Background and Introduction

The focal conflict model of group work was developed by Dorothy Stock Whitaker and Morton A. Lieberman as set out in their book *Psychotherapy Through The Group Process* (New York: Atherton Press, 1964). Whitaker and Lieberman's book is the result of work with task and training groups, and beginning in 1955, with therapy groups. Their thinking has been influenced by the work of W.R. Bion and by the work of Thomas French who developed the concept of the “focal conflict” which he applied to individual sessions and to dreams.

Their ideas can assist people to be aware of what the balance of forces within individuals is at any moment in time. This awareness can then be used to develop new responses in conflict situations.


A Focal Conflict Model

The basic aim of Whitaker and Lieberman is to provide a theory of individual and group process relevant to the task and goals of assisting people. A group may be 2 or more people.

The model can be used to understand behaviour at several levels:

1. **Individually:** the internal conflicts people experience, both positive and negative which can create impasses or enable creative new behaviours to emerge
2. **Between individuals:** as above but each person has both positive and negative drivers for determining their behaviours which are usually unconsciously attributed to the other person (e.g. liking the other person (+ve) vs. blaming the other person (-ve or fear)
3. **In groups:** the culmination of all the paired attributions (both +ve and –ve) between individuals as described below

When people meet they bring their thoughts feeling, beliefs and assumptions about the context and the other people present with them. As they interact with each other they may respond to certain comments and not to others. This is based on their understanding of what is expected and required, usually tacit and not explicit, of the context and the situation. The aspects that are responded to are built on in some way relevant to each person and gradually emerge into a “shared” concern. The way people relate to this concern is unique for each person and these concerns are almost always linked in some way to the “here and now” situation. For example, a person who may complain in a meeting about the competence of another surgeon may also be expressing a concern about the competence of the person leading the meeting or even at some level have fear about their own competence.
**Elements of the Model**

**Disturbing Motive Opposed by a Reactive FEAR and Solution**

In the events of any group or pair of individuals we can see a common, covert conflict which is termed the group focal conflict. This group focal conflict consists of an impulse or positive force which is the disturbing motive opposed by an associated fear which is the reactive fear.

Both the disturbing motives and reactive fears refer to the current situation and people then find they react or respond to the situation and this is their solution – i.e. the solution in this model refers to the action people take. In some instances the action or solution could be to do or say nothing.

The group makes various attempts to find a solution to the group focal conflict. An example of this could be - when in a work situation individuals in a group or team may have the similar motives and fears operating at the same time. As a result they might as a group act as one:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disturbing Motive</th>
<th>Reactive fear</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wish to be unique</td>
<td>fear of disapproval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perceived as</td>
<td>concern about manager retaliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>competent by</td>
<td>manager and gain special treatment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Solutions**

When confronted with a group focal conflict, members direct efforts towards establishing a solution which will:

- reduce anxiety by alleviating reactive fears.
- at the same time satisfy maximally the disturbing impulse.
- there may be several solutions presented leading to competition between possible solutions.
- In order to be successful a solution must be shared and reduce reactive fears.

The solution in this approach refers to the behaviours and actions which are displayed “in the moment” as a result of the interaction between the disturbing motive and reactive fear. In this instance, the group members decide to act in ways that show they are alike rather than expressing their individual motivations to be unique etc.

**Restrictive and Enabling Solutions**

Solutions can be enabling or restrictive.

- A restrictive solution is directed primarily to alleviating fears at the expense of satisfying or expressing the disturbing motive.
An enabling solution is directed toward alleviating fears and, at the same time, allows for satisfaction or expression of the disturbing motive. The energy to fulfill the disturbing motive is greater than the reactive fear.

**DIFFICULTIES IN GAUGING GROUP CONFLICT**

Using a focal conflict model involves certain judgments about the meaning and relative importance of events in the life of the person or group. Content used in making a judgment may be specific verbal content, characteristic of interaction, enacted non-verbal material; verbal content interpreted symbolically, meta-communication through voice. All applies to the present here-and-now situation.

*Content can be summarised easily but non-verbal behaviour must be interpreted and involves more inference. Mood must frequently be grasped rather than measured. Because of these differences the elements of a session cannot be regarded as equivalent and cannot be treated additively. Nor do we believe that the various elements are always of equal importance. Sometimes content may outweigh other aspects; at other times, content or sequence may provide the basic cue.*

*The final decision about the character of the group focal conflict requires an integration of these non-equivalent elements. Our task, then, requires an holistic approach in which the various elements of the session are considered simultaneously and a general judgment is formed. (Whitaker and Lieberman, p35)*

**The Individual's Experience**

The individual's current behaviour can be understood as the expression of individual solutions to currently experienced focal conflicts. These focal conflicts are rooted in long-standing conflicts which developed much earlier in the individual's life.

Each person has habitual solutions for coping with personal focal conflicts. Some of these habitual solutions are maladaptive. The individual is ambivalent or stuck since he believes them to be essential to his existence and yet also wishes to be rid of them.

Successive group focal conflicts constitute a threat to the extent that they expose crucial personal conflicts.

When threat is experienced the individual:

- Tries out his habitual personal solutions
- These are likely to be only temporarily successful because of current operative group solutions.
- He /she will then try to influence the group towards conditions which do not constitute a threat or will make efforts to insulate himself from threatening aspects (e.g. having people laugh or seek to distract by providing humour).
- If these are not possible he experiences maximum threat.
Anxiety must lead not to disaster but the new learning that his habitual solutions are not necessary to his existence. The group culture must provide an environment for him/her to do this.

Individual needs to experience a full range of relevant personal conflicts and this is possible only in a culture dominated by enabling solutions.

Failure to learn occurs:
- When a person succeeds consistently in maintaining a habitual maladaptive solution in the group, remaining comfortable but effectively untouched.
- When a person resorts to physical or psychological flight thus insulating himself from affective forces in the group/environment.
- When other people react in ways which breakdown previously established solutions by substituting disorganised, inadequate behaviour.

Consistently silent group members may experience limited benefit if they don’t engage directly with other group members. They cannot experience reality testing of their fears or the necessity for maintaining habitual maladaptive solutions.

**In Groups – Equilibrium and Change**
A work group’s situation at any given moment can be understood in terms of forces in equilibrium, and the group’s movement over time can be seen as successive shifts in equilibrium.

Movement toward the shared, covert goal is not characterised by a systematic progression, but by continual shifts in intensity and emphasis with regard to the prevailing group focal conflict. Every remark made by group members is relevant to the disturbing motive, the reactive fear, possible solutions or sometimes to several of these. Movement occurs as a function of individual differences in the position which each member takes with reference to the immediate conflict. Each behaviour or act has an impact on the balance of forces with the group focal conflict, changing the equilibrium.

**Group Themes**
A theme is defined as a series of focal conflicts in which the disturbing motives are closely related; e.g. a wish to express hostile impulses.

Within a theme, an enabling solution moves toward direct exploration of disturbing and reactive motives. A restrictive solution moves away from direct exploration of the issue.

Note: how people finish conversations or meetings can impact on the ability of the group to work with conflict over time, i.e. The equilibrium of group forces at the close of a meeting heavily influences the events of the next session. If at the end of a meeting/conversation for example, equilibrium is marked by emphasis on disturbing motives, members are likely to mobilise defenses against the disturbing impulse before the next meeting and the beginning of the next session may be marked by more restrictive solutions or emphasis on fears.

If at the close of a meeting or conversation session, equilibrium is marked by emphasis on the reactive fear, members are likely to mobilise defenses against their fears and next session will be marked by reduced anxiety level and enabling solutions.
Movement from one theme to another occurs when:

- an enabling solution is established which permits a new disturbing motive to be expressed
- a restrictive solution is established which prohibits satisfaction or expression of prevailing disturbing motive.

**Conflict and Group Culture**

Groups develop a characteristic culture. The culture includes practices, standards and mutual understandings which regulate relationships within the group and define the character of the group world.

Group culture has the following characteristics:

- Elements of the culture perform a regulatory and defining function.
- They are the product of interaction in the group.
- They extend in time beyond the specific originating situation.
- They have a powerful influence on behaviour of members.

The group culture consists of successful solutions to group focal conflicts, taken collectively. Time does not, in itself, guarantee change. The process by which conflict is resolved is an active one which requires exploration of the reactive motive associated with the solution.

**The Manager as Facilitator of Conflict**

The manager or leader of a team has a unique view of the group. They need to be aware of his/her own role in the development of focal conflicts and if working participatively, need to assist the expression of the group focal conflict. In this way he/she is able to be part of the development of enabling solutions as well as experience the effect of the conflict. At other times the manager as facilitator may assist the work group to address focal conflict issues which don’t stem from their role as manager.

His/her power to influence the group derives from his unique position and because of the important group members give to him, e.g. power of gratification, threat, magical solutions.

The manager's or leader's goal is to assist the development process for each person in the group.

*With acknowledgement to Dr Max Clayton - Group Work Training Manual 1989*