

# Te Rōpu te Ūkaipo: Learning From Experience

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## Abstract

I have been conducting a psychotherapy group since May 2007. We have met once a week, forty-six times a year, for almost ten years. A group that endures offers a promise of home, a place to return to time and time again, where we can put down roots. New Zealand offered me a promise of home as I think it does many émigrés. Homeless, I sought my roots in the land and the people of the land. This group, the other group members, myself as conductor, are there to be made use of in another kind of homelessness. Our roots feed us but they also transform the soil they are rooted in: we all learn from each other, drawing deep from the unconscious of the group. This paper offers a glimpse into how conducting this group has shaped my understanding with reference to the thinking of Bion and Winnicott. I have come to view work group mentality as a field phenomenon, such that the individuals take for granted the group as turangawaewae, without the need to inscribe a basic assumption on that field.

## Whakarāpopotonga

Mai i te marama o Haratua 2007, ahau e whakahaere rōpū whakaora hinengaro ana. Ia wiki ka tūtaki mātau, whā tekau ma ono huihuinga i te tau, tata mō te tekau tau. He rōpū māia, he tohu kāinga whakaruruhau he wāhi hai hokihokinga, he wāhi whakatipuranga rarau. I whakaarahia mai e Aotearoa he oati kāinga pērā anō ki tōku whakaaro ki te nuinga o te hunga manene. Kāinga kore, i whai pūtaketanga au i roto i ngā iwi o te whenua. Ko tēnei rōpū, hūanga o ētahi atu rōpū me au hai kaiwhakahaere e tū ana hei whai take mō tētahi atu momo kāinga kore. Whāngai ai tātau e ō tātau pūtake, whakarerehia anō ai hoki te papa e ngā takotoranga pakiaka: he whakaakoranga tā tēnā ki tēnā, whāia hōhōnuhia mai i te mauri moe o te rōpū. Ko tā tēnei tuhinga he hoatu pitopito whakaaturanga ki te āhua o tōku mātatau ki ngā whakaaro o Piona rāua ko Winikote i ahu mai i taku takinga i tēnei rōpū. Kua puta mai ki a au te whakaohomauri o te hinengaro mahinga ā rōpū, inā rā te noho a tēnā, ā tēnā i runga i te whakaaro ko te rōpū te tūrangawaewae, ā tē aro ake i te ahunga mai o tēnei whakaaro i hea.

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Raise the anchor, unfurl the sails, set course to the centre of an ever setting sun!  
(Nathan Pohio, 2016)

To misquote Yeats: “All things out of abstraction sail and all their swelling canvas wear.” (Drabble, 1989, with thanks to Charlotte Fisher).

This paper concerns an ongoing weekly psychotherapy group I started ten years ago on the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2007. The group is occasionally known as “The Savour and Devour Group” as it was originally conceived from some advertising I left in a café of that name in early 2007. “Savouring” and “devouring” might be thought of as two relationships to the breast: “savouring” more secure and relaxed and “devouring” more loaded with aggression and anxiety. Over the years, both the group and the individuals within it have done their best to savour and devour me, each other, and the group itself.

This group began with five members and myself as “conductor”, a term derived from Sigmund Foulkes (Foulkes, 1975, p. 5) who is widely regarded as the father of group analysis. Whilst I had “led” groups for many years, I did not want to be doing this any more; I had also “facilitated” groups, but I was not convinced about the benefit of making things easier; I wanted to “conduct” this group.

Group analysis, “psychotherapy by the group, of the group, including its conductor” (Foulkes, 1975, p. 3 emphasis in original), emphasises the social nature of human beings, how we exist, as subjects, within a relational matrix (Foulkes, 1964). Wilfred Bion (1961) put it this way:

The individual is, and always has been, a member of a group, even if his membership of it consists of behaving in such a way that reality is given to an idea that he does not belong to a group at all. The individual is a group animal at war, both with the group and with those aspects of his personality that constitute his “groupishness” ... In fact no individual, however isolated in time and space, should be regarded as outside a group, or lacking in active manifestations of group psychology. (pp. 168-9)

Personally, I have always struggled with my “groupishness” and often feel on the outside; this group was going to be a challenge. I have wished over the years I had my own group to belong to, somewhere I could keep returning home to, instead of having to be the home-maker. However “homelessness” is in my blood, I am an émigré and so are my parents. My mother grew up in New Zealand until her family left for London in 1930 when she was nine. My father grew up in South America, arriving in England the same year as my mother, to begin at his boarding school; he was eight and would not see his parents again for two years. I too am an émigré: I grew up in England, but have lived in Aotearoa, New Zealand for thirty-three years — the last thirty uninterrupted — about half my life.

In his essay, “Reflections on Exile” Edward Said (2000) wrote:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the

unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind for ever. (p. 137)

In his essay, "On Not Going Home" James Wood (2014) helps me think about how the England I left behind for ever in 1983 became frozen in time at the moment of leaving, a kind of "dead mother-land", mummified and subsequently used by me in a vampirish way (Green, 1983/1986). When I left I could not know the import of the decision I was making, or in Wood's (2014, para. 43) words, "know how strangely departure would obliterate return."

I suggest return is similarly obliterated when we are weaned, at puberty, and again when leaving home, which in the normal course of things takes place at the end of adolescence. Part of the reason our journey through adolescence can be such a rocky ride is because of the "war" with our family group and our family "groupishness" as we attempt to individuate. We are all émigrés from the motherland of our family: unfortunately, like my father, I left home for boarding school aged eight.

I believe group psychotherapy may be the treatment of choice for an exile. This group I have been conducting is both one group and many groups: whenever somebody joined or left, it became a new group, and there were losses to be mourned and arrivals to welcome. Each departure and arrival "obliterated return" and yet paradoxically built a "promise of home" for those remaining.

On this first evening, as I set up my room, I was conscious of my role as dynamic administrator (Behr & Hearst, 2005) making a site for the group. I knew this was a significant aspect of my role as conductor: I was to establish and maintain boundaries, the frame of the group, and to organise and manage the setting. By keeping the background steady, I might notice the tracks of the unconscious.

My parents were good dynamic administrators. They were Plunket Parents and I was a "Truby King Baby" (Mander, 1996). My mother was the granddaughter of Lady Victoria Plunket, who together with Truby King had set up the Plunket Society. This meant discipline, four-hourly feeds and no tending during the night. My mother-land was mysterious and separate. Te Ukaipo in its literal sense was forbidden and I have been an exile to myself for much of my life.

As I placed the chairs in a circle, I was thinking about other groups I had facilitated in the past. I had always had someone alongside, co-facilitating, and we always had some purpose or agenda for the group. This time I was alone with myself, a rather vague idea of what was about to happen, and how I was going to work. Obsessing about the chairs helped, as I was very anxious.

I had met with each group member individually beforehand, I had read a little about groups, and I had recently completed an introductory course in group-analysis. I knew I wanted to conduct this group on my own. As a single facilitator, I believe I form a couple with the group as a whole, leaving me available to individuals in the group as a symbolic

Other or the “subject supposed to know” [*sujet supposé savoir*] (Lacan, 1994). If I have a colleague alongside me, we become the couple and the group may be left out in the cold. Put another way, I think having an actual couple moves the group towards the concrete and away from the symbolic.

The five members of the group arriving that first night were strange compatriots — unfortunately in the interests of confidentiality they will have to remain shadowy. We eyed each other anxiously looking for compatriots: friend or foe? I was on high alert for signs of Bion’s basic assumptions (1961); theory has always been my “good-enough mother” in these unfamiliar situations, containing my anxiety. Was I being called upon to lead, or was someone else claiming leadership? Perhaps a couple was forming? What about fight or flight?

One of the things I take delight in as I conduct groups is the extraordinary mix of people that end up meeting together week after week. Nowhere else in my life have I experienced such diversity in intimacy as in a group such as this. It offers the opportunity to see the world through someone else’s eyes, another “vertex” (Bion, 1965) sometimes offering a totally unfamiliar perspective, a new way to think about one’s story. It helps us to find our own subjectivity within the subjectivities of others.

I knew that temperate May evening that just because I was bringing five individuals together did not mean we were going to become something which might be known as a “group”, let alone a “psychotherapy group”. I was silent for the first part of the evening and there was debate as to whether I was failing to provide much needed structure or allowing space for the group to find its own way. However, the evening went well enough considering the “emotional storm” (Bion, 1987) we were negotiating. As a good dynamic administrator, I ended the group on time, relieved to have arrived at the end of this first night in one piece, although I am not sure what I mean by that.

I noticed feeling somewhat bereft as I watched the group members going up the path, leaving me alone to clean up, write notes, and rearrange the room. Something had begun, and I already felt a strong sense of responsibility to this “something”. I was filled with anxious feelings as to whether the group would survive: would people leave or just not turn up? What would I do if there were not enough people of an evening to continue?

I reflected on whether I was being used to contain the group members’ unconscious concern for their own survival, or was it more about who I would be without this group? I was starting to make a home for these individuals to return to week after week for as long as they needed. I would be an exile from this home and yet it could not exist without me. I was suffering from homelessness again, acutely aware of my fragile new identity as conductor (home-maker) of a group that I could never entirely belong to.

Towards the end of my teenage years, a friend from New Zealand told me my great-grandfather had been the Māori rangatira Hoani Kahu. Apparently, while my forebear George Rhodes was busy catching James Mackenzie stealing his sheep, Hoani Kahu had helped my great-great-grandmother Elizabeth Rhodes with rather more than her camp oven! I had grown up with the idea I might be part Māori, and learned the words to the Christ College haka at school, but I had never known any detail.

What is it to belong to a group? According to Bion there is no such thing as group psychology (Grotstein & Franey, 2008). Perhaps there is no such thing as a group? I believe

we can be members of a group even if groups do not exist as such — it does not need to be a symmetrical relationship. From our side, we are and always have been members of groups; while from the side of groups, they do not exist. I think this goes some way to understanding the difference between what Bion called a “basic assumption mentality” in a group and “work group mentality” (Bion, 1961). Basic assumption mentality concerns itself with wanting to generate an illusion of a group whereas work group mentality just gets on with it. I will return to this later.

In the early 1990s I spent two years in a whanau class at Henderson High School. We were supposed to be learning Te Reo, and we did a little, but Naida Glavish, who took the class, immersed us in tikanga Māori. Puatahi Marae offered me a promise of home and I found myself at several tangi, which Naida always said constituted the heart of tikanga. This was Te Whanau Te Ukaipo for me.

In order to really understand groups, I believe we need to revisit what Winnicott had in mind when he suggested there is no such thing as an infant (a remark made circa 1940 and referenced in his 1960 paper, “The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship”). Winnicott proposed the very meaning of “dependence” comes into question at the beginnings of life, as “the infant and the maternal care belong to each other and cannot be disentangled” (Winnicott, 1960, p. 40). From the point of view of mother-and-baby, “mothering” in a primitive psychological sense, cannot be thought of as something “brought to” the baby. If it is “brought to”, in a literal sense, something about the baby’s experience of going-on-being will be lost. The baby must be able to take itself as mother-and-baby for granted.

This is why Winnicott suggested:

The newly integrated infant is, then, in the first *group*. Before this stage there is only a primitive pre-group formation, in which unintegrated elements are held together by an environment from which they are not yet differentiated: This environment is the “holding mother”. (Winnicott, 1965, p. 219, emphasis in original)

Before this integration “the individual is unorganised, a mere collection of sensory-motor phenomena, collected by the holding environment. After integration ... the infant human being has achieved unit status, can say I AM” (Winnicott, 1965, p. 217, emphasis in original). Winnicott used the word “integration” for this moment in development where a baby becomes a person with an inside and an outside (1965, p. 217).

Winnicott also wrote “the basis of group psychology is the psychology of the individual, and especially of the individual’s personal integration” (Winnicott, 1965, p. 215). We need to understand this experience of personal integration to understand group psychology. As Bion suggested: “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” (Bion, 1961, p. 169).

Once, when my infant son was desperately ill, I took him to a healer. As I walked in, she said “You have Māori blood, don’t you?” Surprised, I told my friend’s story about Hoani Kahu. She corrected me, saying my great-great-grandfather George Rhodes had fathered three illegitimate children with a Māori woman who died in childbirth with the last. He

adopted this child as his own, my great-grandfather A. E. G. Rhodes, whose children were my grandfather, Tahu Rhodes and my great aunt, Mairehau.

In the middle of June 2007, about six weeks after the group started, I began the evening by reminding us that a new member would be joining next week, so this was the last time this group as such would be meeting; we would be in a different group next week, and there may be some feelings about this. Then I attempted to explain the difference between “acting out” and “acting in”, and referred to the previous evening where someone had stood up and passed a cushion to another group member who promptly kicked it across the room. I suggested that in this group we need to use words rather than actions. I told Neville Symington’s story (Symington, 2006) about how humans are different from ducks: If a duckling does not learn to swim by a certain age it will never be able to; however, as humans we are different, as we are able to allow one thing to stand for another. In time the group, each other, and me as conductor, may all come to stand for something in each other’s minds.

The group was hard work that evening and I ended the evening saying, “I feel as if we all have our own group tonight, so there are six groups in the room and they are all different. Perhaps one day these six groups might be more similar.”

Reflecting back over the past ten years I realise I have learned a little from experience how to be of more use to the group as conductor, setting a frame for the work of the group. Now if someone asks a question in the group I suggest they might be able to say something about themselves that has prompted their question. This is partly the influence of Balint Groups that has come through my supervisor, Louise de Lambert. Whilst the group would like to call this a “rule”, I resist this, suggesting the asking of a question is a symptom to be understood.

I have also learned to challenge someone when they begin to speak about another group member’s experience: I believe the only person we can speak about with any authority is our self and even this is subject to doubt! If someone is speaking without the use of the “upright pronoun”, I suggest they reflect on its absence. Over the years the group has begun to take responsibility for itself in both these matters.

An analyst once said to me that groups are always psychotic. I think this is what Bion was referring to when he observed activity in groups, which focussed on the group preserving itself as if it had “a natural tendency to disintegrate” (Symington, 1996, p. 128). Sometimes in a group, the wellbeing of individuals becomes secondary to an assumption there is a need to maintain the group, even though there is no effort to make the group worthwhile: being a group becomes an end in itself. Bion called the mental states associated with this activity basic assumption mentality (Bion, 1961).

Basic assumption mentality is emotionally driven and requires no training, experience, or mental development. It makes use of our readiness to engage in this way. It is “instantaneous, inevitable, and instinctive” (Bion, 1961, p. 116).

Bizarrely, Bion observed groups expressing basic assumption mentality through one of three mutually exclusive patterns:

- Dependency: the group behaves as though it requires a leader to continue to exist.
- Pairing: the group requires and encourages a relationship between two people to dominate. The group will gather around these two people as if it were a spectator sport.
- Fight/Flight: the group concerns itself with the boundary of the group and what lies

beyond, that either needs to be fought or fled from. There would be something bad about the outside world from which the group offers refuge.

As I sat with and in the group from week to week I found myself developing Bionian binocular vision, aware of the group behaving as a group and also as a collection of individuals. It became clearer to me that when the group was behaving as a group one of the basic assumptions was in evidence.

There is something so peculiar about the exclusivity of Bion's basic assumptions it led me to link them with an architectural sub-thesis I wrote on refuge (Balfour, 1987) and to think onto-spatially about them. I believe there are three mutually exclusive ways of marking a site, a space, a place, a refuge, a home.

Firstly, there is the experience/place/space that exists as a result of a mark, a reference point, a flagpole or obelisk, a spire, a teacher, any object we gather around. In two dimensions this may be represented by a point.



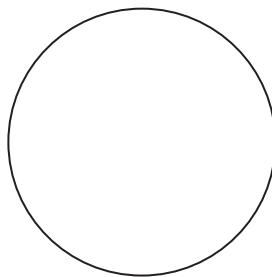
This is related to Dependency.

Then there is the experience/place/space that exists as a result of the relationship between two points: relationship, the couple, generativity, order, structure and connection. In two dimensions this may be represented by a line or arc, drawn between two points, which always has the possibility of extension at either end, beyond each point, to an unknown beyond.



This is related to Pairing.

Lastly there is the experience/place/space that exists as a result of marking a boundary, defining an inside and an outside, container, edge. In two dimensions this may be represented by a circle.



This is related to Fight/Flight.



Although Bion did not discuss this, these three figures form a linear development. Beginning with a point (dependence), moving to the space between two points (pairing), and then the space enclosed by an infinite number of points (fight/flight). They are mutually exclusive except as we approach infinity where the difference between them vanishes.

These patterns may also be related to the development of a newly integrated infant, as it teeters on an edge between integration and un-integration:

- Dependence: Orienting centre, reference point, breast, phallus, etc.
- Pairing: Mother and infant, parental couple, relationship, sexual union, primal scene, etc.
- Fight/Flight: Inside/outside, boundary, edge, covering, skin, womb, container, etc.

They similarly relate to a powhiri, including:

- The wero: The orienting centre;
- Tangata whenua and manuhiri: The space between; and
- The marae: The space within;

to the three jewels in Buddhism:

- Buddha: The orienting centre and reference point;
- Dharma: The truth as it emerges from debate between two subjectivities or from holding a space in meditation; and
- Sangha: The fellowship of spiritual community;

and to a Promise of Home:

- Home as an orienting centre;
- Home as a space held by a couple; and
- Home as a place with an inside

Like an infant held together by its mother's psyche, a group experiences a sense of integration due to the unifying state of mind of whichever basic assumption is active at the time.

I just referred to the way the difference between the three basic assumptions vanishes as they tend towards infinity and this reminds me of the work of Matte Blanco on bi-logic (1988). He stated there are levels to the infinite unconscious, and he used the mathematics of infinite sets to think about these levels. At a conscious level, we are all separate beings in the room together but as we move towards the deeper unconscious all differences between us begin to vanish. At some point the difference between an inside and an outside also vanishes.

Often when someone is speaking in the group about events in their life I am able to link this with events within the group. The group has proven a rich source of transferences and countertransference where projections and projective identifications can find a home, be thought about, and, from time to time, worked through.

From another perspective, following Darian Leader (2011), it is not the basic assumption



group activity that is psychotic, rather this is the work the group undertakes (the symptom) to endeavour to manage the underlying psychosis (a natural tendency to disintegrate) that threatens the group.

I had an illustration of the basic assumptions operating in the group recently: A group member became tearful and spoke about the news of the recent violent abduction of a young woman. The group started to bemoan how awful these people are to do these things, which I associated to fight/flight. I said: "It would be a mistake to think we are somehow different inside this group". This caused general upset but eventually someone was brave enough to own up to their own murderous fantasies. This allowed others to think and speak about their darker sides and the group did some useful work.

According to Bion, the "work" I have just spoken of refers to activity in a group where the individuals establish contact with reality and, recognising the need to evolve, work together towards a common aim. Bion called this a "work group" (Bion, 1961, p. 98), but it is not really a group, rather it is a way of describing an aspect of mental states operating within a group. In these mental states, learning is by experience. There is a need for truth and an awareness of the painful consequences of acting without an adequate grasp of reality.

Returning to my onto-spatial deliberation, I understand work group mentality as a field phenomenon, such that the individuals take for granted the group as *turangawaewae*, without the need to inscribe a basic assumption on that field.

It has surprised me how important the group has become for its members. They often speak about their distress at the upcoming breaks, or their anxiety about a new member joining or someone leaving. Over the years it has become a place to return to, where feelings are contained and spoken about, rather than just discharged. There is a level of maturity in the group such that it has a capacity to undertake mental work to achieve a task. It has developed a capacity for work group activity.

I suggest this maturity is linked to a "capacity to be alone", which Winnicott (1958) proposed was vital to development. The work group may be thought of as a psychological environment where "ego-relatedness" is primary and "id-relationships" within the group strengthen the work of the group rather than disrupt it. Individuals in work group mentality are able to experience being alone in the presence of others. Although there is no such thing as a "work group", there will be aspects of work group mentality in any group that is orientated towards work.

Sometimes this group works hard; the task is hard to define. It seems to be about finding a way to be together in order to understand each other and ourselves better, in our individual subjectivities and commonalities.

From time to time someone will explode in the group when narcissistically wounded, and the other group members act like a blast screen, absorbing the impact and allowing the person who has exploded to recover themselves in the steadiness of the group, without too much shame.

In conclusion, I believe any group which is endeavouring to be creative needs to bring the basic assumption activity and the work group activity into relationship: emotional states associated with the active basic assumption and mental states associated with the work group can then enter a dialectical relation where "each creates, informs, preserves, and negates the other" in the realm of transitional phenomena and potential space (Winnicott,

1971, p. 107). There is no such thing as a group without these moments where the group is created as a symbolic object in the mind of participating subjects.

Ten years on, just before the group closed to members joining or leaving over summer, as it does each year, the last of the founding members — who thought he had it all worked out on the first night — left. With some encouragement from Louise de Lambert I decided it was time to write about my experiences of “savouring” and “devouring”, as I have tended this group in the night for ten years.

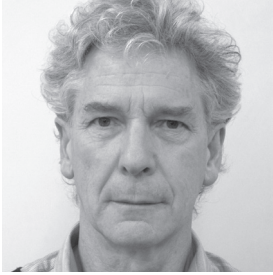
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