



FROM BASE TO GOLD:

THE ALCHEMY
OF THE GROUP

VALERIE GARRETT LOOKS AT THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF THE SUPERVISION GROUP ON THE UNCONSCIOUS PROCESSES OPERATING WITHIN IT

Have you ever sat as a supervisor or as a supervisee in a supervision group and been amazed by what can emerge from the processes of its relaxed joint reveries? It goes almost without saying that this can only be the product of something that involves a good deal of trust among the members, as well as faith in the process, and that is born of time together in safe emotional communication and connection.

The emerging material, which is rooted in the client's inner world, finds its way via the therapist's presentation within and to the group. This may be expressed by any member of the group either as a thought, a feeling, or a bodily sensation. A skilled supervisor or member of an experienced group may then be able to give voice to this revelation and thus shed light upon the unconscious communication from the client. This can be illuminating for the counsellor and can be fed back to the client in a way that may help them make sense of some long-held belief, felt emotion or behaviour that is distressing to them or others.

The aim of this article is to attempt to demonstrate the transforming function of a supervisor-led supervision group, comprising up to four psychodynamic counsellors, on the inner worlds of the therapist/supervisee and her client. I hope to show how the unthinkable can be made thinkable and the 'unthought known'¹ available for thought.

I call upon Bion's theories: his theories about groups and his 'theory of thinking', both of which make understandable his difficult-to-understand concepts of 'alpha and beta elements' and 'alpha function'. These psychic processes/entities have, I argue, their implications for the mutative function of the supervision group. I have chosen to major on Bion's theories because I have seen them at work in my own therapeutic and supervisory practice.

Bion² hypothesises that beta elements are stored, but differ from alpha elements in that they are not so much memories as undigested facts, whereas the alpha elements have been digested/processed by alpha function and thus made available for thought.

Bion believes that to learn from experience, alpha function must operate on the awareness of emotional experience, and that alpha elements produced from the impressions of the experience, must be made storable and available for dream thoughts and for unconscious waking thinking. When there are only beta elements, which cannot be made unconscious, it is impossible for repression, suppression or learning to take place. The client then is bombarded by every

sensory stimulus and cannot tell the difference between one sensory stimulus and another.

This hypersensitivity is not contact with reality. The severely distressed client's attacks on alpha function, brought about by emotions of hate or envy, destroy the possibility of the client's conscious contact either with himself or another, as live objects; places and inanimate objects can be felt to be actually present as opposed to be merely represented by their names. Symbolic thought is missing. Fear, hate and envy can be so feared by the client that he takes defensive steps to destroy awareness of all feelings.

Later in this article, I illustrate theoretical constructs and clinical concepts with an example from my own practice as a supervisor. This example has been disguised to protect the confidentiality of clients and therapists.

It is one of our tasks as therapists to learn from our clients the meaning that they uniquely attach to their thoughts, beliefs and experiences, both consciously and unconsciously; also the meaning of their words, internal objects, relationship to themselves and to others, and the meaning of their environment to them.

Socrates said, 'I know nothing except the fact of my ignorance'. (Source: Diogenes Laërtius, biographer of the Greek philosophers). When we talk about unconscious processes and attempt to elucidate them, we must always remember that we can be certain of nothing except that we know nothing for certain. If we are unable to help the client find some congruence between the above and their own experience, we have made a premature interpretation.

My title, *From base to gold*, speaks about the notion found in the ancient art of alchemy: that, by magical processes, base metals can be transformed into gold. Jung³ found a series of pictures illustrating the relationship between the alchemist and his *soror* in the alchemical treatise known as the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, published in 1550, which he felt anticipated the analytic process today. He used imagery like that of the mixing of two chemicals, resulting in the transformation of two persons in a therapeutic relationship.

My hypothesis is that, within the unconscious processes found in a supervision group of counsellors practising psychodynamically, we can see played out the effect of Bion's alpha function of the group² in transforming beta elements into alpha elements in the work between therapist and client.

The supervision group can perform this alpha function on the alpha elements, which arise from transformed beta elements arising from unconscious processes in the client via the therapist.

It is my belief that the supervision group can perform the function of the good enough, containing and holding mother of the infant: being the receptor, mediator and interpreter of unformed, undigested beta elements within the client, thus transforming them into alpha elements and, as such, making them accessible for thought and thinking.

I propose that the supervision group can be like Winnicott's 'environment' mother, more significant as a process that is identified with cumulative internal and external transformations than as an object⁴. This 'mother' is known more as existential as opposed to representational knowing. Jacobs⁵ suggests that psychotherapy proceeds not merely under supervision, but through the supervisory relationship. I have seen, through clinical experience, that the collective functions of the group unconscious processes are more than the sum of the whole in relation to transforming outcome.

BION'S ALPHA AND BETA ELEMENTS AND ALPHA FUNCTION

Bion⁶ proposed that alpha function 'operates on the sense impressions, whatever they are, and the emotions, whatever they are, of which the client is aware'. Bion goes on to explain that, in so far as alpha function is successful, alpha elements are produced and these elements are suited to storage and the requirements of dream thoughts. 'If alpha function is disturbed, and therefore inoperative,' he continues, 'the sense impressions of which the client is aware and the emotions which he is experiencing remain unchanged'.

These unchanged sense impressions are what Bion calls beta elements. Beta elements are not amenable to use in dream thoughts but are better suited for evacuation through projective identification and are influential in producing acting out.

I have experienced the unconscious phenomena, projective identification and the parallel process in supervision to be the vehicles and processes by which this can occur. It is the beta elements, which are only suitable for evacuation (and in less severe cases) communication, that can serve as the raw material for creativity in therapy and supervision. Using the 'alpha function' of group theory, the group uses its powers of censorship and resistance that are essential to the differentiation of conscious and unconscious, and thus helps maintain the discrimination between the two.

In his theories about groups, Bion⁷ says: 'What the individual says or does in a group illumines both his own personality and his view of the group; sometimes his contribution illumines one more than the other.' Bion believes that some of the individual's contributions come unmistakably from himself, but by means of the group, he can also make contributions

anonymously. If the group provides a way for him to do this, then he can begin to use the group for evasion and denial. Bion postulates a group mentality through which anonymous contributions are made and through which desires and impulses implicit in the contributions are gratified – this only happens with the unconscious collusion of 'the group'.

In my experience, it is the therapist's and group's capacity for reverie that can become the receptor organ for the client's myriad self-sensations through both conscious and unconscious processes.

Bion believes there is a point that emerges in all groups where there is the predominance of feelings of frustration, which he believes to be caused mainly by individuals seeking to satisfy desires anonymously through the group; the frustration of the individual aims is a consequence of this.

Freud⁸ said that, in a group, there is a dwindling of the conscious individual personality, the focusing of thoughts and feelings into a common direction, and the predominance of the affective side of the mind and of unconscious psychical life and a tendency to the carrying out of intentions as they emerge. He saw this as a state of regression to a primitive mental activity.

Foulkes⁹ described the common shared ground of the group as the 'matrix'. This shared ground, he believed, ultimately determines the meaning and significance of all events, upon which all communications and interpretations rest.

Thoughts require an apparatus to cope with them, which leads Bion to his observation of the second development, which is of the apparatus that he provisionally calls 'thinking'. Thinking has to be called into existence to cope with thoughts. Bion considers psychopathological developments may be associated either to a breakdown in the developments of thoughts, or a breakdown in the development of the apparatus for thinking or dealing with thoughts, or both.

He classifies thoughts according to the nature of their developmental history; these can be preconceptions, conceptions or thoughts, and finally, concepts. Concepts, he sees as named, and thus fixed, conceptions or thoughts. Bion suggests that the conception is initiated by the coming together of a preconception with a realisation. He uses as a model for this idea the psychoanalytical theory that the infant has an inborn disposition corresponding to an expectation of a breast¹⁰. Bion's belief is that when the preconception comes into contact with a realisation that approximates to it, the mental outcome is a conception.

He names the inborn expectation of the breast, the 'empty breast', and, when the baby is brought into contact with the real breast, it couples with the awareness of the realisation at the same time as the development of a conception. His hypothesis, therefore, is that conceptions constantly conjoined with an emotional experience will result in a sense of satisfaction.

Thought, Bion believes², is the mating of a preconception with a frustration. His model for this is the baby whose expectation of the breast is coupled with a realisation of no breast being available for satisfaction, and is experienced inside as the 'absent' breast. What happens next, he believes, depends on the baby's capacity for frustration and whether it is the baby's unconscious choice to evade frustration or to modify it. This decision is very important.

If the baby has sufficient capacity for toleration of frustration, the 'no-breast' inside becomes a thought and an apparatus for 'thinking'. This toleration of frustration enables the psyche to develop thought as a means by which the tolerated frustration is made more tolerable. If the capacity for tolerating frustration is inadequate, the bad internal 'no-breast' that a personality capable of maturity ultimately recognises as a thought, confronts the psyche with the need to decide between evasion of frustration or of its modification. Incapacity for tolerating frustration tips the balance in the direction of evasion of frustration. Bion proposes that, in the case of the above, what should be a thought – a product of the juxtaposition of preconception and negative realisation – becomes the bad object, which is only fit for evacuation.

It is one of our tasks as therapists to learn from our clients the meaning that they uniquely attach to their thoughts, beliefs and experiences

This, he believes, disturbs the apparatus for thinking and there is an overactive development of the apparatus of projective identification. The psyche then operates on the principle that evacuation of a bad breast is synonymous with getting nourishment from a good breast, resulting in a situation where thoughts are treated as if they were indistinguishable from bad internal objects, and therefore the mental machinery that is developed is one for ridding the psyche of accumulations of bad internal objects. The resulting dominance of projective identification confuses the distinction between the self and the external object. This idea is central to the work between therapist and client as it exacerbates the absence of any perception of two-ness, ie there is no recognition of a distinction between subject and object.

When baby's frustration can be tolerated and there is a mating of conception and realisations (negative or positive), there can be an initiation of procedures necessary to learn by experience. This is the case with

normal projective identification, which is appropriate for the baby to communicate with the mother so that she can contain and hold the baby sufficiently for healthy development. However, with the excessive use of projective identification where in the baby there is an excess of belief of omnipotence, these procedures are not initiated.

If the mother is unable to tolerate and manage the baby's projections, it is made to continue projective identifications, carried out with greater and greater force and frequency. Then re-introjection happens, with a similar force.

When this is replicated in the consulting room, Bion believes, the client behaves as if an internal object is built up that has the characteristics of a greedy vagina-like breast that strips goodness from all that the internal infant receives or gives, leaving only degenerate objects. Thus the client seems unable to gain from his environment and his therapist.

Bion hypothesises that the failure to establish between baby and mother a relationship in which normal projective identification is possible, negates the development of an alpha function and therefore of a differentiation of elements into conscious and

unconscious. There is no alpha function to convert 'sense data' of the self into alpha elements and therefore lacking is a capacity for being conscious or unconscious of the self.

As with the baby, the client cannot make use of sense data, but has to deposit these elements in the therapist. He is dependent then on the therapist to do whatever has to be done to convert the data into a form suitable for use as alpha elements. It is the mother's/

therapist's capacity for reverie that becomes the receptor organ for the processing of the baby's/client's myriad self sensations.

Normal development occurs if the relationship between baby/client and breast/therapist allows him to project a feeling, such as falling in the baby or some nameless anxiety in the client, into the mother/therapist and to re-introject it after it has spent some time there where it is made tolerable. If the projection is not received by the mother/therapist, the baby/client can feel that its feeling is stripped of its meaning, and a nameless dread is re-introjected instead of a fear of falling or anxiety made tolerable. Thus instead of an understanding internal object, the baby/client has a wilfully misunderstanding object with which it is identified.

Just as sense data have to be modified and worked on by alpha function to make them available for dream thoughts, so the thoughts have to be worked on to make them available for translation into action.

Dream thoughts are anything that can be expressed in terms of sensual images, most commonly visual. This includes narrative descriptions of events that can be visualised as images as located in Row C of Bion's 'Grid'¹¹.

This conflict must somehow be resolved for productive expression of thought or conception in language, or its counterpart in signs. As communication has its origins in realistic projective identification, it has great importance for group dynamics.

Communication is needed to correlate and conjoin one or more sets of sense data to each other – if the sense data harmonise, it can bring about a sense of truth. It is then important that this sense of truth, as it occurs in the crucible of the supervision group, should be expressed and then communicated to the client in an appropriate, sensitive and timely way.

Bion uses the term 'contact barrier' to speak of the barrier between conscious and unconscious. This 'contact barrier', he believes, is continuously in the process of formation by alpha function. I believe there is a group contact barrier, composed of alpha elements, operating in the alpha function of the group. Bion proposes that when the client's contact barrier is composed of beta elements (he calls this the 'beta screen'), it has a quality enabling it to evoke the kind of response the client desires, or a response from the therapist which is heavily charged with countertransference and thus available for exploration in supervision.

CLINICAL EXAMPLE

Mr X came for counselling two years after his wife had died and when he had entered a sexual relationship with a woman who suffered from bipolar disorder. She was often hospitalised and when in a manic phase was flirtatious and promiscuous. This behaviour often put Mr X into an uncontrollable rage and he would violently physically attack the unlucky male recipient of her flirtations and licentious behaviour.

This obviously distressed Mr X and his partner, and on more than one occasion, the police were called. Mr X was always shocked by his outbursts, and his guilt and repentance were distressing for both himself and his family to experience. It was when he and his partner decided on a trial separation that he sought counselling.

His history revealed that X and his mother had been abandoned by his father when he was a baby. As a child, he would listen to his mother and her lovers having intercourse in the room next to his bedroom. When her lovers were not in the house, X was his mother's only companion and confidante. Some of these men abused him physically (not sexually) from which his mother did nothing to protect him. We can only imagine the unthought and unexpressed rage and conflict Mr X suffered in silence as a child. There was obviously no resolution for mother and son, but when a similar situation was replicated in his adult life, he acted out his undigested and untransformed sense data.

The above history was only communicated to Mr X's counsellor very slowly over many weeks as he wanted to major on the here and now and wanted solutions to be given to him.

However, it was during one of the counsellor's presentations of him in the group that another member of the group felt irrational anger and restlessness. She appeared to be angry with the client. The group reflected on this and entered into heated discussion. It took some very boundaried work by me and another member of the group, who remained calm, to tease out what was going on.

As a group, we had wondered how Mr X had coped, as a child, with his sexual feelings for his mother and his possible omnipotent fantasy of being totally responsible for her wellbeing and happiness without his father around. Also, what his feelings were regarding the other men in her life; his possible rage and perhaps his desire for a perfect father. His counsellor then 'confessed' that she felt sexually attracted to Mr X, describing it as feeling excited and tingly in her body. She also often felt some anger with him when he fidgeted around in his chair. I interpreted that I felt Mr X might want to know if his counsellor could cope with his sexuality and anger which he could not cope with as a child. I felt the counsellor was paralleling this in the group, asking us if we could cope with hers. The counsellor replied that she had been struggling to make an interpretation to Mr X similar to the one I made to her, in their last session but had felt a sense of danger. After the acceptance and containing in the group, the counsellor then felt she could make the interpretation when a suitable occasion arose.

Through the process of the therapist being caught up in and braving the conflict between the client's ego and archaic superego (with which the therapist becomes temporarily identified), she can make an appropriate interpretation by working through the conflict between his own ego and superego. This, Caper believes¹², gives the client the best possible opportunity to work through a similar conflict of his own. In the above example, through projective identification and the parallel process, we saw this conflict between ego and archaic superego braved in the counsellor and the group, allowing me to make an interpretation to her, which she was then able to sensitively present to Mr X. For the therapist to analyse effectively, she must, in relation to her clients, be conscious of, and emotionally comfortable with, her own personal infantile and child dynamics.

I will not go into what transpired during the dialogue, but the conclusion was that we had tapped into some of Mr X's unexpressed and untransformed sense data that he had evacuated into his counsellor who, although relieved, felt shell shocked after an uncomfortable hour's supervision.

In my experience, the supervision group can perform alpha function on the alpha elements which arise from transformed beta elements arising from unconscious

processes in analysis and therapy. I have experienced the unconscious phenomena, projective identification, and the parallel process in supervision to be the vehicles and processes by which this can occur. It is the beta elements, which are only suitable for evacuation and, in less severe cases, unconscious communication, which can serve as the raw material for creativity in therapy and supervision. Using the alpha function of the group theory, the group uses its powers of censorship and resistance that are essential to differentiation of conscious and unconscious and thus helps maintain the discrimination between the two. In the reverie of the group, 'madness' and beta elements can be picked up unconsciously and expressed safely in the holding and containing environment. Then they can be processed and understood. Timely interpretations then offered to the client can effect changes in the client's capacity for thinking and therefore understanding.

MUTATIVE INTERPRETATION

When speaking of the mutative interpretation and the difficulty of its execution, Caper¹² saw the mutative interpretation as consisting of two components or phases. In the first phase, the client projects one of his internal objects into the therapist. This causes the client to feel consciously or unconsciously that the therapist possesses certain characteristics that she does not in fact possess. Secondly, the client becomes aware through the interpretation of the transference that these characteristics belong in reality not to the therapist but to his own inner world. Caper¹² says: 'A mutative interpretation helps the client to see the analyst as a real external object, and at the same time allows him to recognise a previously unrecognised aspect of his internal object world.'

However, this very often does not run smoothly and a temporary intellectual deterioration can be produced in the therapist. Just when the therapist is on the verge of making a mutative interpretation, she can have the feeling that she is about to do something harmful. Her sense that the mutative interpretation she is about to give is dangerous arises from the therapist's 'archaic superego'¹³. It tends to make her feel that the appropriate interpretation would spoil her good relationship with the client.

I conclude that it is out of this humus of regressed emotion that the alpha function of the group must, and can, make sense of beta elements. It is the temporary unconscious identification with an unintegrated infantile response that may be able to turn the neurotic countertransference (paralleled in supervision and interpreted by the group or supervisor) into a complementary countertransference in which the true pain and position of the client can be spoken to.

Fordham¹⁴ believes an interpretation must have the purpose of helping the client master anxiety, and/or relieve excessive guilt or other obstructions to the smooth functioning of his mental life. It does so by bringing an unconscious process or structure into relation with the ego, thus enlarging the field of consciousness.

The therapist must be able to sustain feelings stirred in her (as opposed to discharging them as the client does), in order to subordinate them to the analytic task in which she functions as the client's mirror reflection. In a supervision group, in order for this to happen, the supervisee must function as a reflection of the client to the group, and it is through observing the supervisee's countertransference in the parallel process that the transforming process may happen. Perhaps the emotions roused in the therapist are much nearer to the heart of the matter than her reasoning; the therapist's unconscious perception of the client's unconscious is more acute and in advance of her conscious conception of the situation.

Please note that, for clarity, the therapist is referred to as 'she' and the client 'he' throughout this article.

Valerie Garrett has 40 years' experience as a psychodynamic counsellor and now works privately as a supervisor and counselling consultant. She is the author of the well-reviewed book, *Effective short-term counselling within the primary care setting: psychodynamic and CBT approaches*, published by Karnac Books (2010) (£20.95, ISBN 978-1-85575-751-6). Valerie's book can also be found on Amazon and partly read in Google Books.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Bollas C. *The shadow of the object*. London: Free Association Press; 1987.
- ² Bion WR. *Second thoughts*, London: Maresfield Library; 1967.
- ³ Jung CG. *Psychology and alchemy*. 2nd edition. London: Karnac Books; 1993.
- ⁴ Davis M, Wallbridge D. *Boundary and space: an introduction to the work of DW Winnicott*. London: Karnac Books; 1981.
- ⁵ Jacobs D. *The supervisory encounter: guide for teachers of psychodynamic psychotherapy and psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac Books; 1997.
- ⁶ Bion WR. *Learning from experience*. London: Karnac Books; 1984.
- ⁷ Bion WR. *Experiences in groups and other papers*. New edition. London: Routledge; 1998.
- ⁸ Freud S. *The group and the primal horde*. In: Strachy J (ed). *The standard edition of the complete works of Freud*. London: Karnac Books; 1951-1974.
- ⁹ Foulkes SH. *Introduction to group analytic psychotherapy*. London: George & Unwin; 1948.
- ¹⁰ Hinchelwood RD. *A dictionary of Kleinian thought*. London: Free Association Books; 1989.
- ¹¹ Symington J, Symington N. *The clinical thinking of Wilfred Bion*. London: Routledge; 1996.
- ¹² Caper R. *Mutative interpretation*. London and New York: Routledge; 1999.
- ¹³ Strachey J. *The nature of the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis*. *The Journal of Psychotherapy Practice and Research*. 1999; 8(1):66-82.
- ¹⁴ Fordham M. *Jungian psychotherapy*. London: Karnac Books; 1986.

READER RESPONSE

The author welcomes feedback on this article. To contact Valerie, please email valandpete@fsmail.net. To contact the journal, email hcpj.editorial@bacp.co.uk