

**The container, contained and in-between:
A review of the containment concept and its vicissitudes**

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ABSTRACT

One of Bion's most influential legacy to psychoanalysts concerns the way emotional experience are apprehended and transformed by us. The most important implication of his theories is the fact that we need the mind of a significant other to give meaning to our sensuous experience, and that our cognitive capacities is the result of the capacity to establish a stable link with this significant other. To convey his idea Bion proposed his model of a container-contained which he represents by borrowing from biology the signs of ♀ and ♂. In the present article I discuss this model focusing particularly on the function characterizing the ♀ ♂ couple, namely containment.

Although Bion did not use the term "containment", it is reflected in almost all Bion's psychoanalytic concepts. Therefore, I have here first discussed what constitutes the foundation of the containment concept, namely the container-contained (♀ ♂) model. Then I briefly introduced some of the concepts directly related to his model, such as the commensal, symbiotic and parasitic relationships linking ♀ and ♂, projective identification, containment space, valency, reverie, alpha-function, at-one-ment, and faith. Finally, containment is also compared to two other apparently similar concepts, namely Winnicott's concept of "holding", and "reciprocity" which was initially developed outside the psychoanalytical field.

Key Words: *Container-contained, reverie, alpha-function, holding, containment*

As pointed out by Bion (1970) in *Attention and Interpretation*, "the more successfully the word and its use can be 'established' the more its precision becomes an obstructive rigidity; the more imprecise it is, the more it is a stumbling block to comprehension" (p. 80). This applies perfectly to the now famous concept of "containment". This concept was suggested, developed and elevated to the status of an influential psychoanalytical term by Bion. However, the latter alluded to it in passing only in stead of devoting to it the space and time it deserves.

Moreover, most of Bion's followers and researchers have also failed to provide the reader with a satisfying definition of and information about the concept. In spite of its clinical and epistemological importance, there are surprisingly almost no work discussion of or detailed introduction to the concept. Even "*The Dictionary of the Work of W. R. Bion*" by Lopez-Corvo (2003), and "*The Language of Bion*" (Sandler, 2005), have no entry for the term "containment". The

author of the former, confining himself to a minimal amount of space (two and a half pages), dealing with it indirectly within the entry "container-contained". Whereas the author of the former, sticking faithfully to Bion's original and unsaturated text, has avoided providing the reader with a clear definition of what is meant by containment.

Knowing Bion's work and his way of literally (and orally) expressing himself, this is by no means a surprise. It is the author's belief that the lack of an accurate definition of containment reflects Bion conscious intention, and use of the "language of achievement". As discussed elsewhere, (Hafsi, 2003), Bion, as a writer and analyst, intentionally writes and communicates in the "language of achievement", an expression stemming from John Keat's (1817) idea of the "Man of Achievement". According to Bion (1970), the language of achievement is constituted by unsaturated and therefore frustrating expressions which must be transformed by the receiver (the object) so that action takes place and growth is stimulated.

Hence, Bion's language of achievement, and his followers' "negative ability" to bear and transform, or contain it have contributed to a further discussion and development of the containment concept.

The purpose of the present study thus, is to provided the reader with an integrative review of the concept of containment, starting from Bion's idea, and ending with recent contributions by post-Bionian researchers, especially Grotstein (1979, 2000, 2005, 2009), and Ferro (2005, 2006). The concept of containment is not a single concept; it is related to a number of other Bionian concepts such as projective identification, reverie, alpha function, at-one-ment and transformation. Therefore, the relationship between containment and these concepts and theories will be also discussed here.

II) The origin of the concept

Despite the fact that Bion did not used the term of "containment", it is usually attributed to him (Douglas, 2007). Bion used rather the terms container-contained (model), and containing (function). That is why no direct reference is made to this concept in the works introducing Bion's terminology mentioned above. However, since no difference is made in the available literature between "containing" and "containment", these two words will be indifferently used although the author is aware that there might be a semantic difference between them.

1) The container-contained model:

Bion's conception of containment and containing is included in his container-contained model (Bion, 1962b; 1963; 1967; 1970) which he used to describe the earlier stages of the development of thoughts, thinking ability, and apprehension of internal and external reality.

Bion (1962b) developed his container-contained model following the speculation conjecture

that psychotic patients were deprived of the presence of a patient mother who could tolerate, experience, momentarily hold, and digest for them their emotions (Grotstein, 2009a, 2009b). He referred to the absence of this kind of mother in the following passage from an earlier work (Bion, 1992).

When the patient strove to rid himself of fears...felt too powerful for his personality to contain he split off his fears and put them into me, the idea apparently being that if they were allowed to repose there long enough they would undergo modification by my psyche and could then be safely reintrojected... (p. 103) ... I felt that the patient had witnessed in infancy a mother who had dutifully responded to the infant's emotional displays. The dutiful response had in it an element of impatient 'I don't know what's the matter with the child'. My deduction was that in order to understand what the child wanted the mother should have treated the infant's cry as more than a demand for her presence. From the infant's point of view she should have taken into her, and thus experienced, the fear that the child could not contain...This patient had had to deal with a mother who could not tolerate experiencing such feelings and reacted either by denying them ingress, or alternatively by becoming a prey to the anxiety which resulted from introjection of the baby's bad feelings... (p.104).

In his attempting to explain the infant's early (both pathological and normal) interaction with his mother, Bion uses the model of a "container" containing a content or an element that can be "contained". He referred to the "container" by the symbol "♀" and to the "contained" by "♂", suggesting that the infant-mother relationship can be understood as a relationship between a ♀ and a ♂.

He then developed further this model so that it can be used to explain any kind of asymmetrical relationship, not only a relationship between animate internal and external objects (infant-mother, or analyst-analysand for instance), but also between inanimate objects, and animate and inanimate objects. The relationship between a word and its meaning is an example of a relationship between inanimate objects. The relationship between a person and his or her emotion is an example of the latter. Hence, the container-contained model was meant by Bion as an abstraction applicable to all sorts of dynamic relationships.

As suggested by Bion's statement (above), a relationship between a container and a contained can be both positive, that is growth-inducing, and negative, or growth-hindering or pathological. Bion referred to the former as $(♀ \leftarrow \rightarrow ♂)$, and to the latter as "minus container-contained", or " $-(♀ \leftrightarrow ♂)$ ".

Furthermore, Bion (1970) discussed three different types of relationships between a container and a contained, namely, commonsal, symbiotic, and parasitic relationships. Using a line and a circle, he represented the commonsal relationship by a circle touching a line at one single

point like a tangent (Q), the symbiotic one by circle cut transversally by a line (O), the parasitic one by a O underlined (O) without any contact between the line and O.

As pointed out by Cartwright (2010), Bion is often quoted literally because the difference between these three type of relatedness, especially between the first and second one is often very difficult to grasp, and are therefore differently understood by different authors.

By commensal, Bion (1970) meant "a relationship in which two objects share a third to the advantage of all three" (p. 95). In the commensal type the relation between the container and the contained is such that they coexist without harming each other. Each is inoffensive to the other, and the relationship is free of confrontation. As suggested by Bion and others (e.g., Cartwright, (2010), the third object in the relation corresponds to the product of mental activity or interaction between the container and contained. Bion (1962a) defines this type of relationship which he discussed in details in the following:

By commensal I mean ♂ and ♀ are dependent on each other for mutual benefit without harm to either...the mother derives benefit and achieves mental growth from the experience: the infant likewise abstracts benefit and achieves growth...the activity that I have here described as shared by two individuals becomes introjected by the infant so that the ♂ ♀ apparatus becomes installed in the infant as part of the apparatus of alpha-function (p. 91).

In an attempt to illustrate what he meant by commensal relationship, Bion (1970) gives the example of the relationship between what is expressed (contained) and the means of expression (container) and the cultural background (Elizabethan England) wherein the interaction takes places. He argues that "that which was to be expressed and the vehicle for its expression profited from the culture [third object] to which they belonged" (p. 96). As suggested by this statement, the commensal type of relationship is associated with growth. However, as pointed out by Cartwright (2010), "the realization that the containing mind is also connected and influenced by other minds or objects, brings its own set of anxieties similar to the difficulties Klein (1935) referred to in working through the depressive position" (p.146). An example of the results of this mode of relationship is the development of a good enough mutual space which allows the container and contained to interact in order to contain emotional experiences undigested by both. Egenfeldt-Nielsen (2010) gives another example of a commensal relationship, namely the example of two rowers in a double sculler and the boat when balance and mutual trust reigns in the boat. The initial agreement between the therapist and its client comprises an aspect of the commensal relationship; the therapist him/herself provides therapeutical services by being present, his client pays for that. The third object they share is the unknown truth of the session, or Bion's "O". In other words, a commensal relationship is available is the client feels that he/she shares an assignment with the therapist on which is based the therapeutic work (Egenfeldt-Nielsen,

2010).

Concerning the symbiotic relationship Bion (1970) defined it as "...a relationship in which one depends on another to mutual advantage" (p.95). This type of relationship constitutes a prototype of the early relationship between a mentally stable and present mother and her infant. When this kind of relationship prevails, there is a mutual dependency between the container and the contained. That is, as put by Cartwright (2010), the mind of the container is needed, but this mind depends on projected contents or contained. Applied to the mother-infant relationship, the symbiotic mode suggests that the mother is making herself ready to host the content of projective identification the infant is unable to process or contain in order to digest, detoxify, and render them less frightening, more fit for mental digestion or thinking, before feeding them back to the infant who will use them to think his or her emotional experience and learn from it.

Symbiotic relationship between objects is dominated by what Bion described as the positive links, or Love (L), Hate (H), and Knowledge (K), and associated with reverie and, consequently, mental and emotional development. Clinically speaking, this kind of relationship is, a *sinon qua non* condition of the therapeutic process, which depicts an encounter between two different consciousness which will later regain their relative freedom and individuality. Because a symbiotic relationship is not supposed to be eternal. It lasts until the object, container and contained no longer need to depend on each other to continue to live, think and develop. For instance, when the infant's or a patient's ego has acquired enough ego strength to be able to contain his or her own emotional experience, symbiotic relationship can be replaced by another type of relationship, for instance, commonsal relationship, or in case of what Bion calls a negative development, parasitic relationship. Here is an observation of a symbiotic relationship between a mother and her infant reported by Egenfeldt-Nielsen (2010).

The Child's eyes are open...and the mother looks into his eyes, but she does not see...The child sucks energetically and the experience appears sometimes violent, sometimes gently caressing, A world of experience is exchanged. The child lies, relaxed on his mother's shoulder. Although the child does not relate by seeing, he still sees. Milk is seeping from his mouth. Mother is calm and positive. Mother and child are united by sounds. They can "talk", exchanging sounds as they exchange milk. After feeding...the sounds are soft and caressing... (pp. 89-90).

The third kind of relational mode, parasitic is characterized by a relationship between container and contained wherein, Bion (1970) writes, "one depends on another to produce a third which is destructive to all three" (p. 95). As an illustration to the parasitic mode, Bion uses a model which describes a man trying to communicate his irritation, but he was so overwhelmed by his emotion that his speech became incoherent. This depicts a parasitic relationship between the

form of speech, the container and the emotion (irritation), the contained. If the speech (container) is too rigid and coherent, it will overwhelm the emotion (contained), and, on the other hand, if the emotion is too strong to be contained, it will overwhelm the speech leading to an incomprehensible speech. In both cases, the relationship between the container and the contained is parasitic. The result of this relationship is a third object represented here by the incoherence in speech. This third object is expected to be destructive for the link between the container and contained and for itself, and for any possible mental growth.

Unlike the symbiotic relationship, the parasitic one is characterized by what Bion calls the negative links, namely minus-L, minus-H, and minus-K, and associated with a lack of or a destroyed thinking ability. When the parasitic relationship prevails in therapy, the client behaves unconsciously towards the therapist as if the latter is a "toilet breast" into whom dumps undigested experiences, feelings and matters are dumped. Resorting to excessive projective identification, the client splits off parts of the self and projects them onto the therapist (container) to omnipotently control him or her because he or she can not tolerate the "asymmetrical qualities characterizing the creative union between container and contained and the envious feeling it stirs. Cartwright (2009) writes that the patient is so envious that he is unable to tolerate the therapist thinking and containing ability, and consequently, will constantly attack to destroy the analyst's mind and impeding his therapeutical work. The therapist's typical countertransference reaction in this case would vary from a feeling of being unable to function analytically to boredom accompanied sometimes sleepiness, and inability to understand what the patient is speaking of and get linked to the latter.

In the case of the mother-child the containment relationship starts immediately after the conception of the baby. In the pre-natal stage, the foetus is dependent on the mother for the benefit of the twos; their relationship can thus be conceived of as symbiotic. Following the birth of the baby, this relationship is of both commensal and symbiotic types. Under favorable condition the relationship will change from symbiotic to commensal type and vice-versa, preparing the infant for the oedipal triangularity (Cartwright, 2010).

2) Containment and projective identification

Containment depends on the mechanism of projection especially projective identification; without these mechanisms no intersubjective relationship is possible. It was Freud (1915) who first referred to the mechanism of projection as a mechanism which "expels whatever within the self becomes a source of unpleasure..." (p. 133). In other words, projection, as conceived by Freud, allows the individual (Self) to externalize and put in an object (or someone else) one's own unacceptable or intolerable feelings, emotions, and desires. This mechanism was further elaborated by Klein (1946). Which led her to introduce her famous concept of "projective identification". According to Klein, when the infant's in an attempt to get rid of internal bad and hated

parts of the self directs them towards the object, the mother,

This leads to a particular form of identification which establishes the prototype of an aggressive object relation. I suggest for these processes the term 'projective identification'. When projection is mainly derived from the infant's impulse to harm or control the mother, he feels her to be a persecutor. In psychotic disorders this identification of an object with the hated parts of the self contributes to the intensity of the hatred directed against other people (p.8).

To put it differently, in interpersonal relationships, projective identification refers to an unconscious psychological process in which a person will project an aspect of the self (thought, emotion, desire, etc.) onto another person. Then, he or she will begin to identify this person with the projected aspect. It is noteworthy that projective identification was thus introduced by Klein as a defense process which has for function to get rid of the self of unbearable internal aspects. However, this does not mean that Klein was not aware of the other possible functions projective identification has. As pointed out by Cartwright (2010), Klein (1957) later the idea that projective identification might fulfill the function of managing excessive envy towards the object, suggesting it may have various functions and aims.

Later, Bion (1967) developed further the concept of projective identification attributing to it not only an expulsive but also a communicative function. He described it as a preverbal means of communication between the infant and its object, the breast and later the mother, and other whole objects. According to Bion, thanks to projective identification, the infant can not only get rid of those feelings he can not contain, but he can also test the effect and the quality of his own feelings within the object. Applying this to the patient's case, he writes that

The nature of the functions which excite the patient's curiosity he explores by projective identification. His own feelings, too powerful to be contained within his personality, are among these functions. Projective identification makes it possible for him to investigate his own feelings in a personality powerful enough to contain them (p. 106).

Referring again to the link between containment and projective identification, Bion described in the following passage the function of containment in its relation to projective identification, as an expulsive, communicative and consequently a constructive interpersonal process.

When the patient strove to rid himself of fears of death which were too powerful for his personality to contain he split off his fears and put them into me, the idea apparently being that if they were allowed to repose there long enough they would undergo modification by my psyche [alpha function] and could then be safely reintegrated (p. 103).

And a few lines further he tries to understand his patient's reaction referring to his early containment relationship with his mother in the following:

I felt that the patient had witnessed in infancy a mother who had dutifully responded to the infant's emotional display. The dutiful response had in it an element of impatient...My deduction was that in order to understand what the child wanted the mother should have treated the infant's cry as more than a demand for her presence...she should have taken into her, and thus experienced, the fear that the child was dying. It was this fear that the child could not contain. He strove to split it off together with the part of the personality in which it lay and project it into the mother. An understanding mother is able to experience the feeling of dread that the baby was striving to deal with by projective identification (p. 104).

As shown by these quotations, it is clear that Bion (1962a) considered projective identification as an essential communication tool in early object relations, indispensable to containment, and the only means the infant has at its disposition to communicate its emotional experience. Therefore he suggested that if a baby is deprived by a psychologically unavailable or absent mother of the opportunity to use this means, this will pave the way for future mental disorders. Bion says it in the following:

Normal development follows if the relationship between infant and breast permits the infant to project a feeling, say, that of dying, into the mother and to reintroject it after its sojourn in the breast has made it tolerable to the infant psyche. If the projection is not accepted by the mother the infant feels that its feeling that it is dying is stripped of such meaning as it has. It therefore reintrojects, not a fear of dying made tolerable, but a nameless dread (p. 306).

Let us now turn to the contained itself, or the aspects of the personality that are projected onto a container for containment.

3) What is contained? Part objects or emotions?

It is difficult to give a precise description of the content of the contained. In other words we do not know what elements are fit for projective identification as a contained. As shown by Bion's statement above, he is suggesting that what are projected are both feelings, emotions and part of the personality, because, as pointed out by Douglas (2007), based on the assumption that both patient and child can not distinguish between self and its emotions. Owing to this lack of distinction between the twos, the infant or the patient splits off the personality part with the emotion contained in it. For Bion does not say that the mother or the container actually introjects her infant's personality. He suggests that she introjects his feelings (of dying, for instance) and

emotions only. A psychically well-balanced mother is expected to be able to dream, in a *reverie* state, and sense the emotion or the feeling of her baby without being overwhelmed by it. The next step of this containment process is to transform it, so that her baby is able to introject and contain it further. As discussed later, it is this interaction which will, when successfully experienced, lead to improvement of the mother's containment capacity and to the gradual development of the infant's own containment capacity.

In fact, the container-model seems to imply emotional exchange between the contained and the container. The aim of containment is, explains Bion, to introject the projected contained in order to make it more acceptable to be suffered. Being able to tolerate and suffering one's pain, is the antidote of avoidance of pain, and a prerequisite for mental development.

Moreover, containment allows the (contained) subject to suffer the emotion he or she could not suffer before, have an emotional link with it, bear it, and then transform it in order to learn from it. Bion adumbrated three basic emotional links between ♂ and ♀, namely love (L), hate (H), and knowledge (K), and their negative counterparts (-L, -H, and -K). Concerning positive containment, he seems to privilege the K-link over the others. For the containment process involves being ready to know, be curious about, and have the ability to think about the object supposed to be contained, be able to confront and suffer the ultimate truth inherent in the relationship (in the here-and-now), "O", and the resulting "catastrophic change" (Bion, 1970); all these abilities constitute important components of the K-link.

Beside this basic emotional link (K), containment requires "passion" (Bion, 1963) and the ability to seek and maintain the emotional link inherent in it. This ability corresponds to the mental predisposition the author calls "pairing valency" (see for example, Hafsi, 2006, 2007, and 2010). According to Bion, the presence and feeling of passion in a relationship between ♀ and ♂ is the proof of the existence of an emotional link between their minds.

4) The containment space

Inherent in the concept of containment is the one of containment space. Although Bion did not state it clearly, there are numbers of references suggesting that containment requires at least three different psychic spaces.

Since projective identification is based on the phantasy of something entering, or projected into a receptacle or a space, containment can not take place without a space. In other words, for the container to be able to contain the contained, it must have an internal or psychic space into which the would-be contained emotions and emotional states are projected. This space should not be saturated by what Bion (1970) calls memory, desire, and understanding; only if this space is relatively free from these elements containment is possible. Saturation of this space can be done by the container as a defensive move. The container arms oneself with memory of theories to satisfy one's unconscious desire to remain unreceptive to and free from the painful experience

of containment, and growth. Saturation can be also caused by the source (child or patient) from whom the contained is projected. The patient, for instance, may attack and destroy this containment space, due to excessive envy, and other manic defensive processes described by Klein (1935, 1946). Providing the analyst (container) with so much free associations, repeating the same material so that no space is left for containment is an example of this attacks on the containment space. The analyst mind become so saturated that he or she can not understand and think about what the patient is conveying to him or her. This emotional experience is very similar with the one described as burn-out.

Not only the container needs a psychic space. The contained also needs a psychic space where it can be reintegrated. That is, the child needs to have an internal space where he/she can store his emotion after it has been transformed or processed by the container (mother), so that he/she refer it to learn from experience. As a result of envy and intolerance towards not being able to know, a mental state associated with -K, this space can be saturated to destroy it and thus evade the encounter with O and pain inherent in the catastrophic change. Moreover, due to arrogance (Bion, 1957; 1967), and such manic defenses as triumph and contempt, this psychic space may be also dried up by depriving it of the introjections necessary for the psyche to survive and develop.

The third psychic space indispensable to containment is the one required between ♂ and ♀. Implicit in the experience of containment is the presence of a common, narrow and good enough psychic space which has for function both relating ♂ and ♀, and also separating them. It is this narrow and wide enough space that makes possible the transfer, through projective identification, of psychic information from ♂ to ♀ and *vice versa*. Metaphorically speaking, this space is equivalent to a stadium; without it no containment "play" (Winnicott, 1974) is possible. This psychic space share many features with other analytic and intersubjective concepts such as analytic space, transitional space (Winnicott, 1951), third object (Bion, 1961; 1970). By separating ♂ from ♀, this space helps the container to avoid identifying with the contained, and be able to have "a mind of one's own" (Caper, 1999), think about, and digest it before feeding it back to its source.

5) Containment and valency

Valency is one of Bion's most undocumented concept (Hafsi, 2006). He first used it in his pioneer work on group dynamics (Bion, 1961), defining it as

"the individual's readiness to enter into combination with the group in making and acting on the basic assumptions...a readiness to combine on levels that can hardly be called mental at all but are characterized by behavior in the human being that is more analogous to tropism in plants ..." (p. 116-117).

Developing further this concept, Hafsi (2006, 2010) has proposed a valency theory which sheds light on this 'tropistic' aspect of human relationships. In the valency theory, valency has been extended to explain not only the individual relationship with the basic assumption but all kinds of object (including human) relations. Valency is understood as the most basic element or means which generates and maintains interpersonal relationships. Unlike other object relations theory, valency theory focuses not only on the quality of the relationship, but especially on the means that allows the individual to get psychically bound with others.

Seen from the valency theory perspective, containment can not obviously take place without a link, at the valency level, between the source of ♂ and ♀. Concretely speaking, for the infant to have its emotional experienced contained by the mother, the two must be bound through their dependency valencies. However, it should be noted that in the early stages of its development, the infant does not have a mature valency, but only a pre-natal or a proto-valency. Therefore it is the mother that must play the leading role in the early containment. Moved by her own dependency valency, a psychically well-balanced mother (♀) is able to sense or intuit her baby needs for binding, and containment. Because the infant's primitive dependency valency can not be explicitly expressed due to the infant's lack of a mature motor and verbal ability.

Hence it is only when this bond, through valence, between ♀ (mother, analyst, etc.) and ♂ (infant, patient, etc.) has been established that containment can take place. As discussed somewhere else (Hafsi, 2006, 2010), to explain how psychic elements (data) flows from inside the ♂ to the ♀ inside, the author (Hafsi, 2007) proposed the "emotional conduit model" or "emotional umbilical cord model". After ♀ and ♂ have been bound through valency, a kind of "emotional umbilical cord" develops to allow the passage of psychic information from both sides, and set in motion the containment process. Therefore, the author believes that without this basic bond and the resulting "emotional umbilical cord" no containment is possible.

6) Containment and reverie

Being bound to each other is not sufficient. The container needs also to reach a mental state which will promote containment. Bion (1962b) referred to this state as "reverie", and describe it as state of mind characterizing a mother feeding her baby. He conceptualized reverie as representing of mental connection between the mother and her baby, writing:

"when the mother loves the infant what does she do it with? Leaving aside physical channels of communication my impression is that her love is expressed through reverie" (pp. 35-36).

Reverie refers also to a condition where the analyst (♀) is "in a state of receptive observation...absorbed in...observation, or...absorbed in the facts" (p. 95). It is in this state, according to Bion (1970), that the analyst's mind can come close to the "O", the ultimate reality of the session.

Following Bion, Ogden (2004) conceived of reverie as a means of creating intersubjective narratives that constitute part of the "analytical third" (p. 167), and as a state of acute receptivity and the conduit linking the analyst to the analysand. Drawing from different sources, Cartwright (2010) writes that:

"reverie may be conceptualized as a conduit between conscious rational thought and unprocessed unconscious experience...a very specific way of engaging that involves finding ways of tolerating emotional experience in order to relate in the intensity of the present moment. It allows two minds to connect, to attune at a preconscious level...It involves a process...essential in maintaining a containing link with the patient" (p.43).

This state of reverie involves another state free of memory, desires and understanding. Bion (1970) recommended us to abstain from making use of our memory and desire when facing the patient's emotional experience in the here-and-now. According to Bion, memory which includes all what has been learned before, theories, previous events, and the like, is related to the past. All kinds of desire, including the desire to cure and understand the patient, are oriented towards and concern the future. Therefore, they may hinder the containment process which takes place in the present of the session. Desiring or trying actively to understand, may also have similar negative effect on containment, by leading the therapist away from the path of experiencing the patient's experiencing to the one of intellectualization and evasion of the pain, and suffering the fact of not knowing and understanding. Understanding should be understood as a result of containment and not its aim. Both memory and desire may be distractions from the truth of the session, or O, and a defense against the possibility of meeting what one does not know, fears, and should contain to induce growth.

7) Containment and alpha function

Under favorable object relations, all the above-mentioned aspects prevail; therefore, ♀ is ready to and willing to contain ♂. As discussed above, in this case, ♀ will accept to host ♂, experience and endure it until it becomes part of it, or until the former becomes "at-one" (see, below for details concerning this experience) with it. This is a painful experience which may result into a *folie-à-deux*. However, it is only after going through this experience that ♀ can come close to the absolute truth inherent in ♂ (emotional experience), and be able to transform it (Bion, 1965).

This absolute truth flowing in the containment space which Bion (1970) called "O", is unknowable as such; it must be transformed by ♀ to be known about, and fed back to the source (infant, patient) from where it has emerged. This transformation process involves clarifying, and rendering ♂ understandable, less painful and easier to identify with for the source. Bion

describes this process as a one of emotional "desintoxification"; ♀ desintoxifies ♂ and returns it to its source to be reintegrated and used to learn from experience.

Moreover, this desintoxification, which characterizes a successful containment, is according to Bion (1962b) made by the ♀ using its "alpha function". Alpha function is a function in the *psyche* which transforms sense impressions, mentally undigested emotional facts, what Bion calls "beta-elements", into psychic impressions, memory feelings, proto-thoughts, proto-emotions, or, in Bion's words, "alpha-elements." Besides transforming beta-elements into alpha-elements to be used for thinking and dreaming, alpha function makes, through transformation thus intra-personal and interpersonal communication of which containment is an aspect, possible (Grotstein, 2009a; 2009b).

8) Containment, at-one-ment, and faith

Containment includes also another state of mind which Bion (1965) described as representing a fusion with the other's ultimate truth or reality, the thing-in-itself of the session O, or the ♂. In other words, containment involves a state of being at-one with, or becoming the ♂. According to Bion (1970),

"it is assumed that this (O) cannot be known by any human being; it can be known about, its presence can be recognized and felt, but it cannot be known. It is possible to be-at-one with it. That it exists is an essential postulate of science but cannot be scientifically discovered. No psycho-analytic discovery is possible without recognition of its existence, at-one-ment with it and evolution" (p. 30).

In other words, we can know neither our own O nor the patient's one; we can only become or be-at-one with it. It is only by being at-one with O that we can come close to it or, precisely speaking, to its different evolutions and transformations from it.

The experience of at-one-ment is linked to the here-and-now of the session. Sandler (2005) writes that "it is strictly linked to the moment of analytic interpretation. It is not an act of knowing but of being" (p. 62).

However, at-one-ment with O is not an easy task; it requires strict discipline and training. One of the requirements of this strict discipline and training is, according to Bion (1970), eschewing memory, desire and understanding, and being in state of mind where only faith prevails, faith that O exists, but is unknown. Faith according to Bion is "a scientific state of mind" (p. 32), and is therefore different from faith as defined from the religious vertex. When in this state, the container (mother, analyst) will be able to resort to intuition, as a tool to discover (Grotstein, 2007) and contemplate O or the would-be ♂. Moreover, at-one-ment depends on ♀'s possession of an effective alpha function. This allows him/her unconsciously or preconsciously

to 1) search for and select from ones own experience events that have a "correlation" (Bion, 1965), or similarity with the would-be contained (σ) experience; 2) to equate the two experiences, and finally 3) to be at-one with it. This corresponds to a psychic process that the φ must perform prior to transforming σ , for "publication" (decoding it and knowing about it internally), and "communication" (feeding it back) to external sources (patient, infant, etc.) to be reintroduced.

To summarize, the requirements for containment and at-one-ment capability is liberating oneself from the "internal noises" of memory and desire, being able to tolerate not-knowing — displaying what Bion calls "negative capability"—, having faith, and intuitive ability, and being able to make use of one's alpha function.

III) The internalization of the containment function

As discussed above, developmentally speaking containment is initially provided by the object, the breast and later the mother or her substitutes (father, etc.). Deprived of the capacity to contain his own emotions, the infant is obliged to rely on an external object who will fulfill the containment function, until it is mentally and physically mature enough for self-containment. Under favorable containment conditions, the infant will succeed to internalize a containing object, not the mother *per se*. For as suggested by Bion (1970), this function is not peculiar or "related to father or mother but can be related to fragments of both" (p. 122). This implies that containment is a function that transcends real and whole external objects.

This internalization process occurs, according to Bion, through the basic bodily process, such as feeding and breathing. Under favorable mental and developmental conditions, the infant internalizes a positive, receptive, and containing φ , through sucking at the mother's breast, and breathing to survive. Bion (1962b) suggests that this internalization process takes place in "a late stage...that commences with a few relatively simple undifferentiated preconceptions related to feeding, breathing and excretion" (p. 93).

This internal φ will provide the infant with "working model" (Bowlby, 1969a; 1969b) to refer to in case of both internal and external containment. Thanks to the internalized φ the infant will gradually become able to contain its own and others' emotional experiences. In other words, it will be able to accept, tolerate, suffer, give meaning to these experiences, and therefore develop, reducing its dependency towards the external container.

IV) Containment and other related concepts

There is a tendency in some recent psychoanalytic works to confuse containment with other seemingly similar concepts, such as "holding" and "reciprocity" (Symington & Symington, 1986;

Douglas, 2007; Grotstein, 2007). I will thus here below discuss briefly the main differences between these concepts.

The concept of "holding" or "holding environment" was developed by Winnicott (1960). Although containment and holding may seem to describe a similar function, these two concepts belong to different conceptualization levels. According to Symington & Symington (1986) containment is an intrapersonal (internal), that is, a non-sensuous, process characterized by an active interaction between ♀ and ♂, and it can be positive (integrating) or negative (destructive). Whereas holding is rather external or in "between internal and external....predominantly sensuous" (p. 58), and can have only positive effect on the infant's growth. Similarly, Grotstein (2010) makes the following distinctions between holding object as conceived by Winnicott and Bion's container:

"The holding object mother is an intuitive mother who reads her infant needs...she functions as a background object who is preoccupied with facilitating the autonomous development of her infant. My terms for her are: 'existential coach' and 'background presence of primary identification'. Bion's container concept refers initially to a mother who bears and absorbs her infant's emotional states, transforms them, and 'interprets' them to her infant. She is in effect an emotional instructor to her infant" (pp. 162-163).

What separates further containment from holding is the fact that the former is a continuous process which goes beyond the present of the relationship. As pointed out by Cartwright (2010), in the case of the relationship between the therapist and his patient, "the therapist continues to psychically digest unassimilated experiences engendered in him by his contact with the patient outside sessions" (p.33). Whereas holding is a discontinuous process which depends on the presence and actual encounter or contact between the subject seeking holding (infant, patient, etc.) and the object providing it (mother, therapist, etc.).

The other concept that presents similarities with containment is "reciprocity" (Douglas, 2007). Bion (1970) himself used the term reciprocity to describe containment, however he was referring to the reciprocal relationship of words and their meaning (a word contains a meaning), and between remembering and memory. Developed outside the field of psychoanalysis, the concept of reciprocity was first described by Brazelton et al. (1974). It initially refers to the sophisticated conscious interactions observed between an baby and his caretaker, but is also applied to describe all kinds of interpersonal relationships. According to Douglas, the concept of reciprocity is based on the belief that reciprocity takes place between the baby and his mother just after birth. Under favorable environmental conditions, "reciprocal interaction is initiated by both the baby and the mother, using sensory modalities. This is what principally distinguishes reciprocity from containment. For in the case of containment it is not the conscious, intentional, and observ-

able experience but the non-sensuous, psychic or emotional experience that is contained by the container (mother, etc.). For a more complete comparison of containment and reciprocity, the reader can refer to Douglas' (op. cit.) work.

IV) Pathological consequences of negative containment

As mentioned above, Bion (1962a, 1962b, 1970) suggested that containment can be understood as a continuum ranging from positive or growth-promoting containment to negative, or growth-inhibiting containment (Ogden, 2004). In the former, which Bion represented with " $\delta^n \varphi^n$ ", is characterized with by φ which is, owing to a healthy alpha-function, receptive to, and willing to take part into projective identification-based communication, to transform and render the initial intolerable emotional experience (beta-element) more tolerable and more thinkable (alpha-element) so that it can be reintroduced by the source (infant, patient, etc.) from where it was projected. Whereas in the latter, opposite characteristics can be observed, namely an impaired or destroyed alpha-function, and, therefore, an inability to transform, decode, and give meaning to emotional experience. The alpha-function of the φ can be originally defective due to unfavorable early object relations, or can be later impaired or destroyed as a result of the attacks made on it by the infant (or patient), as a result of excessive projective identification and envy (Klein, 1957).

Useless to say that this lack of an adequate, or presence of an impaired alpha-function has harmful (pathological) consequences for each of the unit $\delta^n \varphi^n$, and for the third resulting from the encounter of the two (Bion, 1961, 1970). Developing further Bion's ideas concerning thinking, Ferro (2005) categorized the different pathological states associated with a defective alpha-function and, therefore, absence of containment into three category. In the first category, the alpha-function of the object seeking containment (δ^n) will not develop, and consequently sense impressions (beta-elements) will not be transformed into psychic elements or pictograms (alpha-elements) indispensable for thinking, and mental growth. This state characterizes especially psychotic and autistic states and what Bion (1967) called the "psychotic part of the personality". In these states, sense impressions are experienced as intolerable bad object, and therefore either evacuated through projective processes, "or used as objects of encapsulation" (Cartwright, 2010). Due to this state, the psychotic is unable to generate thoughts, and distinguish between conscious and unconscious, between external and internal (psychic) world.

The second pathological category is relatively speaking less grave. For in this case the alpha-function of the δ^n is operative enough to produce rudimentary alpha-elements, but the latter is unable to make use of φ^n 's alpha function for further processing, and processes of integration-disintegration (represented by Bion as " $Ps \leftrightarrow D$ ") indispensable to mental growth.

The third pathological category comprises states where the φ^n is so saturated with sense data

(beta-elements) that there is no enough room, or mental space is left for processing and transforming them into alpha-elements that can be used for thinking, dreaming, and learning from one's experience. This saturation of ♀'s alpha-function is the result of, amongst others, the ♂'s resort to projective identification as a means to attack the link bounding it to ♀. In this case, the aim here is to load it with those unthinkable elements to burst, as a defensive means against having to face one's unthinkable and unbearable sense data which has been, as a result of lack of containment, reduced to a "nameless dread" (Bion, 1962, 1967).

Conclusion

Bion's most profound influence on psychoanalysis concerns how emotional experience are apprehended and transformed. Consequently, his most influential idea is that we need the other's mind to give meaning to our sensuous experience, and that our cognitive capacities depend on our link with this significant other. To develop this idea he proposed his container-contained model which he represents by, borrowing from biology, the signs of ♀ and ♂. In the present article I have focused principally on containment, the function which links ♀ and ♂.

Although Bion did not use the term "containment", it is suggested through most of his works. To put it differently, containment is closely related to almost all Bion's psychoanalytic concepts. It is so closely linked to these concepts that it is difficult to explain it without referring to them. Therefore, in the present study I have first discussed what constitutes the foundation of the containment concept, that is, the container-contained (♀ ♂) model. Then I briefly introduced the reader to some of the related concepts, such as commensal, symbiotic and parasitic relationships which links ♀ to ♂, projective identification, containment space, valency, reverie, alpha-function, at-one-ment, and faith. Containment was also compared to Winnicott's concept of "holding", and to another concept, namely "reciprocity", which was developed outside the psychoanalytic field.

To summarize, according to Bion (1970) the containment function is fulfilled by the ♀ vis-a-vis the ♂. Bion's ♀ ♂ model describes three different types of relationships between the two. The following is how Bion introduces the idea of containment implied by his model.

"The theory is that an object is paced into a container...The relationship between these objects, which I shall represent by the male and female signs ♀ and ♂, may be commensal, symbiotic, or parasitic" (95).

In the commensal type, ♀ and ♂ "share a third object to the advantage of all three" (ibid.). A symbiotic relationship is characterized by a situation where one "depends on another for mutual advantage" (ibid.). The parasitic relationship corresponds to a situation where "one depends on the other to produce a third, which is destructive of all three" (ibid.). Grotestein (2007) sug-

gested the foetus-womb experience as a model for the commonsal relationship, the mouth-breast as a model for the symbiotic relationship. As a model for the parasitic relationship, he suggested a relationship characterized, amongst other by intrusive desire, and envious attacks by, for instance, the infants towards the mother. This implies that what should prevails in a healthy and growth-inducing relationship between ♀ and ♂ is the symbiotic one.

Containment function includes a number of , to use Bion's (1962b) word, "factors" —such as projective identification, mental (containment) space, valency, alpha-function—, and mental states such as reverie, faith, and at-onement. A successful or growth-inducing containment implies a ♀ being receptive to and tolerant of projective identification as an evacuatory means, but also as a communicative means, which the infants (or the patient), due a lack of alpha-function, resort to in order to convey the unbearable "dis-ease", sensuous impressions, and emotions, that is beta-elements he or she can not process, name and transform alone.

Therefore, containment involves, for the ♀ (mother, therapist), using one's alpha-function to carry out the transformation of these beta-element into alpha-elements, that is, rendering them more bearable and ready to be used for thinking, dreaming, and learning from experience (Bion, 1962b, 1965). This transformation is successful only if the ♀ is in a mental state Bion called reverie. Reverie refers to a specific way of relating to the ♂ and the source it stem from (infant, patient); it comprises finding effective ways of tolerating the emotional experience or ♂, by being present through being absent-minded (Cartwright, 2010). Being present with the infant and absent-minded implies being able to free oneself from the influence of memory and desire or from their representatives, the past and the future. For it is only in the here-and-now that the ♀ can experience "at-one-ment with" (Bion, 1970) the ♂, especially the truth inherent in it or what Bion calls 'O'. At-one-ment depends on the ability of the ♀ to have "faith" in the existence of an unknowable truth hidden by the manifest aspect of the ♂, act in accordance with the faith, and be equipped with a sufficient intuitive ability.

However, the most basic requirement for containment to take place is, from the author's point of view, or valency theory (Hafsi, 2006, 2010), the existence of a fundamental bond between ♀ and ♂, which is made at the level of valency. In other words, ♀ and ♂ must be bound through their respective valencies, and linked by the resulting *emotional conduit*, which is indispensable for the flow of emotional information between the twos. It is only after this basic bond has been established that the ♂ can feel safe and confident enough to entrust, through projective identification, self-parts to the ♀, and the latter can have his or her alpha-function stimulated and prepare for the experience of containment.

Containment is a continuous interactional process, but not necessary a for-ever lasting form of object relations. It can end after it has been sufficiently experienced by the ♂, and the latter is no more in need for an external ♀. In other words, containment last until the ♂ has acquired, through introjection of a containing ♀, its own containment function, has mentally grown enough

to thus be able to contain internally its own emotional experience. In a therapeutical relationship, this is a revealing sign that it may be time to start considering termination of the therapy.

Bion's work suggest that containment process can be understood as a continuum with positive or normal containment at one end and negative or pathologic containment at the other end. The former is associated with mental growth, the latter is characterized by envious attacks from either or both sides (♀ and/or ♂), and consequently, deterioration, or destruction of the life-sustaining link.

Although containment shares several aspects with other similar concepts, such as holding (Winnicott, 1960) and reciprocity (Brazelton et al., 1974), it should be differentiated from them. The most prominent aspects differentiating containment from holding is the fact that the former has a much more wider conceptual application. It was developed to be applied to any situation where an object is contained by another. Unlike holding, it is not confined to interpersonal (mother-child, or therapist-patient) relationships; it can be also be used to describe the relationship between a person and his own self, like when we say that someone can not contain his emotions. Unlike holding which is supposed to be positive when prevailing, containment is a continuum ranging from a negative to positive one.

Compared to reciprocity, a non-psychoanalytic term, containment is basically an unconscious process which goes beyond the containment couple's (♀ ♂) conscious will. Moreover, unlike containment, reciprocity concerns observable and intentional interactions between the mother and her child only.

Finally, as suggested by Grotstein (2007), the concept of containment as reflected in the Bionian container-contained model, puts more emphasis on the relationships between subjects and objects, and between objects, than on the subject and object as independent or separate entities. That is why we can say that the containment concept as developed by Bion may have served as a foundation stone for what is now known as intersubjectivity. For much earlier than the birth of this current of thought, Bion has in most of his work suggested that the source from where truth, meaning and (mental and psychic) life stem lies in between two entities willing to contain each other to give birth to a third for the benefit of all three.

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