

Bion's contribution to group dynamics

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Dit artikel is een weergave van de lezing die Biran uitsprak tijdens het NVGP-congres van 24 maart 2017. Om dubbele vertaling te vermijden – Birans eigen taal is Hebreeuws maar ze hield de lezing in het Engels – hebben we de tekst niet in het Nederlands vertaald.

Bion's theory of thinking

Bion developed an original theory of thinking. He considered that the thinking process is a function of the personality. In his *Learning from Experience* Bion refers to two principal and different elements of thinking. The first, called ALPHA elements, refers to elements that can be thought. The second, called BETA elements, refers to elements, which are impossible to use for thinking. It is ALPHA function that translates what is absorbed by the infant through the senses in a pre-verbal form into words, dreams, expressions of feeling, and dialogue. It affects the transformation from thoughts that cannot be thought to thoughts that can be thought. At first, the mother performs this function for the infant. She translates the infant's distresses for it, gives names to its hardships and anxieties, and thus calms and contains it.

These concepts are important for shedding light on the unconscious processes taking



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place in the group. The group is a regressive place, in which people experience uncertainty, struggle with finding their place, and live on a high level of anxiety concerning their presence in the group. They are occupied by the questions of how they find their place in the group and how the therapist relates to them. It therefore seems that the

group is speaking in BETA code. Because of the level of anxiety and the degree of regression, thoughts that cannot be thought are filling the room. The group expresses those thoughts through different patterns of behaviour, which do not undergo a transformation to thinking. People say concrete things, which occur to them, but they are unable to express what goes on inside them. The function of the therapist here is to execute the ALPHA function, which is the mother's function. The therapist is supposed to collect the different behaviours and the words said, and give them meaning. Thus, the therapist makes it possible for the group to move from code to code, and to learn the language of the unconscious. The main task of the therapist is to transform concrete stories to a symbolic level of thinking. Here is an example from my group.

The group member, a 45-year-old executive, immigrated to Israel from Morocco at the age of ten. He is the youngest of five boys. I will now quote a childhood memory which he shared with the group: 'I was about six years old. My family was not doing very well financially. I wanted to go to the amusement park that was at the end of our street. My mother gave me the equivalent of a two-euro coin – she didn't have any smaller change. She told me to spend one euro and bring back the change. I entered the amusement park joyfully and chose to go on a swing that cost one euro per ride. The swing was hand operated by a large, towering man. When the ride was done, some kid from the neighbourhood who was three

years older than me hopped on and held me down forcefully. I cried out but the man did not listen and started the swing on another ride. I was crying but everyone was laughing and I came home without any change. My brothers said I was lying and they hit me hard. My mother said nothing and did not defend me.'

This patient is a department manager at a large organization, a middle-management executive. He has considerable skill, but finds it difficult to pull rank and use his authority. He was trying to please everyone and make sure no one was mad at him. He became the middle-man between the senior management and the workers and went back and forth between the different ranks of the organization. He never once voiced a clear opinion of his own, subjugating himself to the opinions of others. In the group, he wanted to be my good son, but when other members showed resistance towards me, he joined in with them. He thus lost his credibility and the other members became angry at him for having no spine and for having a change of heart at every new turn.

This childhood memory was authentic and moving and it helped us shed some light on his behaviour.

A concrete story may lift the veil from a person's inner world. By looking at the concrete memory as a metaphor, we can uncover the key drama of an entire life. Keeping in mind the theory of Bion, I understood that the concrete and frightening event has not been transformed to symbolic thinking. It has stayed in mind as a frozen picture. The role of the therapist is to find links bet-

ween this ‘thing in itself’ and the model of behaviour that repeated itself in the group and outside the group. I offered the following intervention: ‘It seems that here and now, in the group, you are finding yourself riding a swing against your will. Someone else is operating this swing and you can’t control it. In your despair, you have erased your own will. You keep swinging back and forth, trying to please your fellow members so that they won’t hurt you, as your brothers did, and pleasing me, so that I will support you and not abandon you. But you are not that helpless child anymore. You can climb down from a swing that is controlled by other people. You are allowed to show what you truly want and to go your own way.’

After this, a lot of pain that was hidden in him came bursting out. The metaphor illustrated the reality he grew up in. He encountered helplessness and transformed it into an emerging feeling of power. In his childhood memory, he was helpless, his crying was drowned out by the commotion of the amusement park. Now, in the group, he stepped out of his loneliness because the other members were empathetic to his pain.

Bion’s theory about the links

Bion divided our emotional experiences into three basic categories which he called *links*: Knowledge (K), Love (L) and Hate (H). A link can have either a positive valence (for instance +H) or a negative valence (for instance -K).

He believed that we cannot grasp the ultimate reality. We interact with the world

through these three kinds of links. Positive hatred creates a change, for example when one expresses anger in the right time towards injustice. Bion attributed the sign minus when, for instance, hatred is chocking one for years and make him sick. Searching for the truth is (+K), but telling a lie is (-K). Self-respect is (+L), whereas arrogance is (-L). Hatred towards an abusing father is (+H), but indifference to abuse is (-H). I will now present vignettes from two consecutive group sessions as an example of a reversible perspective (+K) and of the transformation of (-H) to (+H) to (+L).

Yehuda, 54, was abused as a child. His father would beat him brutally for no reason. He has memories from the age of 6 or 7 of his father’s outbursts of blind rage. He remembers terrible beatings, and his mother being passively present and turning a blind eye. His mother never defended him or tried to stop his father. In the group, Yehuda talks about feelings of neglect, humiliation and rejection. These feelings continue to overwhelm him. If I do not address him and his feelings in the right way or at the right moment he desires, he feels once again like a humiliated and abandoned child.

In this session, both David and Israel told Yehuda he meant a lot to them. Each of them expressed affection towards him in different ways. David told Yehuda that he was the most significant person in the group to him. Because he too was an abused child, he feels that Yehuda holds the key to his own problem.

In response to these expressions of affection, Yehuda froze. His body language beca-

me tense and rigid. He ignored the comments directed at him.

Hanni: 'What's happening to you? What do you feel when people in the group tell you that you mean so much to them?'

Yehuda: 'I'm not interested. It's a burden. I can't be the centre. I can't stand it when people expect something from me.'

Hanni: 'Your body language showed you were scared. You were offered affection, and affection does not necessarily entail expectations. It can be affection for the sake of affection. Maybe it's hard for you to let go of the child who runs away and hides, who doesn't want to be seen.'

Israel: 'I hate seeing you like this. I do feel you are signalling a sort of closeness to me.'

Na'ama: 'You show so much understanding towards the things other people in the group say.'

David: 'To me you convey coldness. But I still feel that inside you are warm.'

Hanni: 'Maybe what scares you is the closeness, the intimacy. What will you do if that happens?'

Yehuda: 'I think that's true. In the group, I discover that emotional closeness and intimacy scare me. If I go on with my associations, I think intimacy entails terrible disappointment, and that's very dangerous. In fact, it is a mortal danger. To expect something from someone and to be disappointed. That's mortal danger for me. Mortal danger. I'm afraid of treachery, of being abandoned. I can't believe or trust.'

Hanni: 'It works the other way around, too. You're afraid to disappoint when someone trusts you.'

Israel: 'So how is it that you've been married to the same woman for twenty-something years?'

Yehuda: 'With my wife it's not so dangerous anymore, but even to her I don't give myself completely.'

Hanni: 'You said "mortal danger" three times. When you were a child, you were helpless and terrified when facing your father. Your mother betrayed you, she didn't defend you. It was like a psychological death. You were little, and unprotected.'

Yehuda: 'You're touching my worst memories. Sometimes I ask myself, why didn't I rebel? I remember that once I ran away and he ran after me and caught me and beat me so hard, I never ran away again.' Yehuda turns to Israel: 'So if you say you like me, it's scary. It's dangerous for me.'

Hanni: 'Because injury will follow?'

Yehuda: 'For sure. Absolutely no doubt. I'll either be hurt, or else I'll hurt others. Best not to start the cycle. Never expect anything. Never fantasize. This goddamn kid keeps popping up. He's my prison guard.'

Na'ama: 'Were you ever violent?'

Yehuda: 'Yes. I beat my son. It was tragic for me. Horrible. The end of the world. But this time I had help, my wife watched over me. She understood, and kept watch. My son doesn't remember it as something so terrible. After my wife helped me, I managed to watch over myself. Later, I got close to my son. I talked to him about what happened and I felt relieved. But even today, I don't trust myself completely. I'm afraid I might have an uncontrollable outburst.'

David: ‘Yehuda, I’ve got to tell you something. You broke the chain of violence. You should be the proudest person in the world. What you did is huge. Huge.’

Yehuda sits quietly, looking embarrassed, blushing. The group is silent.

Vignettes from the following session

Shimon: ‘I used to stutter until I was 19. I was terribly ashamed. I went to a doctor and he told me, you leave this room right now and start stuttering everywhere. Talk and stutter. Fail, and fail, and keep going. Don’t stop talking, and do it everywhere. I did exactly what he told me, and slowly, the stuttering went away. I stuttered, and was ashamed. I remembered the doctor standing behind me and telling me, go out into the world and talk.’

Yehuda: ‘That’s very moving. Nobody ever said anything like that to me. Nobody ever said, fail, and fail, and in the end, you’ll triumph.’

Hanni: ‘The story of the doctor awakens a longing for a parent figure to lean on. One who tells the child, go out into the world standing up straight. Shimon received the doctor’s blessing, but he also dared. Maybe you too, Yehuda, should take risks. Express emotions in real-time and see what happens to you.’

Yehuda addresses me assertively: ‘Ok. So, let me tell you something. Twice in the last session, you got mixed up and called me by a different name. I was terribly hurt. I felt like that former neglected kid, and I crumbled up and sat in the corner. Now I want to be angry with you. Why do you get confu-

sed and call me by a different name? If you care so much about me, why can’t you remember my name?’

The group was silent. I could hear my heart beating. I was taken by surprise, and now I was the one who was scared. I told myself I should speak truthfully.

Hanni: ‘When you rebuke me like that, I feel very bad but at the same time I’m happy to see you expressing your anger directly for the first time. That’s a good question, why I called you by a different name. I don’t want to cover it up. Maybe it has something to do with some unexplored feelings I have towards you. I’ve sometimes felt helpless regarding you, especially when you asked again and again – ‘so what do we do now?’, ‘What can I do?’ Your repeated question restricted my thinking, and maybe forgetting your name was an expression of anger.

Yehuda: ‘Your answer makes me feel good. I feel good when you say what’s going on inside you.’

Hanni: ‘We can talk, too, the way you talked with your son. There was something on my part that wasn’t holding. To forget your name is like injuring your identity. It’s good that we can clear up anger and try to fix things.’

Following this session, Yehuda felt he was becoming stronger. He was able to confront his boss at work. He stopped reacting fearfully and submissively to every authority figure. But in the midst of this movement, he began to regress.

The following is an excerpt from a session that took place two months later.

Na'ama always aroused the group's aggression. People in the group said she lacked tactfulness, was inattentive, talked too much, that her tone was monotonous, that she spoke unintelligently, and so on. Na'ama grew up in a kibbutz. Her parents were different and stood out in the kibbutz's social environment. They were uneducated and had very marginal jobs in the kibbutz. Na'ama was strongly rejected by the kibbutz children. Her memories of feeling different and that she didn't belong re-emerged now, when the group rejected her.

In this session, the group members once again attacked Na'ama, rejected her and abused her. I always felt she was trapped in a childhood scene and didn't know how to make the group like her. She became a scapegoat, and was used for discharging anger. She always drew fire and always behaved as if the attacks didn't hurt her. But it was obvious she was suffering. Suddenly it occurred to me that whenever the group attacked Na'ama, Yehuda remained silent, his gaze distant and detached. He seemed indifferent, and he showed no emotion. Suddenly, I saw a clear picture. I decided to address him and talk about his attitude.

Hanni: 'Yehuda, you're sitting here in silence, indifferent to Na'ama's pain. In this way, you relive the role of your neglectful mother who ignored you. You return to the mother you hate. The indifferent mother who didn't try to stop your father's violence against you. Here and now, Na'ama is the abused child and you are the passive mother.'

Interpreting the silence as conveying a message from the unconscious shook the group.

Yehuda began to move uncomfortably in his chair. He blushed and said that my interpretation touched him very deeply. He felt that something new had been broken through and opened up in him. Later in the session, the group concluded that in order to save himself, he would have to identify experientially with the humiliated child within him. He would have to get close to this child, to love him and accept him. Instead of identifying with the neglectful mother, he would have to resist her and save the child. His apathy towards Na'ama brought to light his apathy towards the abused child within him. Na'ama burst into tears for the first time and has done a lot of work with the group but I have not enough time to get in to it now.

We all left this session deeply moved. It marked the beginning of loving the humiliated children inside – the children that made us feel ashamed, that made us want to run away from them, erase them and all the painful memories they held. The rejected and humiliated children in the inner world prevent the development of self-esteem and self-love.

In describing this group process, I have tried to demonstrate the transformation from repressed hatred that settles like sediment over the years, to open hatred expressed as direct anger, which can dissolve hard, blocking elements. I have also tried to illustrate a process in which hatred is replaced by love through renewed contact with the rejected, shameful child inside, who we would rather run away from because he is a stain on our self-esteem. This child emerged

in the group in need of compassion and a loving mother. The group process enabled such mothering to materialize.

The binocular vision

Bion agreed with Aristotle, who said that 'man is a social animal'. Most of us need to belong to groups. A person feels loneliness when he does not belong to any group. A person can live alone with a sense of solitude because in his mental life he feels belonging to a family and to colleagues and to friends. Solitude differs from loneliness. Solitude is full of internal life, but loneliness is empty.

Nevertheless, belonging is not so simple because it contradicts the need for healthy narcissism and the need to feel individuality and to protect self-boundaries in front of a group. So, when one takes part in a group therapy, he feels a never-ending movement between egocentric parts and sociocentric parts of himself. He wants to belong but at the same time has a fear of being swallowed by the group. He wants to keep his individual boundaries but at the same time has a fear of being left alone and abandoned by the group and by the therapist. So, the fears are at the same time claustrophobic and agoraphobic. The therapist must be aware of the movements between these poles. He does it by looking through the binocular vision. The binocular vision is the ability to be flexible and to move from one point of view to the opposite point of view. When you look at one person, Oedipus is in the focus and the group is in the mar-

gins. When you look at the group, the Sphinx is in the focus and Oedipus is in the margins. The Sphinx represents the enigmas of the social processes which are difficult to decipher.

EGO-centric	versus	SOCIO-centric
Narcissism	versus	Social-ism
Oedipus	versus	Sphinx
Past	versus	Future
Finite	versus	Infinite
Establishment	versus	Mystic

The different pairs here are poles which must be in interaction. Establishment is the infrastructure of our life and Mystic is the one who innovates and creates new ideas. Establishment with no mystic is stagnation. Mystic with no establishment is psychotic.

Bion's biography

I will try to assume how much Bion's life events affected his thinking.

Bion was born in 1897 in Victorian Imperial India. He was raised mainly by a maid and a governess, both Indian, who often told him tales from the *Mahabharata*, whose language he could not decipher, but whose impact he was never to forget.

In Bion's thinking there is emphasis on non-verbal communication. What we grasp through our senses is not less important than the meaning of words. Bion postulated that there are senses of the mind which are parallel to the senses of the body. Our intuition is based on these senses which together create the common sense.

Bion was sent off on his own to England at the age of eight. He was educated at Bishops Stratford College. This was a very difficult period for the young Bion, being away from his family. During that period Bion learned to make good use of his imagination, but was still suffering from nightmares. A lack of a parental container in childhood leads to the feeling that one is alone confronting reality and that one is not a part of a pair that gives the emotional experience of Two-ness. Being so lonely with no one who contains your inner world, ends up with feelings of impotence. In this terrible situation, omnipotence develops as a defence against this impotence and the subsequent arrogance will block any mutual relationships.

In 1916 Bion joined the armed forces, and served in the Royal Tank Regiment on the Western Front. He took part in a terrible battle, in which thousands of soldiers were killed. At one point no officers were left, and Bion, a 20 years old junior officer, was required to take command. Bion remained profoundly affected by this terrifying and cruel ordeal for the rest of his life.

Bion used the metaphor of mental digestion of life experiences and he thought that traumas are not available for digestion and for symbolic thinking; they stay as they are with no development. The inner world is thus flooded with beta elements which cannot develop thoughts.

While he was training as an analyst at the British Institute of Psychoanalysis, World War II broke out. During the war Bion was an officer in charge of the Military Training

Wing at Northfield Military Hospital for a brief period of six weeks. Following this experience Bion wrote his first paper on groups, entitled *Intra-Group Tensions in Therapy: Their Study as a Task of the Group*. Bion's great discovery is postulation of the three basic assumptions: 1. People join groups for satisfying the need of dependence. 2. For being protected confronting a common enemy. 3. To cling to a pair which hold on to hope.

The last event in Bion's biography, I wish to point out, is his move from London to Los Angeles in 1968. This took place when he was about 70, and while he was holding central positions in London's psychoanalytic establishment. While in Los Angeles, he was engaged in much writing, psychoanalysis, painting and lecturing. According to him, he fled London because of his important positions, because he 'didn't wish to be drowned in honour' and lose his individual and independent thinking. The quotation has double meaning and a flavour of bitterness since till then people used to praise his *Experiences in Groups* (1961) but had not read his later books.

It was Freud who turned Bion's attention to the 'caesura'. Quoting Freud, he wrote: 'There is much more continuity between intra-uterine life and earliest infancy than the impressive caesura of the act of birth would have us believe' (Bion, 1989. p. 37).

The act of birth is bewildering. We stand in awe before the new-born child, complete with all its parts. This experience is so intense, that we tend to forget that the baby

was not created this instant, and that it had already gone through nine whole months of life.

Birth is an intense caesura: the moment of birth contains both a continuation and a break, which symbolizes the end of one era and the beginning of another. As such, the caesura always entails this double meaning: it breaks, while at the same time it enables continuity.

Bion was enchanted by Freud's formulation, mostly because of its duality. Bion favoured intuitive, somewhat vague concepts, which evoke a different encounter within each of us and provoke a variety of associations. Bion expanded Freud's term, applying it to all periods of life. Our lives are rich in caesurae: we start things which are less a beginning than a continuation of what was registered and accumulated in the past. The caesura is vital for development: it enables us to make transitions, to keep on doing what we need to do, and stop doing what we find burdensome and redundant.

The concept of the caesura reminds us that the development of our personality is not linear, but synchronic. It means that many aspects of previous ages remain alive in our internal world. In various situations of our present life, another aspect moves to the front.

Let's look at the caesura in group dynamics. In group dynamics, the participants come to the group when one aspect of their personalities moves to the front. So, sometimes the boy of age 4 comes to the group in search of a mother and at the same time another mem-

ber feels like the elder sister of this boy and another member plays a role of an indifferent grown-up who needs nothing from the group. In this way, a matrix is formed with many roles from different periods of life.

To sum up the biographical chapter, it is important to point out that Bion had lived on three continents, was involved in two World Wars, underwent one trauma as an 8 years old child and another, terrible trauma as a young officer in the war. His manifold experiences, his transferring between countries and cultures, his many professional identities as an army officer, football player, mathematician, painter, philosopher, classics' scholar, physician, psychoanalyst – all these aspects contributed to his distinct way of writing, as well as to his ability to observe and analyse group processes in an exceptional way. His contribution is due to his unique thinking and life experience.