

Wilfred Bion –
Containment
Bion's theory of containment
(through reverie) is an
extension/development of Klein's
concept of projective identification.

Maternal reverie: Bion (1962) described the mother's state of mind when she can take in the infant's projected terror as *reverie*. This was expressed succinctly by Segal as a summary of Kleinian technique with schizophrenics [see 1. TECHNIQUE]. It describes, she indicated, the way in which a patient's ego may be built up through introjection of an object that can contain and *understand* his experiences:

... the nearest I can come to it is to explain it by a model, based on Melanie Klein's concept of the paranoid-schizoid position and Bion's concept of the 'mother capable of containing projective identification'. In this model, the infant's relation to his first object can be described as follows: When an infant has an intolerable anxiety, he deals with it by projecting it into the mother. The mother's response is to acknowledge the anxiety and do whatever is necessary to relieve the infant's distress. The infant's perception is that he has projected something intolerable into his object, but the object was capable of containing it and dealing with it. He can then reintroject not only his original anxiety but an anxiety modified by having been contained. He also introjects an object capable of containing and dealing with anxiety. The containment of anxiety by an external object capable of understanding is a beginning of mental stability. This mental stability may be disrupted from two sources. The mother may be unable to bear the infant's projected anxiety and he may introject an experience of even greater terror than the one he had projected. It may also be disrupted by excessive destructive omnipotence of the infant's phantasy. In this model the analytic situation provides a container. (Segal, 1975, pp. 134–5)

The analyst is certainly one container, and mother is another, but the theory does not stop there. As is clear, anyone with a maternal aspect to their character who can listen (see Langs, 1978) could function in this way [see REVERIE]. Indeed, society itself may function as an emotional container of one kind or another, more or less defensive. In an early use of this idea, Jaques (1953) explored social institutions, such as funerals, in detail:

Individuals may put their internal conflicts into persons in the external world, unconsciously follow the course of conflict by means of projective identification, and re-internalize the course and outcome of the externally perceived conflict by means of introjective identification. (p. 21) [see SOCIAL DEFENCE SYSTEMS]

Although this development of the concept of projective identification was partly an effort of the whole Kleinian Group in the 1950s, Bion became its major exponent, harvesting the biggest fruits [see 13. PROJECTIVE IDENTIFICATION]. The maternal mind in this state of 'reverie' performs a function to which Bion gave a neutral term – 'alpha-function' [see REVERIE; ALPHA-FUNCTION].

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Hanna Segal "A psychoanalytic approach to the treatment of schizophrenia" in studies of schizophrenia
Malcolm Lader (ed.)
Ashford: Headley
Bros pp94-7 (1975)

Reverie This term was adopted by Bion (1962) to refer to a state of mind that the infant requires of the mother. Mother's mind needs to be in a state of calm receptiveness to take in the infant's own feelings and give them meaning [see CONTAINING]. The idea is that the infant will, through projective identification, insert into the mother's mind a state of anxiety and terror which he is unable to make sense of and which is felt to be intolerable (especially the fear of death). Mother's reverie is a process of making some sense of it for the infant, a function known as 'alpha-function' [see ALPHA-FUNCTION]. Through introjection of a receptive, understanding mother the infant can begin to develop his own capacity for reflection on his own states of mind.

When, for some reason, mother is incapable of this reverie for reflective meaning, the infant is unable to receive a sense of meaning from her; instead, he experiences a sense of meaning having been stripped away, resulting in a terrifying sense of the ghastly unknown [see NAMELESS DREAD]. There may be various reasons for an inadequate state of reverie:

(i) *The inadequate external object*: The mother's mind may in fact be cluttered with other worries, and she is thus absent for the infant. Thus the mother's mind is the important component of the external world for the infant [see EXTERNAL OBJECT].

(ii) *Envy*: The infant may attack the containing function upon which he depends [see 12. ENVY] and thus restrict his introjective opportunities of a good and understanding object.

(iii) *The stripping container*: The infant may have an abnormally large component of envy which, projected into the object, renders it, in phantasy, an envious container that deprives his projections of any meaning [see CONTAINING; NAMELESS DREAD; EPISTEMOPHILIA].

(iv) *Unlimited projections*: The mother may be a fragile container of projections and collapse under the force of omnipotent projective identifications from the infant. A function of limiting the projections is performed, in phantasy, by the 'penis inside mother'. If an adequate limiting function is present, it might in turn lead to increased envy, with the consequences described in (ii) and (iii) above [see FATHER].

Holding. Winnicott (1960) described a maternal mental state of readiness for the infant which in many respects resembled Bion's description of 'reverie' [see OMNIPOTENCE; CONTAINING]. However, there are clear differences between the functions of 'holding' and of 'reverie', which derive from quite different theoretical frameworks. The function of Winnicott's holding is to support the infant's unwavering belief in his own omnipotence; Bion's concept of reverie is

the maternal attempt to provide a containing function of understanding the infant's reality in order to support his loss of omnipotence.

Bion, Wilfred (1962) 'A theory of thinking', *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.* 43:306-10; republished (1967) in W.R. Bion, *Second Thoughts*. Heinemann, pp. 110-19.
Winnicott, Donald (1960) 'The theory of the parent-infant relationship', in Donald Winnicott (1965) *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*. Hogarth, pp. 37-55.