3.
THE WORK OF WILFRED
BION ON GROUPS
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Since 1965 the Washington School of Psychiatry has sponsored a series of residential Group Relations Conferences in the tradition developed in England by the Centre for Applied Social Research of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. The focus of these conferences is the group, as a whole dynamic field in relationship to other fields. Their uniqueness lies in the highly disciplined concentration on the part of the staff upon this focus. The individual’s personal life, his individual characteristics, and his dyadic relationships are not the subject of the study. A grasp of the work in this area by the British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion can be helpful not only to participants in these conferences but to anyone who is occupied with groups. Since his work on first reading often seems obscure, a brief explication of his major ideas may facilitate understanding.

The shift in perspective from the individual to the group is difficult to make in actual practice although it is often given lip service. It is like a shift to a higher order of magnitude, which is not easy when the lower order is in itself very complex and by no means thoroughly understood. But the shift is necessary in order to grasp social phenomena. From this perspective it is often possible to see the problems of the individual or the pair in a new light. This is well known to family therapists, who find an individual child or a marital relationship more comprehensible when seen in the framework of the entire family.

The Washington School of Psychiatry-Tavistock Conferences provide opportunities for members to study behavior in large groups of 50-60, in small groups of 10-12, and in intergroup situations. No particular theoretical framework is prescribed, and staff members come with various theoretical points of view and from various professional orientations, including sociology, psychology, psychoanalysis, and business administration. But Bion’s concepts have been especially useful to the staff since they formulate group psychological processes in integrative terms. A. K. Rice, who has directed most of the British and American conferences since 1962, was strongly influenced by his membership in a training group conducted by Bion in 1947-48, as well as by Bion’s theories.

Much of the material on which Bion based his theories and many of the examples which he gives come from the small groups which he conducted at the Tavistock Clinic. He does not deal exclusively with these, however, but also discusses large