

## **GROUP DEFENSIVE PROCESSES WITH REFERENCE TO AN ORGANISATION THAT DISAVOWS CLIMATE CHANGE SCIENCE**

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There is a sense in the current socio-political environment that the proponents of climate change action are having less social influence than they would like in order to deal with the problems of climate change.

This paper looks at the nature of social influence of groups in society, and then looks at their dynamics with particular reference to the insights of the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion (1897-1979).

### **SOCIAL INFLUENCE ON THE INDIVIDUAL OR HOW GROUPS PRESSURE INDIVIDUALS**

At the coalface of the real economy there is a mass of corporate resistance to acceptance of climate change. Conor 2010 put it this way:

"Companies that profit from fossil fuel energy give millions to campaigns against carbon taxes and other controls on emissions", Conor 2010 p 253.

And when these sceptical and denialist groups are dominant in society Conor points out that, "intellectuals/activists, (are) always on the defensive, (and) struggle to articulate a coherent position against (such) dominant groups" Conor 2010 p 254.

Relevant groups include coal companies, conservative political parties, industrial umbrella associations, some religious groups like charismatic Christians, some grass-roots groups in communities like farmer's wives.

### **QUESTIONS OF INTEREST**

Two areas of interest arise from this situation about the influence of groups:

1. How does group pressure or social influence affect the individual's thought?
2. What sort of defensive functioning do groups use to maintain intellectually indefensible and maladaptive or dysfunctional positions?

### **ASCH'S SEMINAL STUDY ON THE QUESTION OF GROUP PRESSURE OR SOCIAL INFLUENCE ON THE INDIVIDUAL**

Social psychologist Solomon Asch in 1955 began with the research question of how individuals maintain their independence of judgement in the face of disagreement with a group. His experiment involved a group of 7 to 9 young men assembled in a room for a psychological experiment in visual judgement. These people were to compare lengths of lines. That's what they were told. A set of two cards were presented, one with a single vertical line, and a second card with 3 vertical lines of various lengths. One of the lines on the second card was the same length as the line on the first card, the other 2 lines are substantially different.

The participants were seated in the room and each subject announced his opinion as to which

line on the second card matched the line on the first card. For the first few sets of cards, everyone agreed on the lines which match.

Then the first 8 participants, who were confederates of the experimenter, purposely matched a wrong line, so the subject at the end was confronted with having to agree with the majority or follow with his perceptual senses.

Results showed that 36.8% of subjects went with the majority. How come?

Asch wrote: "Among the extremely yielding persons we found a group who quickly reached the conclusion: "I am wrong, they are right." Others yielded in order "not to spoil your results." Many of the individuals who went along suspected that the majority were "sheep" following the first responder or that the majority were victims of an optical illusion; nevertheless, these suspicions failed to free them at the moment of decision. More disquieting were the reactions of subjects who construed their difference from the majority as a sign of some general deficiency in themselves, which at all costs they must hide. On this basis they desperately tried to merge with the majority." Asch 1955 p 51. He concludes: "That we have found the tendency to conformity in our society so strong that reasonably intelligent and well-meaning young people are willing to call white black, is a matter of concern. It raises question about our ways of education and about the values that guide our conduct .... Those who participated in this challenging experiment agreed nearly without exception that independence was preferable to conformity." Asch 1955 p 55.

Reality is distorted and negated by social pressure. Conformity is powerful.

## THE BIONIAN ANALYSIS OF GROUP PROCESS AND DENIAL AS DEFENSE AGAINST THE WORK

Bion looked at the dynamics of how groups maintain their dysfunctionality.

First Bion expresses his fundamental idea thus:

"the individual is and always has been, a member of a group, .... 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," Bion 1961 p 168-9.

The first group in life is the mother and child, or primary caregiver and child, even when the child is in utero, and subsequently other relations develop with other individuals. One is never alone, though one may fantasise it.

Whenever a group forms, one can conceive of it as being for a purpose. In the adult world the purpose of a group is usually achieved through conscious, rational means, the application of logical thought within a structure of tasks, processes, roles and rules.

Bion pointed out that whatever the group fears, or is anxious about, or feels threatened by, it's the same as any individual may find anxious, fearful and threatening. E.g. a group fears defeat just as an individual fears it.

In thinking about groups there is a representation in psychology of a group's effect conceptualised as "unconscious collusion."

Unconscious collusion is a tacit and unspoken agreement by a group to think, feel and behave in particular ways which exclude alternatives. Specific sorts of thoughts, feelings and behaviours are therefore prohibited or obliterated by an unconscious agreement. How do we know the collusion exists? A skilled outside observer of the group, without a vested interest in the group, can often identify those thoughts and feelings which have been excluded and provide them back to the group which then comes to realise the veracity of the external perception.

An example of this phenomenon is a family who come to a family therapy counselling session with unhappiness in their relationships but soon exhibit in the counselling room a failure to speak about certain behaviours of family members. They remain silent on these matters evidently for fear of upsetting each other. Examples include taboos on speaking about one family member's peculiar behaviours, speaking about sexual matters, speaking about roles and duties in the family, expressing certain emotions in the family. After some therapeutic work the counsellor often finds that the family members were completely unaware that some topics were taboo. They simply behaved as if there was an *assumption* that certain subjects were not present to be spoken about, and usually they were unaware of this assumption. The counsellor's work then may focus on making conscious what has been unconsciously prohibited in the family's interactions.

## BION'S FINDINGS

Bion's work with groups in the 1940s threw light on unconscious assumptions which he published in his book "Experiences in Groups" in 1961.

He identified three group phenomena which were powerful unconscious and unlearned strategies of evasion and denial which were opposed to the conscious aims and intentions and efforts of the group fulfilling its purpose. He demonstrated how the assumptions satisfied the emotional needs of members of the group rather than the rational purposes which it had set itself to achieve.

He referred to them as basic assumptions.

The purposeful rational thinking and effective group he called the "work group."

The first basic assumption Bion called "*dependency*" in which the group behaves as if "the group met in order to be maintained by a leader on whom it depends for nourishment, material and spiritual, and protection," Bion 1961 p 147. The features of the dependent group are dominated by the urge to look after its members and make them feel good which avoids the bother and pain of the real purpose which would be accomplishing the work of the group. Attempts to change the group's focus on being 'looked after,' are resisted. If the leader is absent the dependent group concerns itself with what the leader would have thought. Bion mentioned the church as prone to this assumption.

A second basic assumption group he called "*pairing*" in which the group behaves with "hopeful expectation." Bion 1961 p 151. The features of the pairing group are dominated by the sense in the group that the pairing together of some members will solve all problems in the future. When pairings do occur, hope, Messianic hope, is vested in them. This future focus

defends them against present problems so they sustain a sense of hope which avoids the work. Bion mentioned the aristocracy whose concern with breeding as liable to suffer this assumption.

The third basic assumption group he called "*fight-flight*" in the which the group behaved as if it had "met to fight something or to run away from it," Bion 1961 p 151. The features of this group are dominated by the sense of an enemy who has to be fought, or escaped from by fleeing. Changes in the group's behaviour, such as a focus back on the actual work, is resisted by angry protest at perceived threats. Bion mentioned the army as vulnerable to suffering this assumption seeing everything in terms of a battle.

In general, groups phase in and out of these three states of assumptions and the *work* state until they either achieve their purpose of the work group or become caught in a basic assumption never to leave it.

He also said "I do not mean to claim that they are basic explanations which between them explain all conduct in the group - that would indeed be extravagant nonsense," Bion 1961 p 165.

The basic assumptions, when prevalent in the group, powerfully energise people to avoid the real rational, scientific work of the group.

## APPLICATION OF BION'S ANALYSIS TO A GROUP IN DENIAL OF MAN-MADE CLIMATE CHANGE

Below is some text which shall be used to apply some intimations of Bion's ideas about assumptions to try and understand what the group is actually doing in contrast to what it thinks it's doing.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 4th report in 2007 was released with conservative but serious predictions about the effects of carbon on the planet.

In response to the report of the IPCC, an American private research organisation called The Heartland Institute sponsored a report by a group of its own making which called itself the Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change, the NIPCC.

Wikipedia states: "The Heartland Institute is an American conservative and libertarian public policy think tank based in Chicago, which advocates free market policies. The Institute is designated as a 501(c)(3) non-profit by the Internal Revenue Service and has a full-time staff of 40, including editors and senior fellows. The Institute was founded in 1984 and conducts research and advocacy work on issues including government spending, taxation, healthcare, tobacco policy, global warming, information technology and free-market environmentalism. In the 1990s, the group worked closely with the tobacco company Philip Morris to question the science linking secondhand smoke to health risks, and to lobby against government public-health reforms. More recently, the Institute has focused on questioning the science of climate change, and was described by the New York Times as "the primary American organization pushing climate change skepticism." The Institute has sponsored meetings of climate change skeptics, and has been reported to promote public school curricula challenging the scientific consensus on climate change." Wikipedia.org 2012.

The title of the Heartland Institute published report was: "Climate Change Reconsidered:

2011 Interim Report" by Idso et.al 2011, and it was published for the Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change (NIPCC). It's subtitle was "Recanting Alarmists, Climategate."

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Mike Hulme (2009), a professor of climate change in the School of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia and a contributor to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), published in 2009 a book that contained admissions of uncertainty rarely voiced by insiders of the climate change research community. Hulme wrote, "the three questions examined above 'What is causing climate change? By how much is warming likely to accelerate? What level of warming is dangerous?' represent just three of a number of contested or uncertain areas of knowledge about climate change" (p. 75).

Hulme also admitted, "Uncertainty pervades scientific predictions about the future performance of global and regional climates. And uncertainties multiply when considering all the consequences that might follow from such changes in climate" (p. 83). On the subject of the IPCC's credibility, he admitted it is "governed by a Bureau consisting of selected governmental representatives, thus ensuring that the Panel's work was clearly seen to be serving the needs of government and policy. The Panel was not to be a self-governing body of independent scientists" (p. 95).

These are all basic "talking points" of global warming realists, which invariably result in charges of "denial" and "industry shill" when expressed by someone not in the alarmist camp. To see them written by Hulme reveals how the debate has changed.

Just months after Hulme's book was released, a large cache of emails was leaked by someone at the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia. "Climategate," as it has come to be known, revealed deliberate efforts by leading scientific supporters of the IPCC, and of climate alarmism more generally, to hide flaws in their evidence and analysis, keep "skeptics" from appearing in peer-reviewed journals, and avoid sharing their data with colleagues seeking to replicate their results (Bell, 2011; Sussman, 2010; Montford, 2010). The emails reveal that important data underlying climate policy are missing or have been manipulated.

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One phenomenon apparent in this quoted passage is the sense of an enemy, described as the "scientific supporters of the IPCC" and the perpetrators of "climate alarmism." This alerts us to the fight-flight response. Heartland behaves as if there is an enemy who has to be fought off. A second group of enemies are the IPCC panel and the governments whose needs they serve. These are suggestively cast into the enemy camp because they lack "credibility." What is being avoided here? Attention to the scientific findings.

A second aspect is naming its report as "Published for the Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change (NIPCC)." This can be seen as an attempt to inflate its own importance to the level of the IPCC. It's entered into a sort of masculinity dominance ritual. It's the narcissistic position. It exhibits unconsciously, envy of the IPCC, and envy which is made up of both wanting to be bathed in the authority, fame and glory of the UN IPCC, and also wanting to destroy it by replacing its conclusions and taking all the spoils for itself. This is another manifestation of the fighting response of the fight-flight basic assumption that the group is unconsciously acting out.

A third aspect is the way in which Heartland's focus is onto doubt. (One needs to keep in mind that over 97% of climate scientists conclude that the man-made climate change is occurring and that the errors in the IPCC report were very minor, and were subsequently amended in open scientific forums.) This focus on doubt avoids focusing on the vast bulk of scientific findings. The purpose of such refracted viewing is to look after the Heartland organization and resist any threats to its fundamentals or even its existence. Again its about dealing with an enemy, but has the character of a sniper as opposed to an open confrontation. It masquerades as scientific in its presentation with academic references and quotations from scholars but uses these to foment doubt in a war of words. It's fight mentality, which again avoids the more difficult work of rational analysis of the scientific data.

A fourth aspect is the sense of passion in the passage. The phrase "rarely voiced by insiders" is meant to evoke a sense that insiders in the IPCC have dissident voices but they don't voice them. This has the slight echo of paranoia, of a significant suspiciousness of others, and together with a sense that they are not being looked after by those dissident scientists. In this case, there are suggestions of the basic assumption of dependency. They yearn to be looked after. But it is a perverse expectation given the fighting position they assume.

A fifth aspect is the suggestion of an argument from authority. Belief in Professor Hulme's views perpetrating doubt are dependent on his status. His statements are quoted without any corroborating evidence such as figures of viewpoints which he found. This presentation suggests the dependency assumption where the organisation expects to be looked after by leaders, or in this case eminent individuals who simulate leaders. Argument from authority has no rational validity.

A sixth aspect is the use by the writers of a particular political mode of operation which creates doubt, and then proposes the solution to that doubt it has created. This is a manipulation commonly used in politics. One creates the problem and then proposes the solution but the reality is that the problem was manufactured for a political purpose. In the case of the Heartland Institute, the manipulation is to create doubt about man-made climate change which discredits the scientists, and then propose their self-proclaimed equally scientifically based analysis. The putative purpose of the manipulation is to allow the public to relax into scepticism and denial which offers them the comfort of not having to do anything. The actual purpose is propaganda on behalf of its constituents who are many large US corporations. The irony is that Heartland accuses the scientist's spokespeople of manipulation. The fact that over 97% of climate scientists do not express doubts exposes the Heartland manipulation. The manipulative behaviour of Heartland implies that little or nothing needs to be done about the climate. That behaviour suggests the assumption of pairing where the suggestion is that if you join with them, the problems will be solved for the future. This approach defends against having to deal with the problems of climate change at all.

## LAST POINTS

It is the emotional experiences which Bion draws attention to that alerts us to the idea that thinkers of the Hearland type do not have much belief in their capacity for learning by experience or learning from experience. It can be seen to boil down to the hatred of a process of development. There is a hatred of having to learn by experience at all, and lack of faith in the worth of such a kind of learning.

The basic assumptions group operates with the underlying fantasy of its own omniscience which is simply vested in its current example of itself, but it masks this with allegedly rational

attacks upon its enemies.

In general, learning is dependent on affection. The child usually learns best when he or she likes his teachers. We don't tend to learn from people we hate or are indifferent to. Hateful conflict destroys the capacity to learn, and learn we must to cope with the future.

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