



MOOC 1

Learning Unit 1

Northfield psychiatric hospital (UK)

During the Second World War, in 1942, a hospital in Birmingham, named the Hollymoor Hospital was transformed into the Northfield Military Psychiatric Hospital. A new urgent issue was coming from the battlefield: traumatic events had been shocking military personnel, making them incapacitated and disabled. The community needed to rehabilitate them back into society and back into the army. Time and military needs were pressing. That was the scenario in which two psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, Wilfred Bion (1897-1979) and Johan Rickman (1891-1951) in 1943 introduced group psychotherapy as a psychotherapeutic treatment. The novelty of the experiments has been an inspiration to the understanding of group and social dynamics ever since.

It is important to describe who was being treated. The soldiers could be young men, sometimes teenagers, who had been overwhelmed or over-exposed to the violence of the war. The task at Northfield was, as Wilfred Bion put it, 'to produce self-respecting men socially adjusted to the community and therefore willing to accept its responsibilities whether in peace or war' (Bion and Rickman, 1943: 678). The hospital was a military organization: uniforms and military discipline were obligatory. The task was to reintroduce as many as possible of the soldiers to useful work in the British Army, which almost certainly never involved returning them to the battle front.

A basic principle of the group treatment was to regard the group as an enabler, in which an active process based on relational and transferable skills would allow soldiers to work together and to regain self-respect. Involving themselves in activities and interactions, they inspired each other to gain insight and awareness. In practice, they developed activities of various kinds, work and leisure: occupational therapy and creative activities: "peer welcome committee" by more experienced patients to introduce new soldiers to the hospital, and entertainment groups, such as theatre and a band. To help organize the wide variety of activities, the innovative idea of the multi-disciplinary team, with all members contributing their opinions equally, was introduced. It was only many years later that this was recognized as a keystone in traditional psychiatric practice.

The second fundamental development by Bion and Rickman was the study of the 'here and now' interactions and relationships between the group members, rather than focusing on psycho-

historical issues. Peer group discussions between the psychiatrists on how groups operated were also novel. These were held on a weekly basis for nearly a year and were an opportunity for all the doctors to openly discuss the dilemmas they were experiencing in running groups. Rank gave way to experience in group psychotherapy.

There were several experiments at Northfield itself. Generally, the *First Northfield Experiment* conducted by Rickman and Bion (Bion and Rickman, 1943) was regarded as a failure in the sense that it was closed down after six weeks. Northfield was not a conventional experiment run to achieve certain results as the ones in the laboratory.

So it was important to inscribe the *Second Northfield Experiment*, in the frame of social psychology based on Kurt Lewin's social field theory in which each individual is in relation to the group-as-a-whole. Siegmund Heinrich Foulkes (1898-1976) seemed to see each individual in relation to each other individual, to become the group-as-a-whole.

Bion and Rickman approached the Rehabilitation unit as a low morale group in which activities remained compartmentalized. The training wing stayed separate from the medical unit.

Then Foulkes, in 1945, attempted to deal with this by linking the treatment service on one hand to occupational therapy on the other.

Now we could say there were many outcomes, both in social science and therapeutic treatment, that came from the work carried out at Northfield. They came out of the innovative interventions in military psychiatry of the 1940s:

1. First, the therapeutic community;
2. Then, group therapies, both Tavistock (Bion, 1961) and group analysis (Foulkes and Anthony, 1957);
3. Immediately after the war, the Civil Resettlement Units (Wilson, Trist and Curle, 1990);
4. Then the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (Dicks, 1970);
5. The Group Relations training programmes—the Leicester Conferences (Fraher, 2004);
6. Anti-psychiatry and the 1960s 'revolution'—and its dialectical antithesis, Mrs Thatcher (Laing, 1960; Cooper, 1967).

Northfield 'Experiments' brought the social movement of democracy into therapeutic work, and they contributed to the respect for the person and to enabling better environments and relationships.

References:

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