

DANCING BETWEEN THE CONTAINED AND THE CONTAINER AND THEIR RECIPROCAL RELATEDNESS IN GROUP RELATIONS

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OUTLINE OF CHAPTER

This chapter begins with a description of learnings from the author's own first experiences of a self-study group. It continues with a description of what the study of group relations entails and of the development of the idea of the container in group relations. In reversing the order of "container/contained" in the title of this chapter, priority is placed on what is seeking containment and what shape of experience it might need in terms of timing and responsiveness to build a container. This also refers to Bion's demand for the patience of "Negative Capability" in waiting for emergent experiences to take shape. For this moment of pausing, we note also Bion's focus on ultimate truths beyond insight and his elaboration of the "Caesura".

It then explores the nature of the contained/container relationship in group relations conferences within a force-field of wider and deeper embodied experience. This studies how insight about group dynamics can generate the capacity to come to know what is going on using the metaphor of dancing between a group consultant and members in small study groups, as well as between a staff group and the membership of a group relations conference in a particular context. This comprises a reciprocal relationship characterised by inter-dependency across differences.

Contained/ Container dynamics have been understood and applied, in both clinical psychoanalysis and group relations consulting, as a 'container function' that works to tame primitive emotion long enough, to translate it into the domain of insightful knowledge and understanding. This in turn might help individuals and groups towards better adaptation to and innovation in the surrounding context. It also creates a capacity for the patience demanded of learning from unfolding experience.

Testing these hypotheses requires reference to Bion's later work that seeks to widen and deepen his thinking about *container/contained*, including the *caesura*, *O (ultimate reality & truth)*, its relatedness to embodied *protomentality* and the priority Bion gives to *intuition over insight* (Hinshelwood, 2023). In this way we can seek to integrate Bion the thinker with Bion the dreamer and the dance that he differentiated between "*Transformations in Knowledge*" (TK) and "*Transformations in Ultimate Reality*" (TO).

In illustrating my argument, I give five examples from group relations learning events. The first is my own introduction to this field as a member of a Bion study group whilst I was still at school, aged 16. The remaining four come from work in developing a group relations programme in Moscow, with its distinctive contextual challenges¹. Alongside group relations conference dynamics, the last two also explore issues of intrusions, limitations and opportunities related to the context of COVID-19 and the necessity of an online format for the study of groups. These dimensions have the capacity to disturb emotionally and so demand Containment. The chapter ends with some concluding implications for developing group relations practice.

¹ This work was done before the Russian invasion of Ukraine; however it has been possible to continue in a conference online with Russian speaking membership from both inside and beyond Russian territory.

MY INITIATION INTO GROUP RELATIONS WORK

EXAMPLE 1

I was introduced to group relations as a 16-year-old signing up for a weekly Tavistock group studying its own dynamics from experience. It ran weekly for a year during term time at an all-boys school. The group was an intervention to provide something humanising in a largely institutionalised world, shaped not least by the colonial and post-war legacy that middle class boys should become leaders of institutions at home and abroad. This cultural context carried all the risks of failures in emotional intelligence later described across political, governmental and commercial leadership and now connected with failures in emotional intelligence described as "Boarding School Syndrome" (Khaleelee, 2016, Schavarein, 2015). This experience opened up for me new possibilities for the emotional experience of belonging with others. It also placed me at odds with the cultural context in which I had been raised.

The effect of this group experience was life and career changing. It was also challenging. Who was I to dare to hold opinions when I dared to voice them? Deepening group inter-actions and the dance between mistrust and trust were transcended by something far more mysterious through the rise and fall of personal and collective authority being discovered and tested. I, along with others in the group, discovered what we were like in the minds of others, how we did and did not attract and impress. This opened up a whole new world of confiding and honest relating that was like finding a new country with a new language.

In this chapter, I am using the metaphor of a dance, because it represents movement along with others, contained by music that speaks through emerging bodily movements and improvisation. The music is larger than the people moving with or against each other. It was this mystery in the group that fascinated me – not least the rhythm of it, as we moved from sharing experiences, into fear and defensiveness and then heart-felt surprises. Vague sensations and then emotions arrived from somewhere, got expressed through words and stories. But then they moved on restlessly searching for deeper experience and meanings.

Later I discovered that such a metaphor could also be used to describe experience in psychoanalysis:

'INTERSPACE: "[I]n the happiest moments of analysis, one also plays with adults. By not worrying about generating meanings, there remains only one - but maybe the most important one of all - meaning without meaning, that of dance. A dance of colourful words. As Pound wrote, in order to be effective, poetry should be music and music - dance.'
(Civitarese, G, 2019:57-8.)

I later discovered through Bion's writing, his description of the experience of belonging in a turbulent sea of emotions, which echoed my first group learning experience (Bion, 1997). These were alternately frightening, thrilling, deeply touching, anger inducing and alongside them the group provided a safety net where one could move between hiding and engaging, digesting and encountering. These moves evoked the sense of belonging to something much bigger than could be described as limited to myself. This was the heart of the dance of group relations experience. It was larger than us yet inside us. We chose what we contributed and yet something deeper and wider spoke through us that could move rapidly between the emotions of torment, joy and sorrow. Bion describes this not so much as insight but something deeper to be apprehended through intuition, namely, the *drive for emotional truth about group relations, becoming, ultimate reality and origin of things*, for shorthand "O" (Bion, 1970, 1993).

Many future experiences in groups revealed that what seeks containment feels impossibly and forbiddingly bigger than any container of meanings that can be found. But then one is found. It provides a resting place of containing insight. However, this too proves to be transient, as insight becomes a familiar and easily outworn sort of knowing. So new avenues of risk and adventure must be sought, new experiences of deeper and wider truths. It is this reciprocity between the interpretation of collective transferences of emotion, and projective identification towards an eventually Containing group and group consultant, that this chapter explores.

In sum, my first group experience, provided four key learnings:

- 1) The possibility of finding **words** to express emotional experience in relation to others. Words could contain meanings which contained emotions. In the unfolding group, its members, including me, could speak words to describe what had been hitherto unconscious, that were so close to the experience of others, it was as if they had been “taken out of my mouth”.
- 2) Similarly, the **roles** that people took in the group as leaders and led, initiators and followers, among many other roles, could be described and thought about. This could reflect particular group dynamics as well as revealing truths about how each of us was drawn emotionally to take or avoid such roles.
- 3) We began to dare questioning taken for granted **contextual institutional** dynamics and their impact on shared assumptions that could be understood and challenged.
- 4) The **setting** of the group itself, the room, the timings marked by the predictable arrival and departure of the consultant and the closed group membership. Each provided something conscious and planned, but also an unconscious and subliminal container of attention, for what was awaiting us.

Each of these as well as their inter-lacing insights opened the door to deeper experience that Bion described as *transformations in knowledge T(K)* (Bion, 1965). What propelled us forward as a group and indeed what had led me to sign up was the potential for encountering what was as yet unknowable. This was the unfathomable music I describe as shaping the dance of the group. It is this dance with its enveloping, yet detectable silent music that I suggest points towards working with what Bion describes as *“Transformations in Ultimate Reality” T(O)* Such an approach makes use of his guiding principle of *negative capability*, “...a capacity for staying in ‘uncertainties, mysteries and doubts’ and deferring attempts at logical or discursive sense-making” (Snell, 2013:1, Bion, 1965, 1962, 1970).

ORIGINS OF CONTAINMENT IN GROUP RELATIONS

The development of the study of group dynamics and in particular leadership, followership and authority, in wider organisations began with the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations’ first Leicester University “Working Conference” in 1957. In its report, the idea of the need to Contain tensions within a group is very clear. Writing about the deep emotional attachments to the Small Study Group and the challenges of moving to Application Groups, the authors of the conference report describe specific tensions:

“The Application Groups did not begin well. Conference members had become attached to their Study Groups and to the individuals with whom they had shared this engrossing, if stressful, experience...Such difficulties had been anticipated. They were, in fact, the kinds of stress which the Application Groups had been designed to mitigate. There are obvious advantages if such tensions can be contained and dealt with in a conference, rather than be left to arise later” (Trist & Sofer, 1957: 22).

Before Bion developed his thinking about the nature of psychotic experience and how it emerges in psychoanalytic consulting, he was pre-occupied with seeking to understand the primitive emotional

dynamics across many life roles and experiences. These included to his role as a leader and soldier in the First World War, an Army Psychiatrist and adviser in the selection of leaders in the Second World War, and a therapeutic community pioneer. This work culminates in his *Experiences in Groups* (Bion, 1961), where he explores the oscillation between effective *working groups* and *basic assumption* group life. *Basic assumption* dynamics explore the way groups seek to survive by clustering their emotionality around shared norms and behaviour. He observed how this dynamic detracted from individuals making their resources available to the practical tasks of collaboration in what he described as *the work group*, whereas *basic assumption* behaviour also involved members in losing their own capacity to think clearly (Morgan-Jones, 2022).

To study group dynamics, Bion initiated leaderless groups to which he offered observations and consultation. This effectively allowed him to study how members could lose their minds to *herd mentality* (Trotter, 1916) and *groupthink* where mindless obedience to unspoken norms takes over the capacity of individuals to think for themselves (Tuckett, 2011). This work was initiated at the Tavistock Clinic, and later developed a tradition through the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations and other institutions internationally. The use of this model sought to help individuals to learn the dynamics of small and large groups, relations between groups, and of organisations as a whole in relation to wider societal forces².

The range of experiences from these different settings can foster learning about leadership and understanding what it means to take up a role. This includes discovering internal and external sources of authority for both leaders and followers. It means coming to realise the tendencies to be mobilised by peer pressure, or to volunteer unconsciously, for formal or informal roles, which may be either constructive or destructive. Within this 60-year-old field of developing practice and thinking, the idea of learning how we, and others, tend to construe situations we participate in, demands emotional Containment of the anxieties that underly them.

CONTAINMENT IN GROUPS

It has been argued that behind Bion's developing ideas and psychoanalytic Containment lies the experience of the extremes of war trauma with its maddening "fog" that drives sane people out of their mind with the anxiety of imminent violent death, witnessed daily among their comrades (Szykierski, 2013, Souter, 2009, Bion, 1982, 1985, 1987). This extreme emotional situation, all too familiar for Bion the soldier from First World War tank warfare, links with the way he was able to use his sensitivity to the psychodynamics of projective identification with its traumatised origins. In developing Melanie Klein's description (Klein, 1946) of the way people split off aspects of themselves that they hate, or that overwhelm them, projecting them into a phantasied version of another person or group and hating or idealising them in place of themselves.

Melanie Klein tended to see this as a defensive and aggressive dynamic, whereas Bion saw it as a communication of emotion that was overwhelming and what was unspeakable needing the attention of another being able to receive, tolerate and give it sense and meaning. In elaborating its possible source, Bion describes the risk that the mother of a helpless child may provide dutiful, but unfeeling and bewildered responsiveness to her child's distress, unaware that (Bion, 1967: 104): "...from the infant's point of view, she should have taken into her, and thus experienced, the fear that the child was dying" (Bion, 1967: 104).

For the soldier there was no mercy from the emotional persecution that he might die at any moment. Bion's experience suggested that this was true for the helpless child within the adult in a traumatising

² For a fuller background of the development of group relations within the Tavistock Institutions, see Morgan-Jones, (2022).

moment. This is what was evoked in the regression towards dependency in the group. The urgency of finding a dependable source of survival was imperative. It is not surprising then, that in outlining *basic assumption* group dynamics of *dependency*, he should describe groups behaving with a shared ferocity as if adhering to sometimes authoritarian leadership, as the only way to keep death and madness at bay, at the cost of side-lining their own capacity to be a person. This is the essence of individuals being taken over by *groupthink*. Later Bion described how

“The individual feels that in a group the individual welfare of the group is of secondary consideration...the individual is abandoned; the paramount need is for the group to survive – not the individual” (Bion, 1960: 64).

The notion of the need for emotional Containment for such projective dynamics appears explicitly 9 times in Bion’s seminal work *Experiences in Groups* (1960). For instance, in describing the sometimes-uncontainable oscillation between a) the belief that the group conductor is a reliable leader and b) the disturbed “mad/genius” leader of the *basic assumption dependency* group embodying the group member’s unconscious phantasy of a saviour who will enable survival, he writes:

“The result is that the group can no longer contain the emotional situation, which thereupon spreads with explosive violence to other groups until enough groups have been drawn in to absorb the reaction. In practice in the small group this means impulsion to complain to outside authority” (Bion, 1960: 124). Later he describes how, *“All three basic assumptions [dependency, fight/flight, pairing] contain the idea of a leader...All are opposed to development...The work group, on the other hand, recognises a need both to understand and to develop”*. (Bion, 1960: 160).

This nightmare of some of the *basic assumption* group dynamics experienced in conference settings may also echo the experience of conference members in their own workplaces. This places emphasis on the importance of containing leader-follower dynamics. Thus, in addition to the transition between learning from here and now group dynamics and application of learning described above, there is another transition constantly taking place within GR conferences. Staff leadership needs to provide dependable boundaries and understanding for emotional Containment. These comprise ever-changing *basic assumption* dynamics and transferences from members, alternating with reflective periods where members are able to engage as a reflective work group. In picking up the theme of this chapter, we can conceive of this as a dance between conference staff and its members and between embodied *basic assumptions* and the *work group*.

A recent Lithuanian³ group relations conference entitled, “The Dance of Leaders and Followers: Giving and Taking Authority in Role”, was described in the following terms:

“There can be no leadership without followers and no followers without leadership. They are interdependent roles. But, is the power of followers only to be found in resisting (powerful officials and governments), abandoning (organizations, families), or sabotaging (not performing one’s job)? Moreover, how do we operate when the roles of leadership and followership are not clearly defined? In groups where authority is decentralized, roles of leadership and followership may be fluid and shifting. In layered organizations persons in middle management have to take on the roles of both leaders and follower. So, how do we dance? How does the follower embrace the leader? How does the leader lead

³ The 10th International Group Relations Conference in Lithuania, 2020 “THE DANCE OF LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS: GIVING AND TAKING AUTHORITY IN ROLE” sponsored by Lithuanian Group Relations Society, Vilnius University & The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations.

the follower? This conference invites you to explore the inter-related authority of leaders and followers and the changing nature of leadership today. (Buzaityte-Kasalyniene, 2019).

So, what is this dance between leaders and followers and what does one contain for the other? How may they be mapped?

GROUP RELATIONS AS A FORCE FIELD

One of the key influences for group relations work was the pioneering development of reflections on the dynamics of group processes developed by Kurt Lewin and Associates through the Bethel National Training laboratories (Lewin, 1948/1997, see Torres, 2013 & Trist & Sofer, 1957). Using the analogy of electro-magnetic or gravitational fields, Lewin mapped the forces in the field of a social system in order to understand the dynamics of change and resistance to it. This was a key inspiration for Bion and his mentor John Rickman in his early work on group dynamics (Hinshelwood & Torres, 2013, Hinshelwood 2018, Penna 2022,). Bion later appeared to change his orientation developing under the influence of Melanie Klein his analyst, an approach to groups that understood the key role of projective identification which remains a key framework for understanding what is seeking containment within group relations practice (Sanfuentes, 2003). Later still he moved on to conceive of moments of transition between one state of experiencing to be replaced by another, as central in his studying of *in-between-ness*" (Bion, 1977/89). For Bion this was epitomised in what he describes as the caesura of birth experience (Bion, 1977/1989).

Psychoanalytic thinking about understanding clinical engagement through such a *force field* of conscious and unconscious processes has been reinvigorated by the work of psychoanalysts Wily and Madeleine Barranger (Barranger & Barranger, 2008) in Buenos Aires who conceive of the analytic relationship as an interactional field⁴. Here, what Ogden (1994) came to describe as the analytic third, is created out of the mutual Container/contained relationship of representations and transferences between analyst and analysand, transcending them both. This perspective is developed in Italy through Correale's (1994) exploration of Institutions as containers and Ferro's work in developing a *Post-Bion Field theory* approach (Ferro & Basile, 2009, Ferro & Civitarese 2015).

One key aspect of the *force field* in a group relations conference is in the staff's capacity for containment and to this we now turn.

CONFERENCE STAFF GROUP DYNAMICS: CONTAINER OR CONTAINED

One attempt to manage the force field of unconscious dynamics is the time-honoured custom of conference directors leading the 1-2-day preparation meetings for the staff groups they have selected. The aim is to initiate introductions around personal accounts of significant past and present life experience. This helps a group to learn to know and to develop the team members' resonance with each other. Specifically, it develops the kinds of ways they might become used as receptacles for transferences from the conference membership as a whole as well as within that part of the conference *force field* that is the staff group. It is worth noting that this flies in the face of the early practice at Leicester conferences, where Pierre Turquet as director used to focus rather on contemporary events in society with a view to exploring how these might make their presence felt seeking emotional containment from outside-in.

⁴ It is striking that Field theory re-emerged through the work of Pichon Riviere and his followers, including the Barrangers, in view of the traumatising context of Argentinian dictatorships of the 1970s that made its presence felt in the psychoanalytic consulting room, not least though politically motivated disappearances. (Puget, 1988).

A more personalised preparation focusses the staff group on its various meetings during the conference. This means not just reporting on events in the conference but exploring the regressive pull within staff towards older familial and professional relationships and mutual transferences that might limit or pre-occupy staff, to the exclusion of attending to membership and their different learning tasks. In this way staff dynamics can be used as a reflection of member group dynamics in a way that is familiar practice in therapeutic communities.

Enriching as such personalised practice can be, it can also give rise to a more narcissistic regressive pull within the staff group. The risk is that staff meetings become engaged with themselves at the expense of attending closely to the experience and dynamics of the membership, let alone what the regressive pull might represent from the wider contextual field. This risks leading to over-idealised and over-saturated interpretations such that:

“The container (♀) extracts so much from the contained (♂) that the contained is left without substance”. (Bion, 2013).

Ferro described such interventions as “killer containers” that attacked what was to be contained with knowledge (Ferro, 2005), while Bion himself was very much aware of the risks of over-theorising the human encounter:

(The risk is) “...it become(s) jargon. I'm quite sure, that in talking about the container and contained, I lay myself open to the objection that I just don't know what a human being is! That I'm just fiddling around, you see with containers and contained, as if I've never dealt with a human being, but just played around with these symbols.” (Bion, 2013)

It is for this reason that in the title of this chapter I reversed the usual order of “Container/contained”. My aim is precisely to prioritise attention on what is to become emotionally contained and to emphasise the call for *negative capability* through which truth about current group relations can emerge, rather than being imposed through pre-conceptions.

Bion thought that the reciprocity between Container and contained could be thought of in three of ways:

“By commensal I mean a relationship in which two objects share a third to the advantage of all three. By symbiotic I understand a relationship in which one depends on another to mutual advantage. By parasitic I mean to represent a relationship in which one depends on another to produce a third which is destructive of all three. (Bion, 1970, p. 95)”

The challenge for the staff group is to discover which type of container is operating at any given moment. There are two tasks: a) to protect the membership from staff dynamics so that it can provide a well bounded and contained experienced safe enough for members to regress, learn and progress towards application by the end of the event; b) to learn from understanding what dynamics from the membership have got under the skin of the staff group and effected its ways of working and relating.

LEARNING CONTEXTUAL DYNAMICS THROUGH FAILED CONTAINMENT

EXAMPLE 2

A key aspect of an initial Group Relations Conference, within an organisation in Russia, is the inter-group exercise. Using a translator in my role as director, I introduce the framework of the exercise, the rooms available, the way staff were distributed to consult to those who chose to

come to a particular room. I describe the task of the event: “to offer the chance to learn about inter-group relations between the groups that members themselves formed in the event”. It was also suggested that this could mean briefing different kinds of representatives authorised by the group to represent them and communicate across the boundaries of each group that formed. Such representatives might be messengers, observers or carry fuller authorisation, like plenipotentiaries used in diplomatic relations, with full powers to represent their group more freely and fully.

This outline was to most members a strange and vulnerable making situation, with little similarity with working situations in Russia, where leaders are expected to dictate instructions rather than explore collaboration with more democratic negotiated representation. This had been anticipated to some extent, however encountering the emotional turmoil evoked by it had not. The introduction of this key group relations method created anxiety and a lot of urgent questions. Rather than work with these questions and their underlying anxiety, I as director responded to some, but then told the large group I felt they were beginning to work at the task and needed to do so with each other rather than with me, and that I was going to leave the room to go to the room in which I was to consult, leaving two colleagues to continue consulting to the membership as had been outlined.

This left some chaos, confusion and tensions. Some had experienced similar events before and wished to show their leadership ability by seeking some discussion about what groupings and themes could cluster people, whereas others were seeking answers to questions from a now absent authority in me as director, leading to them fleeing the room in search of a safer base.

The truth of the matter was that in my role as director, I was experienced as abandoning members to deal with these conflicts. In part this was not just about translation of words like authority and group meeting and representative, but whether it was allowed to speak of such things in a culture where authority meant doing what the government or business leaders said, not taking it for yourself or sharing it in negotiated ways with others. It took the rest of this event for these cultural differences to crystallise and be addressed, and for me as director to realise the depth of emotional abandonment where imposing leadership was absent, that was familiar in Russia. By enacting this abandonment and later in being able to recognise and own it in the final review session of the experience, it was possible to meet the deeper anxieties belonging to the wider cultural context that intruded under the skin of the conference and embedded itself in me as director.

By articulating this dynamic with the help and protest of members, it began to be possible to explore the challenges of the aspiration to invite western group relations “experts” into the Russian context, but also to explore how those so-called experts needed educating by immersion to discover how learning about group dynamics could begin to be managed. This experience was a painful and confusing one, but also an educating experience for the director, staff and members.

Through such an experience the consultant becomes implicated in the experience in ways that reveal the vulnerability of all in the encounter. For Ed Shapiro, this becomes the hallmark of *authority relations* in creating learning opportunities, a key idea in group relations consulting:

“...authority is not just a feared boundary to be avoided, but also a longed-for boundary with inevitable vulnerability on both sides. The mutual vulnerability of the authority boundary, a deepening of the ... theme of interdependency, (with...) the wish of the next generation to take up the reins, the wish of the elders to pass on what they have learned, the shared anxiety

about death, the embarrassment of needing, the rage about dependency, and the envy and longing in both directions all factored into this vulnerability” (Shapiro, 2020, p. 79).

The question that now arises is: what moves can be developed in the mutual bond of difference in a way that can become generative?

RANGE OF RECIPROCITY ACROSS CONTAINER-CONTAINED AND BEYOND

The *container/contained* model as a theoretical description is a constant companion in seeking for interpretation, sense and meaning. And yet it is also totally inadequate in describing the larger field of the “dance-floor” and the music within which it coheres. It was this experience that led me later to explore what Bion himself described using the analogy of a spectrum. He suggested that the visible nature of container and contained was available for words to describe across the spectrum of visible colouring of familiar interpretations, but in no way did justice to the infra-red and ultra-violet ends of the wavelength beyond visible colours (Bion, 1977/1989).

This is what led me to explore two wider and deeper dimensions of “contained/Container”, upstream from the focus on group dynamics:

a) At one end of the spectrum, part of transcendent experience Bion explored, (see Bion, 1961, ch. 5) included truths about shared political, organisational and social context. It might also include history, beliefs and culture. These dimensions add not just metaphors, characters and identifications, but links to the wider fields in which people are unconsciously players. These are at the heart of roles in the community inspired by group relations work, that after a conference experience, members might apply themselves to or innovate. It was with this focus that Turquet prepared his group relations conference staff.

b) At the other end, truth was to be found at the level of sensation bound embodiment. Such experience of sensations that have not yet become clear emotions could be overwhelming without the support of staff with whom to think it through exercising the patience of *negative capability*. Bion first described this sensational overwhelm as stemming from the *protomental matrix* where “*what is physical and what mental cannot be distinguished*” (Bion, 1960, Morgan-Jones 2010). Initially for Bion, (1960) this was a group phenomenon, where the sense of belonging to an emotionally supported group dynamics to which a person was drawn, he described as like a chemical valency. In later writing he described sensation bound experience as proto-emotional *beta-elements*, seeking maternal reverie and attention and eventual understanding through verbal formulations he described as a containing *alpha function* accessed through *reverie* (Bion 1963).

Moving across these dimensions as resources for learning from experience, as well as including the dimension of the context shaping experience demands, it seemed to me, the need to isolate each of these elements and only then to see how they might connect. In order to explore this aspect of what I have described as a dance, I now want to describe a practical design to develop understandings across three distinct domains while being open to reflecting on experience and what shapes it, within a complex force field.

THE TRILOGY MATRIX

To reflect on such dynamics in a group relations conference, I developed whole conference plenary reflection sessions where three sub-groups, meeting in concentric circles, each reflect on their experience at different levels. Each circle, observed by the others, works one at a time. The inner circle focuses on the experiences of moving between sensations to feeling to social roles observed or taken during the conference. The second reflects on group and system dynamics they were part of. The third associates to wider cultural or political dynamics revealed across conference dynamics.

People are asked to make links between what is voiced by each circle and to note the *force field* pressures from one circle upon another.

This “*trilogy matrix*” provides a resource for investigating the dynamics of a conference setting as well as in other organisational engagement in learning from experience. It provides a framework for thinking about present time consultations within self-study groups that seek to move with the dance between these different dimensions. (Morgan-Jones, 2022). Its three perspectives also echo the tripartite dimensions of group-analysis described by Carla Penna and Earl Hopper and others as: *personal, inter-personal and trans-personal* (Penna, 2023, Hopper & Weinberg, 2023, Morgan-Jones, 2023).

If we consider dance as a metaphor, it carries not just movement, but also moments of stillness as dancers pause between one direction and another. This moment, echoing the pause between breathing in and breathing out, epitomises what Bion emphasised as the *caesura* between one move and the next, framed through the experience of birth with its life-or-death risk of catastrophe (Bion, 1977/1989).

In dancing, relaxation comes from moves completed. Energy is gathered for the next move. This echoes the primitive musical inter-change between two speakers or the moment of hesitation in the middle of a line of poetry. Such mutual cueing begins with the early interactions between mother and baby in taking turns to utter moods and sounds in response to each other that Colwen Trevarthen has researched as comparable to musical rhythms (Trevarthen, 1980). This is at the heart of early reciprocal relating that builds capacity for emotional Containment and patience (Douglas, 2007).

Hazel Douglas, in her book “Containment and Reciprocity: (Douglas, 2007), provides definition: “*Containment is thought to occur when one person receives and understands the emotional communication of another without being overwhelmed by it, processes it and then communicates understanding and recognition back to the other person. This process can restore the capacity to think in the other person.*” (p.33).

Douglas goes on to discern a continuum across a spectrum of approaches to Containment from a) *macro-containment*, that describes the projective identification of parts of the self, the personality, or the group, to b) *micro-containment* through the recognition of distinct emotions, attunement to the dance of intersubjective reciprocity that enables the regulation of affect.

The following example illustrates the way interpretations of the aggressive and sexualised nature of a shared *basic assumption* provides containment as a defence against the pain of intrusive suffering embodied in Russian women’s experience of traumatic loss, down the generations.

EXAMPLE 3

The group unfolded through what appear friendly, but competitive aggression between pairs, often cross-gender. Once a speaker began, they would not give way to the person singled out to address. This partner would then seize the lead and give a similarly lengthy speech, seeming unwilling to let go of holding the floor. On one occasion a male member just screamed across the room to gain impact and shut the other up. This expression of aggression and competition across difference conceals the confusing experience of being confronted with the threat of anarchy resulting from there being no overt management leadership. Meanwhile the challenge of the task remained, to learn from this experience.

As consultant I intervened, seeking to provide a container for wilder emotions and sensations before any reflective thinking could occur. I suggested that people seem to talk at each other and not much listening and linking to each other; I then suggest that the silenced members might have a better idea what was going on from their passive observations and that these divided off sub-groups represented missed opportunities and a resource for learning.

One younger female member expressed her pain, through her tears, of feeling bombarded by noise. She had seemed particularly attentive, picking up everything, and at last the group was able to listen to deeper sensations and feelings, not so far represented in the exchanges. She had been providing the sensation based and emotional container for the suffering of failed dependency within the group. Her intervention and the silent respectful attention of the group seem to change the emotional group culture for a while with more reflective contributions. One key learning was about the contrast between the “noise” of competitive leading-seeking-recognition versus listening to painful words about the experience of being dominated and silenced. The consultant refers to the traumatising masculine Russian history and Russian leadership styles and the suffering of women passed down the generations. Meanwhile absent men had been lost to war or deported to camps through the trauma of the Gulags and the Patriotic War (1939-45) whose privations and losses were carried down the generations by often silenced women”.

The sensation bound noise awaiting transformation into emotional and suffering became a key first step towards Containment and learning. This enabled the subsequent step of finding meaning through the uncontained sensation of “noise” seeking a container. This eventually led to understanding external forces of trauma and impingement that had been unconsciously introjected and embodied in the group dynamic. In describing this interplay between the group that is patient and analyst, Ogden describes how:

“Debussy felt that the music was the space between the notes... Between the notes of the spoken words constituting the analytic dialogue are the reveries of the analyst and the analysand. It is in this space occupied by the interplay of reveries that one finds the music of psychoanalysis.” (Ogden, 1997).

In group relations, this could be described as a two-step model of containment. First, embodied emotion is expressed and attended to so that feelings that lie beyond sensation can be expressed. Second, the emotion and its pain can be understood as not just an expression of the group dynamic, but an enactment of something larger from the context of societal history and culture. This echoes the two dimensions of Douglas’ view of the range of Container-contained dynamics in the move between emotional gathering for micro-containment and Containment of projected phantasies. This theme was also revealed during the online Russian small study group during the Covid-19 pandemic.

EXAMPLE 4

Despite the growing familiarity of members with online working, the group is disrupted by occasional technical difficulties as well as by intrusions from other family in home-base settings necessitated by the pandemic. The effort of concentrating and the subliminal anxiety familiar to online screen working, makes cueing and turn taking a constant challenge and adds to feelings of discontinuity, disaffection and exclusion. Members speak of not knowing whether they are seen looking at others as would normally happen in exchanges of glances in a meeting in a room. This adds to the dynamics of managing the domestic privacy boundary to which members are exposed working from home and along with it a group feeling of being disembodied.

This disembodied element exacerbates the dynamics of exhibitionism and voyeurism that are an ordinary aspect of the narcissistic trauma of group membership. Turquet wrote about the struggle of

being in a large group where to gain a feeling of belonging, individuality has to be sacrificed in becoming a *Membership Individual*". (Turquet, 1975). By contrast he suggested that retaining personal authority while taking up a role of leadership that makes a difference means becoming an *Individual Member*. Increasingly and especially in online study groups, I believe this large group dynamic creeps into smaller groups. In this sense one can oscillate between being very important to others and of feeling excluded and of no significance in a very short time. It is as if this small study group is expressing dynamics usually belonging to large group experience.

These dynamics add the fear of uncertainty due to the pandemic in the Russian context due to lack of trust about the accuracy, reporting and management of health issues. One meeting coincides with the referendum about constitutional changes that will extend the Russian presidential term indefinitely. The group is divided between those vehemently against it and others, outsiders, represented by in-laws, wanting the secure leadership that such continuity promises. Such a view is characterised as providing a defence against the fears of anarchy that appears as the alternative Russians have experienced since the 1989 collapse of the USSR.

The consultant points to the displacement onto political leadership of uncontained frustrations with the management of this event with its distancing of intimacy and trust building. Could this consultant be like the President inflicting omnipotently a context that is disruptive and power seeking through studying group dynamics online?

These contextual dynamics of mistrust in political leadership cross the skin of the group from its political context, along with fears around the pandemic and uncertainty about whether and when any "normal" life will return.

One member switches rooms at home which moves his image to a new position on members' screens. This creates sudden instability and a perception of the physical setting being radically disrupted creating what one member described as hallucination. This she communicates excitedly speaking Russian rather than the English in which the group has been working. The emotional thrill of aliveness and fear is eventually translated, but not before the consultant has picked up the excitement of transgression in establishing a Russian speaking group culture as an act of rebellion against what is felt to be the dominating leadership of the group consultant from a foreign culture and language. This became the focus for a consultation and seemed to open up more sober reflection on the anxieties colliding at this moment.

THE DANCE BETWEEN CONTAINER AND CONTAINED: TRANSCENDING THE CAESURA BEYOND NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

A *caesura* is the beat between notes in a piece of music. It is the pause as breath is emptied, before the lungs are once again filled. It is comparable to Winnicott's urging of the importance for feeding mothers of hesitating before a feed to ensure the feed is not an over stimulating impingement, but rather related to the timing of the growing hunger of the baby to enhance their sense of their own need and instinct (Winnicott, 1941/1958).

The hallmark of the metaphor of the *caesura* for Bion was birth as a liminal moment between life within the womb and without. For him this becomes the metaphor for giving birth to new and wild thoughts searching for a thinker to give them life. It is this idea that is the fulfilment of his earlier notion of *negative capability*, which through waiting patiently for meaning and sense to cohere provides the means of creativity. It is with his development of this idea into the *caesura* that his method of working takes on a new lease of life.

Caesura is his term to describe the in-betweenness across the terms he chooses to use. Whether it is container/contained, conscious/unconscious, dream-life/waking-life, pre-/post-natal, it is the "/" that interests him most:

"Can any method of communication be sufficiently "penetrating" to pass the caesura in the direction from post-natal conscious thought back to the pre-mental in which thoughts and ideas have their counterpart in "times" or "levels" of mind where they are not thoughts or ideas? That penetration has to be effective in either direction." (Bion, 1977, p. 45).

A GROUP PAUSES TO TAKE BREATH

EXAMPLE 5

An online Small Study Group meet to learn group dynamics from present time experience. The online setting, and group membership is drawn from consultants aspiring to become more effective with their own clients. The early period of the group includes many projections of expectation upon the group consultant whom they fear will be judging them both personally and professionally. This phantasy is elaborated: that I am like a Russian president controlling them with invisible judgements or even sanctions; that I have a hidden curriculum of standards they have to demonstrate; or that I will condemn them for their acting out through one member's delinquent drug taking; or else for failing to find a private place in their households from which to join the group. Eventually, this series of phantasies appears to subside.

There is a pause in the hitherto continuous stream of contributions and exchanges. Across a single session, one member puts her head on her hands on her desk in front of her laptop screen; one is joined by a child in nappies seeking, or maybe giving comfort, while another moves rooms between sessions to seek better privacy and comfort. The exchanges stop for a moment and it is as if the group has given a deep intake of breath and sighs it out. These observations, I suggest to the group are a regression at the relief at not having to try so hard to please a demanding judge or intrusive political regime. Later I point to the anxiety that the group does not know how to find a new set of rules beyond the imagined fear ridden dependency they have been living under as a familiar establishment or order.

In consequence, a member of the group feels able to trust the group with her experience in a war zone in another country, determined not to die underground in a bomb shelter but to face the risk in the open. Her vulnerability and openness to risk transforms the emotional atmosphere in the group and elicits other more personal emotional responses giving the possibility of vitality to the lived experience of being in the group beyond the fear of being shamed to death.

This could be seen as an "In-between moment". The confiding member chose life over dying with her un-lived life unborn, entombed in the womb of the shelter. It could also be seen as the moment when the group knew it had been born and could live independently in its own skin, with members becoming able to take authority for shaping the group through their own initiatives, through aspects of their own painful and joyful lived stories and through reflection on roles taken and evoked by the group interaction. To that extent this group moment was analogous of the first breath taken as the baby emerges from the womb and therefore as a moment of psychological and emotional birth (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975). This echoes what Bion wished to explore with his concept of the *caesura* between pre- and post-natal experience in his work on the *caesura* represented through characters in conversation in his autobiographical *Memoir of the Future* (Bion, 1991). The recovered memory moved the group emotionally and can be seen to represent the development of a shared

authority for seizing life and developing one's own meaning and imperative rather than suffering under that of others.

For Bion's commentator Giuseppe Civitarese, such *in-betweenness* is at the heart of Bion's *method*: "*Transcending' the caesuras that redraw the boundaries of settled thought is the only truly general, conscious and strategic criterion... that inspires Bion's thought.*" (Civitarese, 2013)

CONCLUDING IMPLICATIONS FOR GROUP RELATIONS PRACTICE

1) How can group relations practice be stretched?

Learning from group relations experience has the potential for the reciprocity of the relationship between contained and Container to be extended further in three important directions:

- a) In one direction it is possible to explore what Bion described as the *protomental matrix* beneath *basic assumption* activity and from which it arises. Containment of sensations becoming emotions needs to come prior to *group-as-a-whole* interpretations of *basic assumptions*. This is key to gathering what Douglas describes as *micro-containment* before *macro-containment* becomes possible. I describe this above as a two-step model.
- b) In another direction, it is possible to explore the way the context and socio-political environment impinges, shapes and makes its presence felt across the external skin (Anzieu, 1989)
- c) Exploring where these wider and deeper projective forces in the field meet in group dynamics and how emerging emotional Containment for them can be innovated in a well-paced rhythm, is the task of consulting to groups. These I have described along with a methodology for exploring such unconscious fields as a *trilogy matrix*.

2) Opportunities and limitations of the online container for group relations work?

Review of experiences of online experiential learning with participants suggests that while such events create many possibilities for learning, there are limitations in comparison to face to face events.

Online work enables international meetings at less cost financially and to the environment. The possibilities for learning and development include members using the experience to express and develop phantasies about the group, the consultant, and the wider context, to explore the taking of roles in leadership and followership and in sharing moments of profound personal experience in the here and now that evoke genuine and group shaping emotional engagement that enhance learning about authority relations.

However, limitations include vital elements worth further exploration. One ethical question is: "Is it safe?". Experience of running online self-study groups suggests that the regressions that are part of deep conference learning and personal and collective transformation cannot be contained by a wider system without face-to-face contact and engagement where non-verbal cues are more naturally available and provide visual containment not available on screen. This limitation in being able to work with the emergence of embodied *protomental* experience, restricts learning about group dynamics at deeper levels and risks failing to provide emotional Containment for any regressions that might be provoked. My provisional conclusion is that the defences of dissociation and the network of pre-existing professional networks therefore have to carry the burden of this containing and regulating dimension as a means of inhibiting the risk of emotional casualties.

3) In sum:

In this chapter I have argued that for such work to be developed, the consultant has to listen to and search with deepening intuition for the call of unknown and unknowable dimensions of present time

experience coalescing in emotional embodiment from multiple directions. I have described it as the dance between the reciprocity of the contained seeking a Container accompanied by unheard rhythms and music. This search and the exploration of the dance between contained and Container and their accompanying music is caught in Eliot's Four Quartets:

*At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only dance.
I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.*

— Burnt Norton from Four Quartets by T. S. Eliot (1969 [1943]: 173).

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