members challenge the authority of the leader figure and usually ends when the leader figure asserts their authority to re-establish the status quo.

This article asks two questions relating to the way in which action learning sets operate, drawing references from the group theories of Wilfred Bion (1897-1979). Bion studied the unconscious processes that drive social relationships within groups and the human tendency to avoid anxiety provoking situations through dysfunctional behaviour. The two questions posed are – 'is it possible for researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the 'mundane' interpersonal behaviours of action learning group members and use these insights to help facilitate more effective problem solving'? and 'could the groupwork theories of Bion (1961) be of use to set members in providing them with a framework to help them both contextualise and appreciate their group behaviour and the anxieties which contribute to the avoidance of problem solving'?

Critical Reflection Action Learning (CRAL)

Action learning is a methodological approach to organisational learning that brings groups of learners together on a regular basis to reflect upon and take action on the problems they experience. The approach has its roots in the British School of Action Research which adopts reflective enquiry and practice improvements within the context of social situations (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

Action learning was developed by Reg Revans (1982) as:

a tool for development which required participants to become involved in real-time problems which have components of complexity or anxiety associated with them and which required a behavioural change in order to improve the problem itself (*ibid*; 626-27).

Although action learning practitioners adhere to commonly acknowledged theoretical frameworks, such as working in groups and using models of reflection within their groups, there are at least three distinctively different 'schools' as identified by Marsick and O'Neil (1999). The Scientific school is the most traditional and closest to Revans' original methodology. This school still adopts Revans' fundamental ideas, such as $L=P+Q$ where L is Learning, P is Programming and Q is Questioning (Revans, 1980).

The Experiential school and is largely made up of researchers who adopt Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle into their sets. Kolb's' experiential learning cycle encourages participants to reflect upon their concrete experiences in order to develop theories and plans for action as a way of doing things differently when they next encounter the same type of problem.

The Critical Reflection school and is markedly different to the other two schools. The application of critical theory within this school has a wide range of aims and is dependent on the researchers own ontological and epistemological orientation, but the primary aim of critical research is designed to:

help the action learner stand outside the prevailing social or organisational situation in order to see how it could be different and changed for the better (Pedler, 2005, p. 3).

Within this school sits the approaches of Critical Action Learning (CAL) and Critical Reflection Action Learning (CRAL). According to Rigg and Trehan (2004) Critical Action Learning aims to address the perceived inadequacies within traditional action learning methodologies by exploring the under-researched political and emotional aspects of organisational behaviour. This school takes a critical stance towards a range of group and organisational assumptions which it encourages set members to explore in order to surface the underlying drivers of power and influence within a system. Critical action learning seeks to question the way in which such power relationships favour certain groups and tend to disadvantage other sub-groups (Rigg & Trehan, 2004).

Critical Reflection Action Learning sits within the Critical school but has a slightly different focus from CAL itself. CRAL researchers tend to be interested in the operation of the group from an unconscious level, concentrating their attention on the group's 'hidden' processes and emotional content as a gateway to learning. Researchers adopt similar levels of criticality to organisational life as CAL theorists, however, the addition of psychodynamic aspects within this approach offer a uniquely different lens with which to view their organisation.

Reflective practitioners traditionally work on their own projects and problems within a set (Schon, 1983) whereas the CRAL practitioner employs the insight of the whole group as a powerful, critical force for problem solving. (Reynolds & Vince, 2004). The group model of reflection considers CRAL as a critical and social group process (Reynolds, 1998; Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999) which helps participants both learn and take action within the boundaries of their own organization.

It is within the group setting with set members critically reflecting upon one single problem together, that the CRAL process is enacted. CRAL researchers often use tools of reflection such as 'projective drawings' (Vince, 2006; Shepherd, 2016a; Shepherd, 2016b) to encourage the group to connect with a range of unconscious emotions such as anxiety, grief or fear which may have links to the organisational problems being reflected upon.

Visual images

The research this article is based upon originates from two Action Learning projects carried out for the author's PhD thesis and contains a number of unpublished transcripts from this thesis (Shepherd, 2009; Shepherd, 2011; Shepherd, 2016a; Shepherd, 2016b). The research was conducted in two SME organisations in the North of England who reported experiencing a number of operational problems which they wished to address through a group learning process.

In each session group members would discuss a problem their organisation was experiencing and create individual drawings representing the way in which they saw the problem in their minds eye. The drawn images were then used as a way to access unconscious content from the group through a structured process of critical reflection. After the session group members sought to take action on their problem using the insight they had taken from their drawing/reflective session.

Visual research is a relatively new discipline, one that is often ignored within the social sciences as Ruth Holliday (2001) observed around a 15 years ago. Since then there has been overwhelming interest in the use of visual images, pictures, photographs, video and participant produced drawings which has helped progress the notion of 'visual sociology' as a methodology in its own right (Pauwels, 2010). Within management studies too, interest in the visual has steadily increased over the past ten years, with Bell and Davison (2013, p. 169) contending the use of visual images is leading to a growth in what they suggest is a 'visual turn' in the field of research into management, leadership and organisations.

Visual images such as drawings, paintings and participant created images have been used as assessment tools within the field of clinical psychology for some time. A link has long been proposed between the way in which a patient interprets visual images and the state of their mental health (Bell, 1948, p. xi.). Visual images are particularly helpful in allowing access to a patient's worldview and to their unconscious functioning. Many psychologists contend that the act of simply looking at an image or collection of images tends to stimulate a patient's imagination, fantasy thinking or storytelling capabilities (Buck & Warren, 1992).

Vince and Warren (2011, p. 4) assert the real value of using images in research is when the images are employed to generate data from groups.

...their real value in research is in the way they can reveal aspects of collective emotional experience and knowledge about a specific work context. Asking a group of participants to draw their team or organization is an invitation to generate multiple interpretations and to promote dialogue over the collective and contested meaning of individuals' images. This inevitably raises questions about the power relations that shape both experience and interpretation.

There are a number of other more established approaches to working with visual images within a socioanalytic context, probably the most notable being Sievers' (2007) Social Photo-Matrix and Mersky's (2008) Social Dream-Drawing.

In the Social Photo-Matrix participants are asked to take photographs which all correspond to a pre-agreed theme which they then reflect upon using 'free association' in later group workshops where their images are projected onto a large screen. With Social Dream-Drawing participants agree a theme in the days before their workshop and draw images of their dreams which they bring to reflect upon in the workshop session itself. These approaches utilise notions of free association which helps participants surface a range of unconsciously repressed thoughts, desires, drives, and phantasies (Freud, 1915e).

These two methods and the author's approach have some commonalities in that they all aim to access unconscious group content in order to advance organisational reflection, self-development, organisational learning and understanding.

All socioanalytic methods have one thing in common: they are aimed at creating the conditions for reflection...shared reflective practice is the socioanalytic pathway to understanding work cultures, the unconscious background of organisations, and for the development of meaningful working hypotheses that serve as a platform for reflective enquiry (Krantz, 2013, p. 24).

A Socioanalytic Lens

The way in which researchers and set participants may begin to understand the interactions that seem irrelevant or distracting within their groups is to consider their actions through the post-Freudian philosophical lens of socioanalysis.

Socioanalysis asserts that human thought has two different aspects; the first aspect is readily available to the subject in everyday life and commonly known as conscious awareness. The second aspect and the area post-Freudian researchers study in detail, is unavailable to the subject in everyday life but which paradoxically exerts much more influence on the behaviour and emotional state of the subject. Freud termed this aspect of the human experience 'the unconscious' (Freud, 1915e).

A socioanalytic reading of the organisation employs notions of the unconscious in explaining the irrationality of organisational life and individual behaviour. Researchers in this field of study recognise that there are in effect two organisations operating in parallel and at the same time.

The first organisation is in the physical environment and easily distinguishable, made up of objects such as desks, computers and the people that staff the organisation. The second organisation is created in the mind of each employee and is mostly unconscious, operating 'beneath the surface'. The organisation in the mind is a place where powerful emotions, phantasies (general unconscious thoughts) and anxieties are enacted, as organisational members attempt to protect themselves from the stress of being in the workplace alongside people who by their very presence increase one-another's anxiety (Huffington, et al., 2005).

According to some researchers the organisation in the mind is the nexus of organisational dysfunction. It is here that members of the organisation develop work routines and procedures that are specifically tailored to avoid the anxiety associated with engaging in the workplace (Vince, 2006; Obholzer & Roberts, 2006; Gabriel & Griffiths, 2002).

Like individuals, institutions develop defences against difficult emotions which are too threatening or too painful to acknowledge...Some institutional defences are healthy, in the

sense that they enable the staff to cope with stress and develop through their work in the organisation. But some institutional defences, like some individual defences, can obstruct contact with reality and in this way damage the staff and hinder the organisation in fulfilling its task (Halton, 2006, p. 12).

Defence mechanisms

Socioanalysis is built upon a number of tenets which shape the way in which researchers understand the organisation. One of these tenets propose that within the unconscious mind resides a number of instinctual drives and emotions the mind needs to suppress. These drives would be extremely damaging to an individual should they ever be enacted. Socioanalysts contend that the system which prevents us acting out our drives and emotions are the so called 'defence mechanisms' which help guard against our drives and instinctual feelings ever coming into conscious awareness (Diamond, 1993).

Repression is a defence mechanism which helps the individual distance themselves from anything which it seeks gratification, but which upon acting upon would cause acute anxiety or stress. Such objects of gratification may include sexual impulses, engaging in taboo behaviour, or acting out fantasies. The anxiety of giving in to such drives may be diminished if the individual can block out or repress such compulsions, hence a repressed defence creates a 'wall' between our drives and our conscious awareness of them (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984).

In times of heightened stress individuals can unconsciously expel their uncomfortable and often unacceptable emotions onto something in the external environment, this is another defence mechanism known as 'projection'. Projection may be the act of projecting one's internal worldview onto an object, or it can be employed as a defence against the anxiety of a situation. Individuals can substantially reduce their feelings of anxiety by unconsciously denying a part of themselves they deem to be unsavoury and only holding onto the parts which they consider good, (Diamond, 1993). Projective drawings aim to capture the individual and groups denied parts of themselves in relation to the organisational problem. The projections are often seen through the images group members create and the narratives individuals developed when describing the images.

As well as asserting that individuals project their unconscious mental content onto the images they create, another tenet of socioanalysis suggests that participants are able to project elements of their *group* unconscious onto their images through the process of projection. According to this school of thought the problems set members reflect upon contain both the *group's* internalised mentalization of the problem and the *group's* unconscious, suppressed phantasies and emotions (Huffington, et al., 2005).

The notion that the group itself shares mentalizations and phantasies derives from the socioanalytic work of a number of key writers, (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Obholzer & Roberts, 2006), including Long and Harney (2013) who refer to this idea as the 'associative unconscious' (*ibid.* p. 3).

"thought" is a social rather than an individual process. In essence, this means that the functions and bases of thought are social, even though individual thinkers are the vehicles by which ideas, thoughts, words-all of the symbolic activity-are articulated and extended (*ibid.* p. 7).

The 'distracted' set

How can knowledge of group projections and defence mechanisms help set facilitators and participants understand their seemingly innocuous interactions in a way which helps develop their problem-solving abilities? The author's research suggests that it may help participants and facilitators recognise their 'mundane' behaviours may actually be sophisticated forms of defence against the anxiety associated with group problem solving.

The extracts below demonstrate a range of typical distracting conversations and conflicts which occurred over the lifetime of two action learning projects the author facilitated whilst conducting research for his PhD thesis. Each example demonstrates in its own way the group protecting itself against the anxiety of the groups problems through a number of defence mechanisms.

Brian- I'm aware of what they [the Local Authority] ask us to do, and I'm happy to go along with them for the things I think are important for our clients, what I really, really kick against is bureaucracy for bureaucracy's sake....
Gill- we shouldn't have to... [but] we were told
Brian- and I say if you want that information, you have it, you b***** send it! ... I'm not sending it
Gill- and then it's down to ME!...
Brian-I'm not doing it! I'm not doing it!
(Shepherd, 2011, p. 115)

Brian- I think in fairness to Nikki, she's doing a great job
Nikki- (laughing heartily) thank you!
Brian- I think in fairness, I think Nikki is one of our greatest workers, I don't think I've told you that in the past but I am telling you now
Nikki- thank you
(Shepherd, 2009, p. 12)

I'm feeling quite threatened, I feel uncomfortable and quite threatened about what's happening... (*ibid.* p. 8)

Bion and groups

Wilfred Bion (1961) was the first researcher to recognise that groups behave in both functional and dysfunctional ways according to the level of anxiety they experience when engaged in group tasks and problem solving. Bion's work is important within the critical action learning field as his observations may be useful in understanding the 'inner workings' of the set itself. These insights may help provide a much-needed framework for researchers and group members to appreciate and contextualise their behaviour, whilst taking into account the anxieties linked to the act of group problem solving.

One of the major contributions to the field of socioanalysis proposed by Bion was the theory of how a group over time, may be regarded as a separate phenomenological 'entity' in its own right (Fraher, 2004). This controversial but well established idea, termed the group-as-a-whole has been tested and validated by a range of researchers in many countries; groups do seem to take on a 'mind of their own' once they become established.

The working hypothesis [Bion] formulated of the mental activity of members of groups have robustly stood the test of time...his related writings, lectures and memoirs assure him a place in the history of the development of psychoanalytic thinking about social groups, institutions and society (Lawrence, et al., 1996, p. 30)

This insight is important when working with groups in long-term CRAL projects and sheds new light on the behaviours of individuals and their interpersonal interactions with one another. At the stage of development where the group begins to have shared experiences through the psychological connectedness of its members, groups will behave in either one of two predictable ways.

Sometimes the group will work constructively on problems as a highly effective team, defining issues, reflecting upon them and proposing strategies for action. At other times, the group will engage in maladaptive behaviours and engage in a range of distracting activities, avoiding the work of the group as a way to defend themselves from the anxiety of tackling their problems effectively (Bion, 1961). In the constructive mode, members of the group focus effectively on the task in hand and maintain close contact with reality. Bion termed this mode the 'work group' and recognised that this group were able to appropriately manage their anxieties and emotions while working on tasks (Semmelhack, et al., 2008).

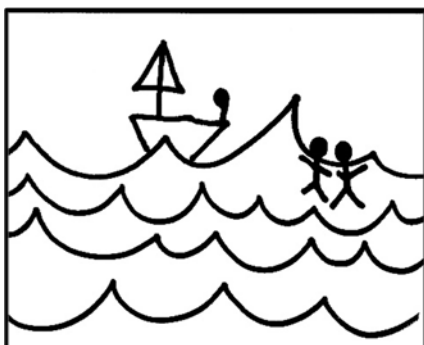
Groups involved in real work, reflect on their drawn images in constructive and honest ways. Their group conversations have an air of authenticity as the set ask appropriate questions and utilise the images as a way of learning more about themselves or the problem in hand. Facilitators engaged with groups who are doing real work often need to keep the group in this 'zone' for as long as possible and help set members make their own linkages between their images and their organisational issues. In this example, the group are reflecting on an image and the facilitator is encouraging them to persist with their reflective efforts.

...don't try to spiral down with your thoughts to try to get a solution, keep reflecting, keep asking questions like 'what does this mean to me'? 'How do I feel'? 'What do I think about this'? And trust that something will fall out [of your reflections] (Shepherd, 2016b, p. 258)

In the following example, a set member engages in real work by asking a deeply reflective question aimed at helping the group surface how a group member's unconscious attitude may affect the outcome of a sale. Note how the question is exploratory and aims to promote constructive discussion.

...I just wonder whether the picture you drew reflects the way you deal with the customer, [do you think to yourself] how am I going to close this sale, why are they not buying, why do they not want this offer?.....does that [attitude come across] to the customer? (Shepherd, 2009, p. 11).

In the next example a set member utilises a visual metaphor to reflect on the way in which they see themselves and their role within the organisation. The image is quite a powerful one showing a sailboat on a choppy sea with two figures in the sea to the right of the boat. The metaphor is more powerful when the set member uses the image to figuratively explain her 'here-and-now' feelings, which invite more reflective discussion.



From where I'm looking it just seems like two people have missed the boat, there's been a chance, but they've missed it and in a way that seems like where I am.....the boat that we're actually signed up to is sailing past us and we're still in the water and were trying to get on board; or if we are trying to get

on board there's some resistance to it, but in the meantime were left struggling, floundering, it's all become too much really (Shepherd, 2016a, p. 76).

As a final example of real work in this section, a member of the group reflects on an image created a session earlier which was of a person standing under a fierce black rain cloud. This narrative shows both the power of the drawn image on the group unconscious and the reflective potential the image still holds once it has been introjected by the set.

I was really stirred up last week and I couldn't sleep Tuesday night, I was tossing and turning and got up in the middle of the night, I think what you said to Brian last week when he described his "moving the black cloud" in his drawing and you said "why don't you move yourself?" I found that really quite profound (Shepherd, 2011, pp. 133-134).

Basic Assumption (BA) thinking

The notion of the 'Basic Assumption group' derives from the seminal work of Freud (1937) and his theory of the defence mechanism known as regression. Regression is an operation of the unconscious where at times of extreme anxiety the individual 'regresses' to a former state of mind, typically thinking or behaving in the way they would have done as a small child. Melanie Klein (1975) elaborated on Freud's ideas through her empirical research on the behaviour of children, noting the regressed state in adults had direct links to earlier, unconscious states. Gustave Le Bon (1895/2014) developed his ideas of the group in the late 19th Century by noting the way in which individuals within a group seem to regress to a former state in order to merge and join together with the larger group entity.

In the regressive basic assumption mode, members of the group are not concerned with working on their problems, but with easing the groups' anxieties and avoiding the pain and emotion that further work may bring. It is in this mode that group members typically act out unconscious defence mechanisms which shield them from anxiety. Bion termed this mode of operation the 'Basic Assumption group' as there seemed to be certain fantasies or expectations group members would hold on to as a way to assume their group safety.

The maladaptive basic assumption group tend to avoid contemplation of work and its associated anxieties preferring to assume that some 'magical force' would rescue the group instead. According to Bion, basic assumption groups employ three distinct defensive behaviours against their growing anxiety and their avoidance of work. These defensive behaviours are known as Dependence (*baD*), Fight-Flight (*baF*) or Pairing (*baP*) (Bion, 1961, p. 153).

A group experiencing Dependence thinking (*baD*) behaves as if they are excessively dependent on the leader (the set facilitator for instance) or the group itself to solve their problems. Group members may squabble with one another, compete for the attention of the leader, become passive as anxiety builds or become increasingly disheartened as they discover the leader is not as powerful and able to meet their needs as they once assumed. This group seem to channel their energies into the personality of one group member or sub-groups with complete disregard for their own ability to manage their anxieties.

A group engaged in Fight-Flight (*baF*) behaviour experiences other group members or the external organisation as extremely threatening to their existence. Group members engage in

fantasies around annihilation or having ‘spies in their midst’ who need to be ‘rooted out’ for example. Alternatively the group may pin their hopes of resolving their problems on a key group member who will help them ‘take flight’ and escape the clutches of the source of anxiety. In this mode of behaviour, the group becomes much more toxic, challenging or rebellious and is in danger of fracturing.

A group engaged in the basic assumption of Pairing (*baP*) will shift its concentration away from the group-as-a-whole to the didactic relationships developing within the group. In this phase the group may engage its energies in distracting from their anxiety by discussing romantic expectations and speculations on the prospect of sexual alliances developing between group members. This form of group-as-a-whole distraction may hide a deeper unconscious desire for a couple within the group to take on the qualities of father and mother to protect the other members of the group from anxiety and stress.

It is important here to highlight that other empirical researchers differed in the way in which they regarded the group and the way in which they worked with the group unconscious. The psychoanalyst S H Foulkes (1964) for instance, who worked in the same military hospital institutions as Bion at around the same time, regarded the group as an entity which could assist individuals develop using therapeutic methods. Foulkes approach involved group participants employing the Freudian technique of ‘free association’ to help them to understand their individual problems. This was achieved by helping members reflect upon their unconscious content and comparing this to the established group ‘norms’. Foulkes’ method, known as the matrix differed from Bion’s approach in that it was concerned with the individual’s problems, as opposed to the organisations problems with the individual. ‘in the group analytic situation the personal problem is in the foreground, the institutional aspect in the background, discussion is free-floating’ (Foulkes, 1964, p. 270).

Typical action learning sets tend to engage in a mixture of real work and basic assumption behaviours in cyclical patterns over the lifetime of a project. The cycles correspond to the level of anxiety the set experiences when attempting to engage in the process of problem solving. If problems seem to be insurmountable or highly complex, or if there seems no immediate ‘solution’ to the problem the set may choose to take refuge in basic assumptions. The following examples demonstrate the type of basic assumption thinking groups employ and the defences that they create in order to prevent the anxiety of engaging with their organisational problems.

Set members tend to demonstrate dependence behaviour (*baD*) very early on in the set as they often need to rely on the facilitator to direct their efforts. A common dependency behaviour occurs when the group regress to an earlier childhood state and seem to lose their capacity to think, relying on the facilitator to become a nurturing parental figure. In one case, when the set were invited to reflect on the organisations problems around poor sales the author was asked ‘how do you reflect on ‘lack of customers’?..... (Shepherd, 2016b, p. 256). Another basic assumption behaviour shown in the following example occurs as a set member reflects upon their drawn image of the seabed, complete with a small shoal of fish, a cave and seaweed.



...the only image I've got is under the sea, this is the seabed and there's some plants and you know how the sunlight comes down onto the sea and there's patches of light and illumination,

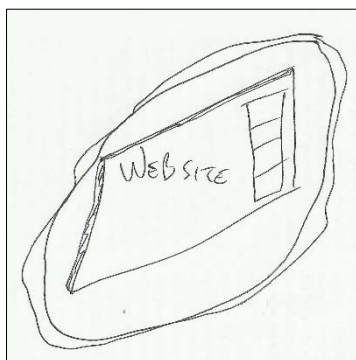
it reminds me of snorkelling...down at the bottom its more sinister, there might be a rocky outcrop and a bit of shadow over there. [I am] comfortable in it and I could spend all my time in it... (Shepherd, 2016a, p. 76).

This example illustrates the set employing 'fight-flight' behaviour (*baF*) and toying with the fantasy of fleeing the anxieties of organisational life and its associated problems by taking themselves away to live beneath the sea. This *baF* is not constructive for the group as it does not allow set members to reflect upon its organisational problems or the underlying group dynamics. This *baF* is essentially an attempt by the group to evade their responsibilities and live an alternative existence in a co-constructed fantasy.

Sometimes sets engage in dependency behaviour (*baD*) as a way of expressing frustration at the disorganised systems in place which hindered their own performance. In the extract below a set member voices the unconscious need for a 'saviour' to join the organisation in order to save them from the constant pressures of dealing with absenteeism. Again the dependency behaviour is not constructive as it seeks merely to establish the need for a phantastical 'somebody else' to solve the organisations absenteeism problem.

Well there are lots of pressures, especially when people are absent, it's not easy to get emergency staff, I don't know where to go to, we need somebody else to come in and help us both, even if it was to work for today, but that's impossible, they need to build a relationship with the clients (Shepherd, 2011, p. 117).

A final example of basic assumption thinking is illustrated in the following excerpt where the set surface their unconscious anxieties whilst reflecting upon an image of a proposed new and expensive business website. As the set reflect upon the image they begin to employ the unconscious defence of projection onto the drawing and become anxious and uneasy. The basic assumption in this instance is that the group are powerless and fearful of the mere thought of creating a new website which is overwhelming to them and that they should take flight to stave off their collective anxiety (*baF*).



Steve- It looks to me that you're looking at the website through a broken hole or something in a fence...(PAUSE)

George- A peepshow

Rachel- (LAUGHS) yes!

Steve- you couldn't quite get to it could you, because we're on the other side of the fence...

George- what does that feel like?

Steve- not good (LONG PAUSE)

Rachel- I don't think the whole picture feels good, I think it really does..

Steve- no it doesn't (LAUGHTER)

Rachel- I feel quite unsettled

Steve- Yes

Rachel- It really does give a feeling of how everybody's feeling which is really, really anxious, probably more anxious than anyone's really said

Steve- yeah

Rachel- in respect of the whole thing (Shepherd, 2016b, p. 259).

Revisiting the original questions

At the beginning of this article two questions were posed—is it possible for researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the ‘mundane’ interpersonal behaviours of action learning group members and use these insights to help facilitate more effective problem solving? and could the groupwork theories of Bion (1961) be of use to set members in providing them with a framework to help them both contextualise and appreciate their group behaviour and the anxieties which contribute to the avoidance of problem solving?

The research presented here suggests that that it may indeed be possible for researchers to develop deeper understandings of ‘mundane’ behaviours of their set members through the adoption of insights suggested by Bion and his work on the ‘group-as-a-whole’. Set facilitators using such insights can help the group come to realise the link between their group anxiety and their maladaptive problem avoidance. In order to do this the facilitator would need to possess both the experience and knowledge to highlight to the group their unconscious defence mechanisms at times of increased stress. This would obviously require set facilitators to take a more active approach within the group, situating themselves as something of an ‘expert facilitator’.

If set members were able to learn how to become more aware of their behaviours ‘in the moment’ by developing a mental framework based on Bion’s assertions, then the opportunities for the group to be more productive are likely to increase. If this were the case then set members would need to become active recipients of knowledge from the facilitator as well as active problem solving reflective practitioners. By using Bion’s methodology and developing into a fully functioning ‘set-as-a-whole’ it may be possible to greatly improve organisational problem solving as the opportunities for ‘real work’ begin increase within the group.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that in order to improve group problem solving, insights from the work of Wilfred Bion and the group-as-a-whole should be adopted by both facilitators and action learning group members. Using such a methodology would entail the whole action learning system becoming more aware of the minutiae of their interpersonal behaviours and their defences to anxiety. It is generally accepted by socioanalytic researchers the validity of Bion’s work, however, there are a number of questions researchers should reflect upon before considering pursuing such an approach within their own action learning sets.

Reg Revans for instance, made it clear that action learning was not therapy; by combining insights from psychoanalysis and socioanalysis the boundaries between critical reflective action learning and therapy may become too close and merge. This could be especially true if one considers the role of the facilitator within the set and the way in which their facilitation is more active and directive. Is it appropriate for facilitators to point out a groups defences and change the relationship with the set from a relatively neutral set supporter to a commentator on anxiety and defence?

Some of the potential ethical pitfalls of this approach include the chance that participants may surface deeply repressed ideas and emotions within their images which may be quite difficult for them to deal with. This could be problematic especially if set members are quick to respond emotionally to their drawn images, as some participants do. The repressed content itself may be quite shocking and exposes the individual to their unconscious thought in a

public arena; this is obviously unacceptable as it may cause unintended psychological harm the set participant.

Another area for ethical discussion is the amount of 'disclosure' the facilitator provides to set members before they embark on a CRAL project. It could be possible that set participants may not be given adequate information on the potential risks involved with working within a CRAL set at a subconscious level and consequently the set may be ill prepared to deal with the emotional effects of an unfolding project. Again, this is unacceptable for set participants and needs be considered within a new ethical framework and made available to researchers who are interested in using this technique.

Researchers dealing with emotions and managing reflective processes using CRAL and similar methods require a specific set of competencies and additional skills. In my case I am qualified psychotherapeutic counsellor and practice with both individuals and groups regularly. I follow the ethical guidelines laid down by the UK Counsel for Psychotherapy (UKCP) which adopts strict rules for the treatment of individual and group members. In order to work within a CRAL framework safely and effectively I would advise researchers to undergo training with a recognised body such as the UKCP to help them understand and appreciate the practicalities of working on an emotional level with people. It is only through such formalised training that I believe a researcher can ensure their efforts are actually helpful and do no harm.

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