A personal reflection on some of the origins of GroupAware[1]

By Simon Bell[2].

Overview

The Bayswater Institute provides a range of research, consultancy and professional development services to individuals, groups and organisations as they implement change in our complex, constantly shifting world.

Change requires collaboration. The Institute uses Double Task to develop our client's capabilities to work in and understand groups of all kinds and levels. We call this capability GroupAware and recognise it as a significant contribution to personal development, efficiency and resilience.

Relentless focus on "getting the job done" leaves people alienated from the group and disengaged. This dilutes the common purpose, creates unnecessary barriers and results in sub-optimal outcomes. GroupAware provides a new way of seeing teams or groups and provides insights into more effective team working.

GroupAware empowers people, at all levels of organisations. This leads to improved team performance, deeper reflective practice and the resilience to catalyse change in a complex world.

Introduction

At the Bayswater Institute we are keen to work with groups of people in a meaningful way. The reason for this is we believe that many examples of sustainable human progress are explained by groups, teams and communities working in ways where meaning is shared and cared for. When a group is working well, when it is well in its working, it is often the case that the group is *GroupAware*.

GroupAware is a Bayswater concept. By it individuals will improve the wisdom and function of the groups with which they work and from a reflective experience, address issues such as intolerance, ineffectiveness and weak group empathy. Much has been written about dysfunction and chaos in groups, teams and communities. Among the many bedevilling issues, I have found that nine emerge on a regular basis, these are set out in Table 1.

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[1] GroupAware is an outcome sought at the BI Wisdom in Groups event - https://www.bayswaterinst.org/leadership-development/

[2] The following document is a personal reflection by Simon Bell on the origin of GroupAware.

Table 1. Key issues GroupAware addresses

Key ideas			
	Lack of self-discipline	Irresponsibility	Feeling trapped
	Inauthenticity and insincere action	Purposelessness	Poor ability to network
	Managing the obvious issues only	Focusing on heroics and firefighting	The bottom line is front, back and centre of all.

In my experience these nine recur as issues for groups in many situations. In isolation many of them are not disastrous but in combination they can destroy the work of the group before it has begun. GroupAware as an emergent property is one way to address these nine issues. I will return to them in the final summary.

There are many ways to measure and assess group progress. One way to assess groups, in terms of leadership, power and dominance is on a matrix scale called the BECM scale[3]. BECM has seven rungs or stages, ranging from 1 (the most effective and enlightened groups of reflective practitioners) to 7 (the domain of tyrants and bullies[4]). It is a useful simplification to assume that the more any group shares and makes use of meaning, the better the group will function and the higher up the BECM scale will be its subsequent behaviour. BECM is intended as a graduated continua and great groups can occur at various ascending points on the scale. However, a group working in a BECM stage 1 way is often a group exhibiting the highest qualities of GroupAware.

The concept of GroupAware can be mapped out as theory, method and practical application. From the individual to the group (see Figure 1). Here I want to establish the historical basis for the GroupAware concept.

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[3] See the Bell and Morse reference in the Reference section. BECM stands for Being, Engaging, Contextualising and Managing. Each of these could be seen as powerful group characteristics. A group has to be in order to be known as a group. In a BECM analysis being is qualitatively assessed. It has to engage in work and it has to contextualise current work with legacy understandings. Finally, it needs to manage its engagement. All of these variables can be done well or not so well.

[4] for more on this and the BI BECM approach see the Group Insight Workshop at https://www.bayswaterinst.org/workshops/

Figure 1. Theory, Method and Application - GroupAware
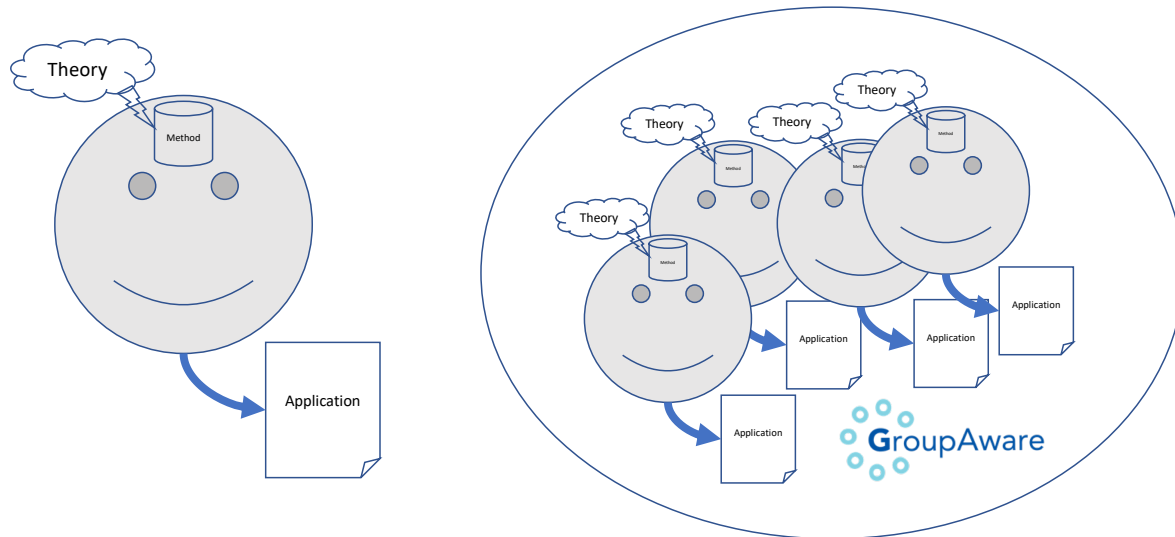
The intellectual foundation from which GroupAware emerges meanders around a number of authors and thinkers. You may find some to be surprising.

A complete study of the intellectual legacy from which GroupAware emerges would be a major project. Here I want to point to a few leading influences, major thinkers and practitioners who provide important pointers on the way to the development of the concept. I arrange these thinkers into three triads of authors. Three groupings to explore in order to assess the need for and origins of GroupAware. Set 1 is Nietzsche, Heidegger and Freud. Set 2: Arendt, Sartre and Frankl. Set 3: Eger, Bion and Bridger. Finally, I mention Jon Kabat-Zinn – the original author of Mindfulness whose important contribution links us back to our first Set.

This is a short essay, and much more could be said about all these authors. For the purposes of GroupAware I select a few highly relevant ideas only. Some of the ideas presented are major steps towards the GroupAware concept. Some represent issues which the GroupAware concept needs to be able to contest. Overall, the work of this paper is to describe how these ideas explain some of the main values behind GroupAware. The three triads of authors take the ideas from the primary foundations for GroupAware, (Set 1: its being), the need for GroupAware (Set 2: its life) and the way in which GroupAware emerges into group practice (Set 3: its collaborative intelligence).

Set 1 – the Being of GroupAware.

It has been contested by many classically inclined thinkers that all philosophical enquiry finds its origins with Plato and indeed, the eductive[5] principle applied by Socrates in the Discourses could be seen as a foundation for GroupAware. But here I want to focus on more recent thinkers and writers. I will content myself with more contemporary authors – many of whom had their intellectual epiphanies around the times of the great wars of the 20th Century. The basis for the GroupAware concept and therefor for ideas around groups and meaning, find early inspiration in a trinity of work: Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900), Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976), and Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939).

In our practice as group facilitators at the BI, it is often the case that we find out more about the coherence of a group by first finding out more about the nature of the individuals who make up the group.

The individual emerged as a separate and meaningful social construct in the writings which emerged at the time of the European Enlightenment (the 18th Century). But the individual as self-moving and truly independent found agency in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche has had something of a bad press. He has been widely associated with Nazi ideology, but this was largely as a consequence of the influence of his sister after his death. Nietzsche's theories were hard hitting but not explicitly fascist. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche introduces powerful concepts of the human person, of the will to power and of resulting human self-mastery. Self-mastery has a significant correspondence to Kabat Zinn's Mindfulness in a contemporary context. It is hard to over-emphasise how startling Nietzsche's ideas were at the time of writing. Nietzsche sees humanity as a project in process and in this project concepts of standing alone and taking responsibility are of primary importance. These ideas find further resonance in the work of another contentious philosopher: Martin Heidegger. Heidegger had a strong allegiance with Fascism and was a practicing Nazi. He was undoubtedly a complicated person. He never apologised for his affiliation with National Socialism but was defended by ex-students such as Hannah Arendt – herself Jewish and an escapee of Hitler's regime. Many of his views were and remain repellent, nevertheless, Heidegger provided much of the ground work for later movements such as Existentialism and his ideas around Dasein (being-there or

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[5] Meaning: to 'draw forth' the ideas within

presence), the vital importance for authenticity in our being and the 'thrownness' of existence into life have been widely discussed and developed by subsequent scholars. In Heidegger's assessment the individual is both a victim of wider forces and, at the same time, as Dasein, an authentic individual realisation of independence and self-knowing. I could argue that Heidegger's work supports Nietzsche's lonely Übermensch[6]. If Nietzsche and Heidegger provide us with the individual sorting out her/his reality, Freud provides us with another dimension. To some extent Heidegger and Nietzsche project humanity as mobile and conscious/ self-conscious and aware. Capable of another key concept; choice. Freud extrapolated that the conscious was balanced by a deeper, unknown and powerful realm of the unconscious. The nature of this unconscious, shared by all humanity is shadowy and mysterious and yet ubiquitous and resonant with concerns for the understanding of conscious action. The unconscious is a place where this identity can be forged and possibly lost.

In summary, and taking themes from each author, human beings are thrown into existence where much of what we are, our Dasein, is unknowable to us, semi-lost to our unconsciousness. And yet, it can be argued that we have the potential to achieve mindful self-mastery, a self-identification above any imposed order or context. This first step is all about explaining our potential in being. However, so far this has been about the individual. Freud has pointed at the depth of human nature. This needs further exploration.

Key ideas for GroupAware: Self-mastery/Mindfulness, Authenticity and the Unconscious.

Set 2. The Life of GroupAware

To engage with the exploration of human action I refer to three authors; Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 - 1980), Viktor Frankl (1905 - 1997) and Hannah Arendt (1906 - 1975).

Jean-Paul Sartre – hugely affected by both Heidegger and Nietzsche, is conventionally thought of as the father of existentialism. He formidably asserts our being is for ourselves. He declares that we have no excuses to make for our being and that we can refuse to be whatever we seek not to be. The realities of personal freedom, responsibility and choice are central.

So far, the writers referred to have been philosophers, at this point I bring in the first psychologist, Viktor Frankl. Frankl took the existential ideas of Sartre and realised them in

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[6] Nietzsche saw this as an ideal or a superior person. A model person able to rise beyond conventional morality to create new rules and values.

Logotherapy or *Meaning* Therapy. Frankl saw the human search for meaning as being key to a life of any value. In his understanding, meaning could be gained via various means but, as a psycho-therapist he was keenly interested in the potential for meaning in suffering, guilt and the threat of death. Following the experience of these, inner progress was possible. In all of this the human being has agency and choice.

Building on harrowing personal experience as an escapee from Nazi Germany, Hannah Arendt saw the downside of human agency related to suffering, guilt and death in the human-mass-agency of totalitarianism. As already noted, Arendt was an ex-student of Heidegger's and she defended him post-War. The fact that he represented some views abhorrent to her did not dismiss his insights in other domains. She was hugely affected by Heidegger's thought, recognised the value of authenticity but also saw, ranged against human action, the unthinking reaction of the manipulated mass. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt draws out how human combination, achieved by terror and consistency in Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union, overwhelmed individuals. Human collection in mass is demonstrated as achievable but worryingly so with the potential to destroy the individual in a nearly amoral and mechanistic manner. Sartre experienced the Second World War and it invoked in him the charge of 'no excuses'. Arendt shows the dynamic of this at play. Personal responsibility and "No excuses" is hard to justify when humanity moves at scale in a project of terror. If human beings are to work collectively then the nature of the group needs to be consciously and carefully addressed.

In summary ideas of authenticity, individuality, collective agency and psychological searches for meaning in examined life found new channels with Sartre, Frankl and Arendt. But this is still the assessment of theory and individual experience. GroupAware emerges from the interface of the psychosocial.

Key ideas for GroupAware: Personal responsibility, meaning and collective agency.

Set 3. The Collaborative Intelligence of GroupAware

The third and final aspect of this explanation of the grounding of GroupAware is explored in the work of Edith Eger (1928 -), Wilfred Bion (1897 - 1979) and Harold Bridger (1909 - 2005). Eger, like Arendt and Frankl had personal and formative experience of totalitarianism in Nazi Germany. But, for her the conclusions are different to that of Arendt. In: *The Choice*, Edith Eger arguably transcends what appears to be the overwhelming certainty of totalitarianism and

mass human agency. In this personal memoire the power of individual, family and group emerges as counter-weights to the overwhelming, crushing power of the mass operating under terror. As with Sartre and Frankl, the power of the individual to choose to oppose, to choose to be, to choose to find meaning is key.

Choice is an important concept in the move from personal psychological understanding to the understanding of the psychology of the group. This is expressed in the jump from Eger, Frankl and Sartre to Bion and this is via Bion's use of the medium of *valency* - an idea he develops in *Experience in Groups*. In this book Bion demonstrates how groups work on tasks. He infers valency in this social combination, taking the term, originating in chemistry and, according to Wikipedia, meaning: "the valence or valency of an element is a measure of its combining power with other atoms when it forms chemical compounds or molecules".

Bion considered valency in the case of human groupings to be the combination of one person with another. Whether human grouping is involuntary or by choice is often hard to assess but it can be argued that valency can be affected by circumstances. Valency does not obey a linear rule but perhaps gives us a key to understanding the behaviour of humans brought together in group formations.

Critical to the GroupAware concept, Bion's identification of the power of the group via the experience of the group allows us to explore group dynamics in a more methodological manner and this evolution of the method of assessment of the group is important for much which follows.

Bion drew upon the work of Melanie Klein and Freud in his assessment of the hidden life of the group. Groups are physical and psychological. Any group may contain groups within groups. Most groups come together to achieve specific objectives and at one level there is always a work group within the group. This work group manages the work to be accomplished but this explicit work would in turn often be affected by another group within the group - what Bion called the Basic Assumptions group[7]. Groups can only work well if the balance between work and assumption are managed or contained.

Here is where Bridger emerges and with his work the Double Task.

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[7] Drawing here on Freud, Bion understood the Basic Assumptions group to be one of three types - Dependent, Pairing or Fight/Flight dealing with leadership, sex and preservation.

Removing some of the Freudian baggage of Bion, Bridger was looking to understand group dynamics without superimposing on it the theoretical concerns and contested theories of earlier thinkers. In his "Double Task", Task 1 is the explicit work of the group and Task 2 the implicit. By attending to Task 2, Task 1 can be accomplished in a more sympathetic and effective manner. Sympathetic in that the group is more aware of its actions and their consequences to group members. Effective in that the group take conscious ownership of the deeper concerns of group members and draws these into the conscious work involved in Task 1. But, if Task 2 is ignored or abused, then Task 1 breaks down or, in extreme cases, can be irretrievably lost. Group members are alienated from each other, personal agendas have saliency over the agenda of the group (which may remain un-formulated by the group) and the management of division and conflict are a necessary part of the group leadership role. Indeed, it can become the group leaderships primary role.

Key ideas for GroupAware: Choice, valency and Double Task.

Summing up

It is not coincidental that the thinkers, philosophers and practitioners mentioned here had personal, often harrowing experience of war, of human conflict. It might be thought that conflict is often a powerful means for learning and the mass conflict of war can provide profound insight into human formations.

For the Bayswater Institute we are concerned with the meaningfulness of the group and of the group's function. We make use of the Double Task to help individuals in groups better understand their role, action and effectiveness. We can make assessment with BECM and identify how GroupAware the group is. This is evidenced by the BECM assessment of the explicit and implicit work of the group. Double Task is key to the process.

In so far as a group becomes accomplished at managing Task 1 and Task 2, so it becomes GroupAware, the members provide evidence of reflective practice and this is presented by a close conformity of the group behaviour to the expected behaviours of level 1 on the BECM scale.

At the outset I mentioned some key issues which GroupAware is designed to address (see Table 1). The three Sets of authors provide us with themes for GroupAware and these themes address the issues set out in Table 1 – see Table 2

Table 2. Issues first encountered and key ideas for GroupAware

Key ideas	Set 1	Set 2	Set 3
1	For lack of self-discipline – take up the challenge and engage with self-mastery/ Mindfulness	For group irresponsibility it is useful to first identify and encourage personal responsibility	When you are feeling trapped realise that you always have choices
2	If confronted by inauthenticity and insincere action seek to draw out the authentically held beliefs of the group	If the group seems to be purposeless, seek the higher meaning for which it exists	When there is a poor ability to network seek the valency which may be spontaneously emergent in the context
3	For groups where managing the obvious issues is predominant, look to the messages that emerge from the unconscious actions of group members	For groups where focusing on heroics and firefighting are the norm, find respite in collective agency	When a group is obsessed by the bottom line – Task 1 is front, back and centre of all, the Double Task can provide insights

Figure 2. Key ideas of GroupAware

Our objective with the GroupAware concept is to provide leaders with an insightful means to engage in the work of groups in a reflective manner. GroupAware emerges as a key outcome from Double Task groups in the Wisdom in Groups workshop run by the Bayswater Institute in London every year. Keeping in mind the Double Task, the objective is to provide a non-fussy, packageable and provocative Group Wisdom equivalent to the individual Mindfulness developed by Kabat-Zinn.

Kabat-Zinn's genius was to make Mindfulness a relatively easy to understand blend of Buddhism, psychoanalysis and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy which people can pick up and use to improve their inner balance and address personal issues such as depression and anxiety. People can subsequently go as deep as they like. Mindfulness is a relatively easy and useful gateway to a deep field as well as a valuable method in its own right.
GroupAware provides an accessible way to harness Harold Bridger's Double Task and a variety of systems methods. This in turn improves the wisdom and function of the group and from a reflective experience, address issues such as intolerance, ineffectiveness and weak group empathy. People can subsequently go as far in their analysis as they like. In this way GroupAware is a relatively stress-free and pragmatic way in to a complex and bewitching field as well as a valued method.

Summarizing the Summary

GroupAware includes the means to achieve:

- Insights into group work skills
- Methods of practice with this regard
- Quick gains in group etiquette and group powers
- Pointers to deeper dives into the group psyche (for the explorer)

The GroupAware concept emergent in the Wisdom in Groups event can potentially:

- Revolutionise group dynamics in organisations
- Produce major gains in team effectiveness
- Develop a truly learning reflective practice
- Catalyse a model for up-scaling groups to meet commensurate challenges

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