

Bion Seminar December 2013

Much of the discussion will organize the following ideas. Don't become too distressed if any of these terms are unclear to you. I will explain them further - Bion is not easy, but I can make it easier once you understand him and how his thinking developed. ML

1. Alpha function: Term to describe a process where sense data/experience is converted into meaningful experience.

Here is the pathway: Sense experience/biologically close sensations—UCS phantasy
Alpha elements--meaningful experience. The latter emerges out of —emotional
experience characterized by fears of dying, persecution, annihilation (PS)-sadness,
grief (DP); (paranoid-schizoid position – depressive position /affects)

The mother facilitates (or fails to facilitate) the alpha function through reverie (see 2)
The above process rests on numerous Kleinian assumptions: belief that there is innate knowledge
on a wide range of subjects, including sex, father, mother, organs, etc. There is little evidence of
the latter; instinctual actions would not qualify as they are somewhat automatic, never particularly
restrained by thought. However, Bion still does pretty creative work given the limitations posed
by the facts before him.

(Innate knowledge is experienced as a preconception. More on preconception to follow)

2. Reverie: Term adopted by Bion (1962) describing a maternal (caretaker/analyst) state of
consciousness characterized by calm receptivity such that the mother can take in/ process the
distress (fear/apprehension/terror/confusion/avoidance/dysregulation)
of the infant/child so that through her processing she can provide comfort and calm
and meaning so that unmanageable state(s) can become manageable and ultimately
self-regulated

3. K : Bion believed that, along with love (L) and hate (H), the desire to know and acquire
knowledge (K) is the most important element in the growth and
development of the personality. Through reverie the mother establishes a K link with the infant.
The infant/child, via internalization of an interaction (PI),
incrementally establishes a structure that will grow and expand over time. The child's knowledge
and desire to learn (K) is enhanced. As thinking and curiosity are enhanced
intellectual and social development is furthered.
The development of K is dependent on maternal capacity and the mother's
freedom from distraction, depression and negative external experiences, i.e. marital
disappointment..

Bion's elevation of the mother as the central force in the child's development was a distinct
advance in Kleinian thought. Alpha function, reverie, containing affect and enhancement of K
represent the core of contemporary Kleinian thought.

4. -K: (minus K)- term to describe what happens when the mother, whatever the reasons, is
unable to provide the alpha function, establish reverie, and contain the infant's distress.

The capacity to know is acquired when the child internalizes a caretaker who understands

her/his need and can take effective action to calm distress. If the mother cannot maintain the child's arousal within a tolerable range then development may be compromised.

No K: The capacity to know is destroyed due to lack of an internalization. The latter is a result of a shallow environment characterized by an absence of intimacy. The child will actively seek out a significant, but when no one is available depletion follows and the child experiences the surround as dangerous and aggressive. The ability to think, learn and reflect is injured and the capacity to learn from experience is undeveloped or absent.

5. Beta Elements

The relative constant in nearly all forms of psychological affliction is that the suffering individual is unable to learn from prior experience, particularly if significant formative experiences are out of reflective range (dissociated) or if the capacity for reflective thought is so hampered as to preclude access to earlier experience even if the experience is available to consciousness (-K or No K.).

Beta elements predispose the infant/child /adult toward action rather than delay, contemplation, selection and experimentation. Beta elements do not assist development and predispose the individual to groups that contain loneliness and insecurities but disallow growth and dismiss reasoned action.

Bion filled in much that was missing in Klein; specifically noting, that if the mother's actions were sensitive and timely frustration tolerance would develop and growth would follow. The aforementioned formulation is consistent in Bion's work and has not been properly acknowledged. The reason for this collective disavowal is that to accept the prior formulation one would have to disregard a central Kleinian conception that insists that the child, separate from his/her projections, is a single unit and is largely the creator of the bad object; that is, that the child's affects, particularly aggressive affects, compromises the attachment from the beginning of life.

6. Container and Contained- terms used by Bion and others worldwide to describe a process of communication and influence whereby one entity holds, manages, comprehends and influences another. The terms represent a generalization from the maternal-infant model, broadening the original model into psychoanalysis itself; that is, the analyst, with an individual or a larger group(s) seeks to identify multiple pathogenic states via projective/intersubjective pathways and then selectively contain such states via the preferred tools of psychoanalytic consultation and practice.

7. Concept--an idea that links together observations; also, an idea that links together observations that share a common property. Concepts facilitate thought and mental growth. They represent the main inhabitants of theory.