ON NOT KNOWING: DISCERNING THE MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL REQUIREMENTS OF CREATIVE WORK

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Paper presented at a special group of the Bion 2002 Conference
Los Angeles, CA, February 7-10, 2002
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Bion has used Keat's notion of "negative capability" to denote a state of mind that is a necessary ingredient in all forms of creativity. It implies a capacity to stay in contact with the work while one doesn't know what it needs or what one wants for it. It is only in this not knowing state that one is open to make use of accidental happenings in the work itself or around it and the work can be enriched and become separate from oneself. I would like to examine the many anxieties that interfere with this special state, a state that is also a requirement of analytic work. I will be discussing Bion’s theory of thinking, his paper on Attacks on Linking, and the risks to the analyst’s creativity in the work with the countertransference.

Bion’s theory of thinking constitutes an important development in psychoanalysis with clear implications for its practice. It also provides an understanding of the importance of not knowing and negative capability. I will briefly review the antecedents of Bion’s contribution.

Klein had two ideas that were starting points of Bion’s later work on thinking. One was her theory of symbols (1930) and the other projective identification (1946). Hanna Segal developed the symbolism ideas in a paper, which distinguishes between symbol formation in Ps and symbol formation in D. She called the first symbolic equations and
the second, symbol proper (Segal, 1957). In symbolic equation the symbol is confused with the object to the point of being the object. Where there is more awareness of differentiation between self and object the symbol is recognized as separate from the object – it represents the object instead of being equated with it. The symbol proper becomes available for use to displace aggression and libido away from the original objects to others (Klein, 1930). In other words, the symbol is the vehicle of sublimation. Segal (1981) came to see normal dream symbols as a means of communication between different parts of the personality.

Following Freud and Klein, Bion wrote a series of papers that have had a profound effect on the theory and practice of psychoanalysis (1957, 1959, 1962a, 1962b). In them he uses the notion of projective identification to develop his theory of thinking. He follows Freud’s distinction between the pleasure/unpleasure principle and the reality principle. Beta elements (raw emotion, a sensation, a meaningless perception) are projected into the object. An object capable of reverie can contain these Beta elements, identify them, transform them and give them back to the person in a more bearable form. Bion calls this process of transformation alpha function. The individual not only reintrojects the particular bad thing transformed into something tolerable but also the function itself. Thus he or she acquires a capacity for tolerating frustration and for thinking, which also implies that dream thoughts, memory, symbolization and the concepts of time and space can develop (Spillius, 1983). This alpha function led Bion to develop his ideas about the relationship between the container and the contained and about a predisposition toward learning, or the process of knowing truth, which he calls K, or evasion of learning and
knowing, which he calls minus K. For Bion, this disposition toward wanting to know the truth is as essential for psychic health as physical food is for the body. His ideas go back to Freud (1905, 1910) and Klein (1921, 1928) who postulated the existence of an epistemophilic instinct, the basis of intellectual curiosity. Klein (1930) was able to observe how children’s anxieties interfered with this intellectual curiosity.

For both Freud and Bion thinking is forced on the organism by the needs of reality. Whereas for Freud thoughts are the products of thinking, Bion takes the existence of ‘thoughts’ as a given, as pre-conceptions. He argues that thinking forces the mind to deal with them, in other words, that the mind now has the task of coping with thoughts. The importance of Bion’s theory of thinking lies in the fact that he manages to connect emotions and cognition. He is as concerned with exploring how emotions become meaningful as he is concerned with a model of how the capacity to think develops (Thorner, 1981). As Spillius 1983) states, “Bion’s formulation shows not just that the environment is important but how it is important” (p. 323). He introduces the notion that failure in the process of making the unbearable bearable not only occur because of the individual’s envy and intolerance of frustration but because of his or her object’s lack of capacity for reverie and alpha function. With development these processes between the individual and external object are repeated inside the mind between the ego and internal objects.

Bion’s model has helped change the view of projective identification as pathological to a view of projective identification as a form of communication. He has helped analysts
develop a greater openness and tolerance toward patients’ use of this form of communication and to begin to pay attention to their role in receiving or deflecting the patients’ projections. Bion has invited us to pay attention to the relationship more than to the objects in it. The analysis has become a two-way street rather than the work of one person trying to help another. He used Meltzer’s term (1978), link, and wrote a seminal paper, Attacks on Linking (1959) that has to do with one’s intolerance for links and its consequences. Bion employs the term link as a way to describe the patient’s relationship with the object’s function rather than with the object since the function of the object (the mother, later on the analyst) is to provide a link between two objects.

This idea that a linking function is what connects two human beings or two minds can be found in all of Bion’s work. He considers the breast a link insofar as the mother’s mind, in its capacity to receive and understand the baby’s anxieties and fears, functions as a link. Thus, Bion changed M. Klein’s concept of the mother’s breast as the nucleus of the infant’s ego from a concrete, morphological and anatomical concept to a functional, physiological one (Spillius, 1983). It is the linking, understanding aspect of the mother’s mind that will eventually get introjected. Such introjection of this mother’s capacity to link is the prototype of all subsequent learning insofar as the person, having acquired that capacity, will be able to receive and understand other people’s communications.

Relatedness is a central idea in Bion’s preoccupation. Emotion itself has a linking function, and the links between people are “emotional experiences” which cannot be conceived in isolation from a relationship. Bion postulated three types of emotional
linkages: loving, hating and knowing. He called these relationships the L, H, and K links. Thus he placed the K link in the same basic emotional level as the L and H links, conceiving learning as a primary link and not derived from the other two. Knowledge concerns itself with objects and K is not a piece of knowledge but the process of ‘getting to know’. Tolerance of pain and displeasure is a precondition of the ability to think. The thought is itself a frustrating experience insofar as it replaces an object with its non-material character. According to Bion (1962 b) a thought can be only maintained if one is able to tolerate that frustration, otherwise the thought turns into an absent, bad object. This follows Bion’s key notion that the absence of a good object is experienced as the presence of a bad one.

What is attacked in attacks on linking? Bion added to our understanding of the Oedipus complex. What is attacked can be and often is the (creative) state of mind of the parental couple, that which links them. This is very different than the attacks on each of the parental objects. He introduced a notion of the Oedipal preconception, one that allows the infant to understand that two objects are linked and how they are linked. In Bion’s model thinking is a way of linking as well as all that belongs to curiosity, symbol formation, verbal thought, and judgment. As Bianchetti (1997) states, “Personally, I think that all of Bion’s contributions about the mind can be understood as extensions of the linking functions of the human mind, and its difficulties and disturbances” (p.230). The patient can attack the creative relationship with his or her analyst, an envious attack on the state of mind that is the link between the parental pair that analyst and patient have become. The patient can also attack the ‘facts of life’, the knowledge about the existence
of the difference between the sexes and between the generations as well as the reality of
ageing and death (Steiner 1990). For Bion (1959) there is at times an over prominence, in
the psychotic part of the personality, of links which appear to be logical, almost
mathematical, but never emotionally reasonable. The links surviving the attacks on linking
are perverse, cruel and sterile.

Another attack on linking is that between the conscious and unconscious mind. For Bion
(1959b) there is no fundamental difference between conscience and unconscious. In fact
he conceives a state of mind, which is conscious and unconscious at the same time. He
argues that in order to comprehend an emotional element it is necessary to ‘see’ the
conscious and the unconscious part in a ‘binocular way’. “The model is formed by the
exercise of a capacity similar to that which is in evidence when the two eyes operate in
binocular vision to correlate two views of the same object. The use in psychoanalysis of
conscious and unconscious in viewing a psycho-analytical object is analogous to the use
of the two eyes in ocular observation of an object sensible to sight (Ibid. p. 86). Along the
same lines Sandler (1999) argues that ‘binocular vision’ helps the analyst to tolerate
paradoxes without rushing into an attempt at solving them. We can see how Bion’s
binocular vision and Keat’s “negative capability” are related and why Bion’s adopted the
latter. They both imply a capacity to enlarge the scope of attention to the matter at hand
and to tolerate uncertainty and not knowing.

In an early paper (Safán-Gerard, 1978) I delineated the stages of the creative process that
take place in every interaction with the work: perception, elaboration, expression and
evaluation. I described the functions of each of these stages to understand the various sources of blocks to creativity. We are going to focus specifically on the first two of these stages, perception and elaboration. During perception, we take in what is in front of us in the work; this is no simple matter since at times, due to defenses against various anxieties stimulated by what we just did, the taking in doesn’t take place. The openness to experience that is a requirement both in art and in psychoanalysis is not a given. The artist, the analyst and the patient may be unable to listen or see the new thing and they rely on the old thing, what they already know, preventing development. In the elaboration phase, what is taken in is brought into contact with other internal experiences where it can interact with them. This new element brought in may lead to links between one’s internal objects, which, in turn may lead to conflict between them and various anxieties. If one defends against such anxieties the new thing inside remains as a foreign body, encapsulated and prevented from exchanges with the parts of the self that might be reacting to it. If, on the other hand, the new thing we have taken in is allowed to impact us, there might be strain or internal turmoil, which, if tolerated, can lead to a response, often a surprising one, in the expression phase of the creative act.

Another factor to consider is that of the links between parts of the self since the nature and number of these links may contribute to the richness of the creative work. In other words, the complexity of the links will depend on how many internal objects or parts of the self are available and how much conflict is stimulated. Projections of parts of the self into objects are inevitable. This does not imply a restriction in creativity when projections are reversible. If, on the other hand, the projections of unwanted parts of the
self are fixed and irreversible there will be less conflict stirred up and the work will suffer. This is the case when we consider self-righteousness, for example (Safán-Gerard, 2002). A self-righteous person tends to project an unwanted part of the self and becomes morally indignant when facing this part of the self in others. Having eliminated conflict and having assumed a completely moral stance the person is less likely to welcome new material for fear that it might stimulate internal conflict. And when this new material is allowed in, the links between only accepted parts of the self become sterile and creativity suffers. What is common in all four stages is the person’s internal freedom to examine and interact with new material and the willingness to experience the anxiety or distress evoked in the process.

The risk to the creativity of the analyst occurs in the countertransference. The early literature on countertransference was full of negatively connoted expressions such as “succumb” or “drown” which implies a loss of control. It has become documented again and again how enactments by the analyst, which one could consider “mistakes”, were understood after the session (Searles, 1975; Rosenfeld, 1987; Kernberg, 1976; Steiner, 1993), perhaps only when it was written up. To the seminal papers in the 50s on the meaning and use of countertransference one needs to consider the work of Racker (1968), who explored the role of the analyst’s psychopathology and Searles (1975), who wrote about the regression the analyst experience due to the violent projective identification by the patient. While in the grip of counteridentification it is impossible to sort out what belongs to the patient’s transference and what belongs to the analyst. Therefore it is hard to know how the patient’s actions should be understood and interpreted. The fact that
the patient may have projected an aspect of his or her internal world into a reality in the analyst makes this sorting out a difficult task. With guilt about our own pathology it is hard for us to return to our concern for the patient and to realize that even if he or she has touched a similar pathology in ourselves, he or she was using us as a target into which to project unwanted aspects of his or her personality. It is useful to remember that, as Racker (1968) so pointedly expresses, ...“whatever the analyst experiences emotionally, his reactions always bear some relation to processes in the patient. Even the most neurotic countertransference ideas arise only in response to certain patients and to certain situations of these patients, and, they can, in consequence, indicate something about the patients and their situations” (p. 171).

Racker has distinguished between concordant and complementary counter transference. The former is the basis of empathy but its danger is a concordant overidentification with the patient. In a complementary countertransference we identify with one of the patient’s internal objects. We often oscillate from concordant to complementary countertransference, from empathy to turbulence. This turbulence offers an opportunity for creative work and I hope to elucidate the nature of this work.

Interpretations that leave countertransference reactions aside are either superficial or too abstract and theoretical. These interpretations are compulsive in nature since they protect the analyst from anxiety. Since in the unconscious the analyst responds to a patient’s attack with the law of retaliation, there is a temptation to block this retaliatory response by applying theory. This has a constricting effect on the analyst and the patient. The patient
may submit and identify with the analyst, which results in indoctrination. On the other hand, interpretations that include the countertransference are alive, even if incomplete.

As early as 1950 Erickson saw countertransference as an opportunity for the analyst to develop. This relates to Bion’s theory of thinking in which, by giving equal importance to emotion and cognition, and by seeing analysis as a two way process, opened the avenue to study the disturbances in the analyst’s capacity to receive the patient’s projections. With regard to the perception and elaboration phases of the creative process, I argued that the artist has to be willing to allow the linkages between different parts of the self and the conflicts between them to be stirred up by what is being perceived. If projections by the patient into the analyst receive a similar treatment within our minds, the possibility is open for either empathy or for acting out. The possibility for the analyst to explore his or her inner conflict is ever-present, especially when there has been an enactment by the analyst. “Our countertransference acting out is testimony to our unfinished business but it can be the avenue for growth and development” (Safán-Gerard, 1990).

This begins to show how the analyst’s response to his countertransference is related to creativity. To allow time and space for links to take place in the analyst’s mind, he or she must be willing to put himself or herself under stress. In this regard Meltzer (1967) has written about the analyst working at a maximum level of strain where there is no self-protection against the experience of anxiety or distress in the examination and interaction with the new material the patient is bringing in. Artists are used to working under considerable strain and many have documented the conflicts stirred up by work in
progress. This is where the practice of psychoanalysis can be considered an art given that the projections of the patient act on the analyst's mind the way work in progress acts on the mind of the analyst. Working under a maximum level of strain means that one may have to flounder in the unknown and open oneself to confusion without reaching for immediate understanding and relief. This is the meaning of Keat's negative capability and I believe that it applies both to the artist and the psychoanalyst. Perhaps the greatest gain in the analyst's training analysis is simply a greater capacity to bear conflict and pain. That puts the analyst in an advantage compared with the artist who may have not been helped to increase his or her capacity to bear conflict and pain.

I have argued that enactments in response to the countertransference can be considered mistakes. The controversy about admitting our mistakes to our patients may reflect our relative reluctance to truly examine our countertransference. Admitting a mistake to a patient may threaten the patient's dependence on us and his or her idealized transference toward us, that we may like, even enjoy. We may also fear the patient's anger at our mistakes, which puts us in danger of projecting our super-ego into the patient and of having, in our own eyes, come down from our lofty position as the analyst who knows. Advocating discussing our mistakes with our patients, Rosenfeld (1987) has stimulated both praise and criticism. Admitting a mistake certainly opens up the analytic situation in unknown ways that will disrupt the status quo and may induce strain for the analyst. The relation to creative work is clear insofar as artists often welcome mistakes because mistakes open up the work in unpredictable ways (Safán-Gerard, 1982). Conductor and composer Pierre Boulez (1982) creates his own mistakes by taking the work in the
opposite direction than his intuition alone would. In this way he claims he forces himself
to find and deal with new solutions. Admitting to a mistake involves facing in the work
the enactment of some unconscious and unwanted aspect of the self. The artist who does
not want to admit to a mistake does not stay with it long enough to allow for new links to
take place in his mind and misses the opportunity to capitalize on its enactment.

As I have said, during creative work artists take time to absorb the disrupting effect of
what they just did. The work in progress in front of them has to be digested by having it
linked in their unconscious with conflictual aspects of themselves. Bion’s ‘binocular
vision’ becomes necessary as the artist’s attention has to stand somewhere between his
conscious and unconscious mind. But all this cannot be only relevant to creative work in
the artist but also to the work of the psychoanalyst. The analyst’s turbulent states in
response to a patient can also become a source of curiosity and challenge and this means,
recalling Meltzer (1967), working at the maximum level of strain. In this regard one could
begin to question the word ‘creative’ and refer to a quality of work. For Elliot Jaques
(2002) “All work is creative. What we call ‘creative work’ is simply the work carried out
by high capability people with the necessary skilled knowledge to carry out work in
which they are deeply interested… we talk about great creativity because we have not had
any conception of how to understand and to refer to a person’s level of innate (potential)
capability”. Perhaps a key element is the emotional involvement with our work and that
is what Jaques means when he says that the person is ‘deeply interested’. His interest
lies in the question of how much of the innate capability is actualized in the relationship
with the work, which brings us back to Bion's conception of links and of how many are possible within the person's mind.

I have attempted to explore the emotional and mental requirements of creative work both for the artist and for the psychoanalyst. After reviewing the work of Bion and its antecedents in Freud and Klein I have presented a view of the creative process and in particular of the first two of its four stages, perception and elaboration. I have related this to Bion's theory of thinking and the role of the linking function. I have then considered the relationship between a response by the artist to work in progress and the analyst's countertransference, highlighting the special value of mistakes and enactments. Regarding countertransference, I have argued that the sorting out of an enactment after it is carried out not only can enrich our understanding of ourselves and of our patients but also provides perhaps the most fertile ground for confirmation or modification of our working theory. The study of our countertransference enactments, just as the artist's study of his or her mistakes, promises to enhance the theory building aspect of psychoanalytic practice.
References


References (continued)


