

## **Bion in the nursery. The Three steps of an intersubjective theory**

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### **Abstract**

The author analyses Bion's works evolution in regard to the relation between intersubjectivity and symbolization. Three books mark this evolution: *Experiences in groups*, *Learning from experience* and *Attention and Interpretation*. Firstly intersubjectivity is the field of symbolisation, secondly the condition of it and thirdly the cause of it, they are both so closed that they are condemned to move together. The same vignette, each time interpreted, illustrates in a nursery these three progressive manners to consider intersubjectivity.

**Key-words:** intersubjectivity, symbolization, intrapsychic, interpersonal, children

At the present time, there is a great debate about the intersubjectivity. I wish to remind in this paper that the intersubjectivity is the core of the psychoanalytical conception of Bion. He introduces it progressively and in different manners. I will analyse this evolution of his work. Intersubjectivity becomes more and more inside the different process of symbolization, which Bion used. I have highlighted three steps as regards the way in which the relation of intersubjectivity and symbolization can be considered. These steps are like three circles of a spiral.

The hypothesis is that there are three relations between intersubjectivity and symbolization in the evolution of Bion's work:

- Firstly intersubjectivity is the field of the work of Bion but symbolization remains its classical form. It corresponds to a period when Bion was working as psychiatrist and as a group therapist.
- Secondly intersubjectivity becomes the manner that Bion exposes a new way of symbolizing. He introduces new concepts (function alpha, container-contained relation). The model of a "mother-baby dyad" gives form to this perspective. He was working with psychotics.
- Thirdly intersubjectivity and symbolization are more closely articulated, symbolization entirely depend of intersubjectivity. So in the field of intersubjectivity we can think about the position of the practitioner with the new concept of transformation and the new definition of attention. The model of this last perspective is groupal and institutional.

Three books mark this evolution: *Experiences in groups and others papers*, 1961, *Learning from experience*, 1962, and *Attention and Interpretation*, 1970. Each one is a

stage in the evolution of his work.

Previously few brief definitions. "Intersubjectivity" means that something occurs *between* Subjects. We adopt the definition of Kaës (1993). There is an opposition between "intrapsychic" and "intersubjectif" (Golse, 2002). Therefore "intersubjectif" implies to consider the unconscious dynamic of Subjects, it is not synonymous of "interaction" or "interpersonal". Classically "symbolisation" is an "operation by which something represents something else for other" (Gibeault, 2002). We will use it in a larger meaning to tell each process of representation, even when there is no yet conscious of an absent object. Bion will introduce us in this issue.

Bion was a great help for my practice as clinical psychologist with babies in nursery and in other mental care institutions. For demonstration I will present a vignette that I will interpret each time from the perspective of the particular relation between intersubjectivity and symbolization.

### **Gabriel and Mary in the nursery**

I was working as a psychologist in many day care nurseries twenty-five years ago and I remember a baby and his nurse. Gabriel is nine months old and he has privileged bounds with Mary, a young nurse. It is a prosaic situation, but it makes problem for caregivers. When Mary is in his room, Gabriel does not accept his meal from anyone else; when she goes out, he cries behind the door. Mary thinks of him all the time, even when at home. The others nurses tell me their criticisms of her: she should do something to stop it. It is a problem for other babies. When Mary is with them, she is so monopolized by Gabriel that she can't give enough attention to them. Above all, it seems also to make problem for Gabriel. He often cries and he doesn't play in the nursery.

It is not a typical clinical case, a therapy situation, but this intersubjective configuration is typical for those of us who work in institutions, with babies, children, patients or old people...With the different steps of the meaning of intersubjectivity, we could interpret it in different ways, in different vertices. Each version is correct but each one brings new meaning.

### **I. Experiences in groups, the intersubjectivity as the field of symbolization**

I will highlight the first relation between intersubjectivity and symbolization out from his book "Experiences in groups" published in 1961, but written before this date. Bion presents a theory to explain groups' mechanisms from a psychoanalytical approach. During this period he was undergoing second analysis with M. Klein.

The process of symbolization appears in the difference between "work group" and "basic group". The first one uses the secondary process to be in contact with reality. The second one avoids reality, the primary process, as a psychotic level of the group dominates it. I reduce his conception here but it is the main configuration of symbolization, especially from the second part of the book published in 1952 for an issue in honour to M. Klein.

Bion has transposed the intrapsychic mechanism used with the individual psychic apparatus onto the group. This bi-partition repeats the difference between conscious / unconscious. "To symbolize" is to use the secondary process, the rational level of personality. The difficulty comes from the existence of the non-rational level, which is dominated by the principle of pleasure.

However this conception is applied in an intersubjective field, in groups. He doesn't quote Lewin's theory but he has here the same conception of a group as Lewin: totality is not the equivalent of the sum of its members. According to Bion, the human being is more a "political animal" (Aristotle) than a "horde animal" that Freud had questioned. So many notions such as valence, group mentality, culture, basic assumption, basic group and work group introduce the specific field of intersubjectivity.

Special attention will be given to the new concept of a "basic assumption" which can be considered as a typical intersubjective experience. It is qualified as a protomental system, (especially in his first paper): motions tend to lead to "acting out" or to psychosomatic problem. Bion explores this way later with psychotics. Here, the dynamic is not a bipartition: when one assumption emerges, the other two are ready to succeed, and so on...it is a new movement to explain psychic processes. Pairing assumption has a particular place because it can announce the possibility of change. In the same way later the Messiah, the mystic or the new idea will announce the change.

### **First interpretation: in the nursery the state of mind of an institutional group**

In the nursery, the process of symbolization can be explained by considering that the "work group" consists in taking care of babies, while "basic groups" try to avoid this task.

The pairing of Gabriel and Mary is a concretisation of the "pairing assumption". The problem as Bion explains is that this couple comes to exist "in reality", there is no place yet for a new idea of change. So the group is paralysed by basic assumptions, it does not progress. Sometimes "dependency basic assumption" becomes more apparent between baby and adult, and between caregivers and me. Sometimes "fight-flight basic assumption" is closed to emerging when there is criticism of parents, of other nurses, of the administration or of the psychologist etc. There is quite a lot of tension in the group and the rational organisation does not change, although people have more knowledge about babies needs.

The situation improves when this pairing is not consolidated by attacks or by envy, in other words when pairing becomes a way of dealing with baby and his problem. So this union can produce a new idea. Gabriel has been for a month in the nursery, he needs his mother. We have discussion about his problem: he is just nine months old and Mary takes the place of his mother. When caregivers are aware of this separation anguish, they stop their disqualification of Mary, and Gabriel feels better.

On this first step of theory, intersubjectivity is the field of a classical symbolization.

From this intuition Bion will go ahead to discover another symbolization and relationship with intersubjectivity.

## **2. Learning from experience, the intersubjectivity as a process of symbolization**

"Learning from experience", published in 1962 is a good title to summarize the second relation between intersubjectivity and symbolization. Experience comes from intersubjectivity, learning presupposes the presence of others. Experiences become the foundation of a process of symbolization; it is a link between symbolization and intersubjectivity.

A new definition of symbolization appears. It results from a period when Bion worked with schizophrenics. He used Kleinian concepts but he needed to create a new concept to explain a special process, namely the alpha function. This type of symbolization takes place before secondary symbolization; that is to say before the bipartition of the two processes of primary and secondary. It is also an intrapsychic process but it depends more directly on intersubjectivity: an object equipped with alpha function has to symbolize what the subject will thus symbolize. Alpha elements belong to the intrapsychic system but they come from a function, which is working in intersubjectivity links. Classical symbolization was created for problems of neurosis. This type of symbolization occurs when subject is not yet differentiated from object. According to René Roussillon it could be called "primary symbolization". It is quite important for modern clinical situations.

Bion studies the role of verbal thought with psychotics. Normally language is used to communicate and also to be conscious of internal and external realities. But sometimes it is used as an act. Bion noticed that it occurs particularly when a schizophrenic arrives at depressive position after a period of hard work: thus he is afraid to be conscious of his madness and he regresses to schizo-paranoid position and to acting out.

According to S. Freud (1911), who has written that thought was originally unconscious, Bion infers that it must be primitive thinking. He describes ideograms, a matrice which makes links between senses or sensorial impressions. It is in contradiction with the idea that there is no psychic organisation with the principle of pleasure into the primary process.

In the same way, he points out that the "psychotic part" of personality does not make a difference between conscious and unconscious, between woken state and dream. With his paper "On hallucination" (1967), he observes that the senses organs can expulse perception instead of receive it. The mechanism of splitting that M. Klein has studied concerning objects can also concern a part of the psychic apparatus.

It is important to notice that this hypothesis of alpha function results from a confused intersubjective situation. A membrane is defective between the patient and the psychoanalyst, and between the conscious and the unconscious. It constitutes a double differentiation both intra and inter-psychic. André Green (1982) has advanced the

concept of "double limit" to name this mechanism.

Bion draws up the metaphor of a mother-baby dyad to explain how alpha function metabolizes non-psychic elements, i.e. beta elements. Baby expulses beta elements, and its mother has to receive and "digest" them. Mother has to contain them in her mind in order to give meaning in return; she had to transform insane into psychic elements. In this way the baby is able to think and to have dreams. In this perspective "to symbolize is to create alpha elements".

Bion makes distinction between the link of knowledge (K) from the drive bonds (A and H). However, primary symbolization always has to be approached with this drive background (the oscillation Sp – D). The origin of K link is the mechanism of projective identification; it is called the relation container-contained. When M. Klein insists on the splitting to project outside the mind, Bion considers a more normal way used to communicate, like mother with her baby.

### **Second interpretation: in the nursery the double limit into the couple and within the group**

The intersubjective problem of Gabriel and Mary is a trouble of symbolization. At first sight, Mary does not manage to contain Gabriel's helplessness. Her response cannot digest his difficulties, and she cannot provide him with a secure attachment. However it is more complicated. The problem of Gabriel depends also directly on all the caregivers. The capacity of reverie of Mary depends also on her situation in her team group. According to our first interpretation it is a "work group", so we can consider that there is an alpha function of this team group (cfr. the gamma function in Neri, 1995).

To contain Gabriel's difficulties, the team has to contain the couple Mary-Gabriel. There is a double membrane, which is simultaneously defective inside this pair and outside it, within the nursery. Limits between persons are confused, between Mary and Gabriel, and between this pair and the rest of the group (the other caregivers and the other babies). The situation improves when Gabriel's anxieties and Mary's desire are received and contained. The alpha function of the work group creates a double limit into this pair and within the group.

The first interpretation was a help to localise the problem and to describe the atmosphere of the group. This second interpretation can explain more precisely the way to symbolize. "Pairing assumption" is a nodal point, which can articulate intra and interpsychic elements.

In 1962 Bion distinguishes between the "thought" and the "thinking apparatus". He observed that a new thought calls for a new apparatus to be thought. It is a revolution in the conception of knowledge that will be at the heart of the third step I develop.



### **3. Attention and interpretation, the simultaneous development of intersubjectivity and symbolization**

The third model of relation between symbolization and intersubjectivity comes from "Attention and Interpretation". It is an integration of the two preceding models. Intersubjectivity is the field of symbolisation, it is the way to a primitive symbolization but also it determines the way to symbolizing. The symbol has the character of an establishment, this model has an institutional or a trans-psyche dimension. As for his private life, we know Bion decided to let his responsibility in the Psychoanalytical Society and to leave London for a new country, the California.

Bion tries to go beyond experiences that can be indeed limiting. They are resistances to approaching unknown elements from patients. Experiences are formed in models, which constitutes a focus for attention. They are infiltrated by satisfactions of senses. In order to rectify this flaw of experiences, Bion promotes a discipline to eschewing desire, memory and understanding. It is an ethical point of view because it indicates in which direction we have to work. Attention is defined by the link of the capacity of reverie, but also it is an "intuit" to catch the container-contained link. It is a factor of mind but also a state of mind. The training to observe baby at home according to the method of Esther Bick (1964) is a preparation for this discipline - each time the observer knocks at the family door, he has to receive the state of mind of the family by eschewing his memory and his knowledge of this family.

The concept of "transformation" is the link between intersubjectivity and symbolization. It is a concept for the practice, like the alpha function. It is a sort of an extension of the transference concept: for transformation the movement of transference is located in his framework and around the type of symbolization to be carried out. This third model is based on the role of establishment "as a Janus": in one hand it has a containing function, in other hand it is a resistance.

The symbol can walk as an establishment. As container it depends on perceptions and on common sense of a community. It depends on a group, more precisely of that is established in this group, through the members of the group. It is a sort of "normal" meaning, which results from common perceptions in a culture. The dictionary gives us details of this convention. Bion learnt History at University, firstly he had introduced basic assumptions from the model of different civilisations (Bleandou, 1990), and he continues to point out the importance of this characteristic of human being. Sometimes a symbol meets a contained, which transforms it. The new idea has to make its place in establishment, in the shared mind of a society, of a group or of a person. This new perception requires the creation of apparatus to receive it. This new vertex is not compatible with the other ones. Thought does not belong to anyone and each change is a risk of a catastrophe. It destabilises the establishment. In this perspective, to symbolize is

a revolutionary act.

The dynamic of change is near the first time of the period of group experiences. Bion is close to S. Freud (1921) who explores mass-psychology: "primitive-mass" (Primitive Horde) is like an origin which makes movements under organized-mass, namely institution. If primitive-mass can destroy institution, however Bion exposes that the change presupposes the contact with this primitive part. So Bion (1970) makes a new interpretation of the "scientific myth" of Freud:

- 1) At the Origin there would be no difference between God and Man. It corresponds to the first Freudian stage: the father is omnipotent and he possesses all females.
- 2) After, a separation between God and Man is established. The difference between omnipotence and reality is established, a work group can exist. It corresponds to the brothers' convention after the murder of the Father.
- 3) The third stage, a mystic is in communion with God, with the Origin of the group. His new idea destabilizes what was established. It corresponds to the Freudian period where a poet relates to his group a story of a father killed by his sons.

Freud demonstrated paternal transference, Bion more archaic transference by developing a psychotic version of the Freudian myth. Freud explains symbolization in the secondary problematic; Bion explains symbolization in more primitive way. He highlights rather more intersubjective viewpoint to approach relations into groups and institutions.

### **Third interpretation: in the nursery denial pacts and the Origin of the Institution.**

The intersubjective problem of Gabriel and Mary has a transsubjective dimension. This banal situation is difficult to contain because it is against the establishment of working behaviours and nursery habits. The norm was: "it is forbidden to be attached to baby", but everyone denies that, and this phenomenon occurs frequently. Why? There is a type of common denials between caregivers and parents about baby's separation anxieties and about the importance of love link with baby. Denials concern the perception of anxiety and desire:

- Gabriel cries because of separation. His environment does not manage to realise the origin of his comportment. Adults deny the importance of mother's separation. Between Mary and the mother, no word about separation but a similar difficulty to evoke it.
- The emotional engagement of Mary is too excessive, and it disturbs the team establishment. She is young, it is her first job after professional school, and caregivers do not sustain her. There was no meeting to think about this situation, everybody seems afraid of this implication.

These shared denials are like the "denegative pacts" of René Kaës. Establishment has to contain the impact of the mystic, of the new idea. This nursery has to contain this pair,

which disturbs. It is dangerous because it affects the foundation of the nursery as institution, its mythic Origin. The myth of the Crib says that a woman saves and takes care of a baby, which might be died or damaged. To be in contact with the Origin is dangerous, such as an omnipotent act because there are lots of Love and Hate inside it and because it is a transgression. The rules of the foundation of nurseries say that it is forbidden to steal baby. What does Mary do?

The excessive attachment between Mary and Gabriel evokes this mythic origin and a transgression. Returning to this Origin can destabilise the establishment, which has contained these original violent emotions. Returning to the Origin is however a necessity because more Love drives can help a team to improve its organisations and its practices. So the risk of change is catastrophic. When Gabriel's anxieties of separation has been recognised and when Mary's desire has been no more disqualified, the situation improved finally. After a hard and long intersubjective thinking in the teamwork, Mary and Gabriel bring Love links into the group; a new form of establishment appears, until the next change etc.

This risk of change explains that there is an oscillation in institution from "status quo", nothing moves, to crisis, everything moves.

Intersubjectivity and symbolization are closely articulated in this third relation because an intersubjective process is at the root of the symbol. The model of the institution in a group takes the place of the model of mother-baby dyad. In the similar manner, the modern physics takes the place of the classical physics.

This way to think intersubjectivity with Bion is not closed; I just hope to have shown how rich it is to sustain clinical practice, especially in groups and institutions. Actually it is also a necessity to face the different conceptions of intersubjectivity in psychology and psychoanalysis.

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