

Groups In Transactional Analysis, Object Relations & Family Systems: Studying Ourselves in Collective Life

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Chapter 1 – Engaged Research

One of the paradoxes of professional relationships with clients who come to us for help is that we are supposed to maintain our objectivity even as we, too, may become infected by what the person has brought to us to work with.

- *In turning ourselves into receptors we are taking a big risk. From what we know of the universe we live in some of the information may be most unwelcome; the sound or signal we receive may not be of the kind that we want to interpret, to diagnose, to try to pierce through. -Bion*

Yet this risky procedure – of receiving what we may not want to know – is precisely how we come to be of help. We figure out how one can live within the same emotional forces that are disrupting another’s life or capacity to function well.

We simply ask ourselves, again and again, “*What’s going on here?*”



Bion’s Containing Function

Containing involves a series of critical steps in an interpersonal process, typically in terms of the mother-child dyad.

The child’s unorganized, unconscious bodily experiences of being alive in the world would be communicated nonverbally and concretely to the mother. The mother would receive such communications primarily at the body level.

Through her acts of reception, reflection and response, the mother conveys a sense of being able to bear lived experiences rather than need to push them out of sight and consciousness, like so many unpleasant thoughts.

In the normal process of development, this sequence of *communication, reception, reflection and considered response* helps the child learn to process his or her own experiences.

As with the mother in relation to her child, the therapist could demonstrate that the client's internal emotional world could be suffered realistically, rather than avoided or elaborated into catastrophic or magical 'phantasies'.

The term *phantasy* is used to indicate an unconscious narration of bodily experience that differs from our more conscious fantasies or stories.

The infant will begin unconsciously to live out their own story about what it means to be alive. These *phantasies* operate as more than just simple explanations but also as templates that guide our behavior and choices.



Receiving

A therapist must first be receptive to the communication from the client, which inevitably comes loaded with emotionality. That emotionality or affect must then be held and psychologically processed – chewed on, digested and lived within – in order to understand the nature of the emotional communication.

Then it becomes essential to be able speak to the truth or fact of the communication being received, no matter how hard it is to know or hear.

There is much that is being communicated, that is sent and received unconsciously, outside our ordinary channels of awareness. These communications are typically states of bodily affect, or vitality affects (Stern). They can remain undetected by our minds.

Human beings are inclined to put unpleasant experiences out of mind; in fact, such experiences may never reach consciousness. They are expressed, split off, relegated to the outer limits of the bodymind. Yet, as with offshore dumping, these repressed experiential contents have a nagging way of floating back, muddying the waters of our status quo.

Affect itself is extremely contagious among human beings, especially when burning.



Processing

A person's ability to suffer both pleasure and pain, and thus to render those experiences meaningful in the larger context of life, performs what Bion called the *alpha function*.

This human capacity involves creating mental and bodily structures that allow the shocks of life's *beta elements* to find a home within a larger system of meaning. Religion, for example, attempts to order and make sense of life's sufferings.

- *"Our religions and psychotherapies offer frames of reference for processing unbearable agonies, and perhaps, also, unbearable joys." – Michael Eigen*

Alpha functions offer us a living symbol, taking us beyond the use of words that mean nothing, or simply discharge affect, or obscure what is actually happening.

We can be quick to vocalize without really thinking and to use words to toss back or deflect the other person's disturbance. Speaking then becomes an automatic habit that is particularly problematic.

We may do this simply because we have not learned to endure and reflect on the more passionate and disturbed states of being human.

- *It is too often forgotten that the seriously disturbed patient is being disturbed because he or she is aware of something serious, even if the therapist isn't, and does not want to be reminded of it. Both parties can be at one in wishing to deprecate the seriousness of mental pain – hence a dangerous collusion. – Wilfred Bion*

Bion cautions us against prematurely *acting on* or *reacting to* an emotional communication received with great discomfort or anxiety on the part of the professional. Our response must be processed enough to take place from a position of relative neutrality.

This signals the fact that distressing emotions can be lived with instead of continually repressing them to the far end of one's psyche.



Interpreting

An interpretation is the product of processing, made with one's whole mind and body from the emotionality that has been communicated, often done out of awareness, by the other person.

To interpret is to introduce that processing into the interpersonal realm, to reference the intimacy of the (unconscious) exchange.

Interpreting can be written about more easily than actually conveyed.

To speak what has been repressed is to open the subject – both topic and person – to conscious distress. (Becoming a disturbing force.) It can be upsetting finally to know and say what has been going wrong, without the option of pushing it from view.

Speaking what one experiences also signals the presence of a separate mind that, in silence and in wondering, can otherwise seem to be one and the same with one's own mind. This evidence of separateness crushes fantasies of psychological and emotional merger.

- *Because interpretations are often verbalized, we can easily become lost in their content and in questioning their accuracy.*

These issues are relevant, but they must first be validated on the basis of an interpretation's *function* in an interpersonal process. Being accurate is of little use if the spoken words are meant mainly to discharge affect or to interrupt an unnerving containment and processing. The intention of a verbalized interpretation can be felt well before its literal meaning.

The interpersonal encounter is not complete until the effect of the therapist's reflection has been brought consciously and courageously into the realm of exchange. They must be lived through, in relationship, if they are to hold transformative potential.



Living With The Facts

The desired outcome of a therapeutic process is an increased capacity for being oriented to reality and to the facts of one's life, with a resulting improvement in social and/or personal functioning or adaptation.

If reality orientation is a function of bearing the degree of emotional intensity and conflict associated with our human condition, what facilitates that success is what Bion called '*containing*' – not just by the therapist but ultimately by the person seeking help.

- *“Proper containment should not only help a patient bear a current state of mind, but also help him or her to better bear futures ones without help from an external object or significant other.” - Robert Caper*

Our power as professionals is inherently limited. Eric Berne said that the therapist doesn't cure anyone, but only provides therapy to the best of one's ability, being careful not to harm, and waiting for nature to take its healing course.

Robert Caper also stated that the fate of the therapy is determined not by the therapist's interventions, but by the dynamics of the client's unconscious.

As therapists, we may be able to enter another's psychological world, intentionally or unintentionally, but what that person *does* with the result of our understanding and participation is outside our control.

- *We aim to align ourselves with the client's unconscious capacity to embrace life.*

We arguably can offer our best when all of our resources are focused on what helps most.

For Bion, optimal treatment of cognitive and emotional disturbances took the form of his living, in the presence of his patients, a steady relationship to his patient's inner life.



Engaged Researching

Calmness and reserve need not be equated with emotional distance, cutoff or objectification of the other person. Only by making a grounded and anchoring emotional contact with the experience of the person who has come for help can a professional receive, sustain and organize what the client communicates to them, consciously or otherwise.

We can only see the facts of our human condition clearly when we acknowledge our own relationship to them and achieve enough neutrality to face and understand what must be lived with, and improved upon.

- *“Objectivity... is an attitude of respectful openness to the whole of our existence, which allows, through our involvement in the world, reality to reveal itself the way it is.”*
- Robert Sardello
- *“Therapeutic containment is not an effort to make the patient feel relieved, or good about himself, but only to help him think and feel what is true. The relief comes from the fact that the truth is always less persecutory than the fantasy that had displaced in the patient’s mind.”*
- Robert Caper

We want to give our clients the opportunity to experience reality’s relief, obtained once one can accept and live through it.

Our capacities for containing can be developed gradually. As we grow our ability to contain our client’s internal process, as well as our own, we affect their functioning. We do this by injecting thoughtfulness and curiosity, and by struggling for objectivity. These are key interventions.

The more we can become thoughtful, the more we become considered in our actions, and more able to make worthwhile contributions to another, and to the communities in which we live.

