

The Tavistock Method

Banet & Hayden (1977) A Tavistock Primer

The Tavistock method originated with the work of the British psychoanalyst Wilfred R. Bion. Convinced of the importance of considering not only the individual but also the group of which the individual is a member, in the late 1940s Bion conducted a series of small study groups at London's Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. He reported his experiences in a series of articles for the journal *Human Relations* and later, as the book *Experiences in Groups* (Bion, 1961).

Gradually, Bion's novel approach of viewing a group as a collective entity evolved into a method. In a series of conferences from 1957 on -- under the guidance of A. Kenneth Rice, chairman of Tavistock's Centre for the Applied Social Research and a member of one of Bion's early study groups -- the design shifted from the roles that individuals assume in work groups to the dynamics of leadership and authority relations in groups. Rice's views that individuals cannot be understood, or changed, outside the context of the groups in which they live, shaped the contours of the group relations conference as a teaching modality. Under his influence, group work in the 1960s in Great Britain focused on group relations; in contrast, groups in the United States moved toward personal growth and the study of interpersonal dynamics. In 1965, Rice led a conference in the United States, and the Tavistock method began to be developed here by Margaret Rioch and others. The A.K. Rice Institute is now the U.S. equivalent of the Tavistock Institute.

Basic Premise

An aggregate cluster of persons becomes a group when interaction between members occurs, when members' awareness of their common relationship develops and when a common group task emerges. Various forces can operate to produce a group: an external threat, collective threat, and collective regressive behavior, or attempts to satisfy needs for security, safety, dependency, and affection. A more deliberate force is the conscious choice of individuals to band together to perform a task.

When the aggregate becomes a group, the group behaves as a system-an entity that in some respects is greater than the sum of its parts - and the primary task of the group is survival. Although this task is frequently disguised, group survival becomes a latent motivating force for all group members. It provides the framework for the exploration of group behavior.

Appreciating the group-as-a-whole requires a perceptual shift on the part of the observer a blurring of individual separateness, and a readiness to see the collective interactions generated by group members. In Gestalt terms, the group is focal and individuals are background.

The group-as-a-whole approach can be summarized as follows:

- The primary task of any group is what it must do to survive.
- The group has a life of its own only as a consequence of the fantasies and projections of its members.
- The group uses its members in the service of its primary task.
- The behavior of any group member at any moment is the expression of his or her own needs, history, and behavioral patterns and the needs, history, and behavioral patterns of the group.
- Whatever the group is doing or talking about, the group is always talking about itself, reflecting itself.
- Understanding the process of the group provides group members with heightened awareness and the ability to make previously unavailable choices about their identities and functions in a group setting.

Bion's Theory

Groups, like dreams, have a manifest, overt aspect and a latent, covert aspect. The manifest aspect is the work group, a level of functioning at which members consciously pursue agreed-on objectives and work toward the completion of a task. Although group members have hidden agendas, they rely on internal and external controls to prevent these hidden agendas from emerging and interfering with the announced group task. They pool their irrational thinking and combine their skills to solve problems and make decisions.

In truth, groups do not always function rationally or productively, nor are individual members necessarily aware of the internal and external controls they rely on to maintain the boundary between their announced intentions and their hidden agendas. The combined hidden agendas of group members constitute the latent aspect of group life, the basic assumption group. In contrast to the rational group, this group consists of unconscious wishes, fears, defenses, fantasies, impulses, and projections. The work group is focused away from itself, toward the task; the basic assumption group is focused inward, toward fantasy and a more primitive reality. Tension always exists between the two; it is balanced by various behavioral and psychological structures, including individual defense systems, ground rules, expectations, and group norms.

Basic Assumptions

On the basic assumption level of functioning, the group behaves as if certain assumptions are true and valid and as if certain behaviors are vital to the group's survival. "Basic" refers to the survival motivation of the group; "assumption" underscores the fact that the survival motivation is based, not on fact or reality, but on the collective projections of the group members.

Bion identifies three distinct types of basic assumptions: dependency, fight/flight, and pairing. Turquet (1974) adds a fourth: oneness.

Basic Assumption Dependency. The essential aim of this level of group functioning is to attain security and protection from one individual, either the designated leader or a member who assumes that role. The group behaves as if it is stupid, incompetent, or psychotic in the hope that it will be rescued from its impotency by a powerful, God-like leader who will instruct and direct it toward task completion. When the leader fails to meet these impossible demands, the group members express their disappointment and hostility in a variety of ways. The dependency function often serves as a lure for a charismatic leader who exerts authority through personal characteristics.

Basic Assumption Fight/Flight. In this mode of functioning, the group perceives its survival as dependent on either fighting (active aggression, scapegoating, physical attack) or fleeing from the task (withdrawal, passivity, avoidance, ruminating on past history). Anyone who mobilizes the aggressive forces of the group is granted leadership but the persistent bickering, in-fighting, and competition make most leadership efforts short lived. In flight functioning, leadership is usually bestowed on an individual who minimizes the importance of

the task and facilitates the group movement away from the here-and-now.

Basic Assumption Pairing. Pairing phenomena including bonding between two individuals who express warmth and affection lead to intimacy and closeness. The pair need not be a man and woman. Such a pair or pairs often provide mutual intellectual support to the extent that other members become inactive. When the group assumes this mode of functioning, it perceives that its survival is contingent on reproduction; that is, in some magic way, a "Messiah" will be born to save the group and help it complete its task.

Basic Assumption Oneness. Described by Turquet (1974). This level of functioning occurs "when members seek to join in a powerful union with an omnipotent force, unobtainably high, to surrender self for passive participation, and thereby to feel existence, well-being, and wholeness." (p. 357). The group commits itself to a "movement" - a cause outside itself- as a way of survival. Leaders who offer philosophy of life or methods to achieve higher levels of consciousness become attractive to the group in this type of basic assumption function.

The basic assumption life of any group is never exhausted, not is it imperative for a group to rid itself of its basic-assumption strivings and provide structures and vehicles to channel these strong, primitive feelings. Hence the church attempts to satisfy dependency needs; the military and industry employ fight/flight motivation; and the aristocracy and the political system - with their emphasis on breeding and succession - build on basic assumption pairing. The interest in mysticism and cosmic consciousness seems to be an expression of basic assumption oneness.

The Group Relations Conference

The Tavistock method can be applied in many different group situations. Primarily intended to teach group dynamics and increase the awareness of group phenomenon, the method is formally applied in group relations conference. Events are characterized by a clear statement of objectives, special staff roles, and a pervasive, all-encompassing application of the group as a whole theoretical approach.

The aims of such conferences tend to be to study the ways in which authority is vested in leaders by others, to study the factors involved as they happen, to study the covert processes that operate in and among groups, and to study the

problems encountered in the exercise of authority. There is no attempt to prescribe specifically what anyone shall learn. Participants are provided with experience-based group opportunities to study their own behavior as it happens, and conference events allow consultation with at least one staff member to facilitate that task.

Consultants consult only to a group, not to individual members, and only within the time boundaries prescribed. The consultant's role often is the subject of much consternation among members, which is deliberate, in the interest of assisting members to pursue the task of the event in which they are involved. The consultants does not engage in social amenities, advice giving, or nurturing, but performs his or her task by providing interventions for the group's consideration and reporting his or her observations back to the group. Thus, the consultant confronts the group by drawing attention to group behavior. This is done by means of description, process observation, thematic development, and other interventions, some of which are designed to shock the group into awareness of what is happening.

Participants typically experience some pain as they explore issues of authority, responsibility, boundaries (of input, roles, tasks and time) projection, organizational structure, and large-group phenomena.

Group members inevitably project on the staff their fantasies, fears, and doubts about authority and power. Exploration of these projections can yield significant learning but the role of the consultant is difficult. Strict adherence to it is a hallmark of the Tavistock methods.

References

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Source

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