

wk-3

1.

Week 3

**LEARNING FROM
EXPERIENCE**

BY
W. R. BION,
D.S.O., B.A., M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P.

**BASIC BOOKS
PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
NEW YORK**

Exp

Dream, a fact, conscious + unconscious.

CHAPTER SEVEN

1. IF A MAN has an emotional experience when asleep or awake and is able to convert it into alpha-elements he can either remain unconscious of that emotional experience or become conscious of it. The sleeping man has an emotional experience, converts it into alpha-elements and so becomes capable of dream thoughts. Thus he is free to become conscious (that is wake up) and describe the emotional experience by a narrative usually known as a dream.

2. A man talking to a friend converts the sense impressions of this emotional experience into alpha-elements, thus becoming capable of dream thoughts and therefore of undisturbed consciousness of the facts whether the facts are the events in which he participates or his feelings about those events or both. He is able to remain "asleep" or unconscious of certain elements that cannot penetrate the barrier presented by his "dream". Thanks to the "dream" he can continue uninterruptedly to be awake, that is, awake to the fact that he is talking to his friend, but asleep to elements which, if they could penetrate the barrier of his "dreams", would lead to domination of his mind by what are ordinarily unconscious ideas and emotions.

The dream makes a barrier against mental phenomena which might overwhelm the patient's awareness that he is talking to a friend, and, at the same time, makes it impossible for awareness that he is talking to a friend to overwhelm his phantasies. The psychotic's attempt to discriminate one from the other leads to rational thought characterized by a peculiar lack of "resonance". What he says clearly and in articulated speech is one dimensional. It has no overtones or undertones of meaning. It makes the listener inclined to

dream - a barrier to what might overwhelm

psychotic's thought lack of resonance

say "so what?" It has no capacity to evoke a train of thought.

3. The "dream" has many of the functions of censorship and resistance. These functions are not the product of the unconscious but instruments by which the "dream" creates and differentiates consciousness from unconsciousness.

To sum up: the "dream", together with the alpha-function, which makes dream possible, is central to the operation of consciousness and unconsciousness, on which ordered thought depends. Alpha-function theory of the "dream" has the elements of the view represented by classical psycho-analytic dream theory; that is to say, censorship and resistance are represented in it. But in alpha-function theory the powers of censorship and resistance are essential to differentiation of conscious and unconscious and help to maintain the discrimination between the two. This discrimination derives from the operation of the "dream", which is a combination in narrative form of dream thoughts, which thoughts in turn derive from combinations of alpha-elements. In this theory the ability to "dream" preserves the personality from what is virtually a psychotic state. It therefore helps to explain the tenacity with which the dream, as represented in classical theory, defends itself against the attempt to make the unconscious conscious. Such an attempt must appear indistinguishable from destruction of the capacity to dream in so far as that capacity is related to differentiating conscious from unconscious and maintaining the difference so established.

dreams
p.c.b

ability to
dream
reserves from
psychotic state

making unconscious conscious must appear as destruction of capacity to dream

Contact barrier

CHAPTER EIGHT

1. I SHALL NOW TRANSFER all that I have said about the establishment of conscious and unconscious and a barrier between them to a supposed entity, that I designate a "contact-barrier"; Freud used this term to describe the neuro-physiological entity subsequently known as a synapse. In conformity with this my statement that the man has to "dream" a current emotional experience whether it occurs in sleep or in waking life is re-formulated thus: The man's alpha-function whether in sleeping or waking transforms the sense-impressions related to an emotional experience, into alpha-elements, which cohere as they proliferate to form the contact-barrier. This contact-barrier, thus continuously in process of formation, marks the point of contact and separation between conscious and unconscious elements and originates the distinction between them. The nature of the contact-barrier will depend on the nature of the supply of alpha-elements and on the manner of their relationship to each other. They may cohere. They may be agglomerated. They may be ordered sequentially to give the appearance of narrative (at least in the form in which the contact-barrier may reveal itself in a dream). They may be ordered logically. They may be ordered geometrically.

coherence of
elements
↓
contact barrier
between conscious
unconscious
elements

cohere
agglomerated
sequentially
logically
geometrically

2. The term "contact-barrier" emphasizes the establishment of contact between conscious and unconscious and the selective passage of elements from one to the other. On the nature of the contact-barrier will depend the change of elements from conscious to unconscious and vice versa. In so far as dreams give us direct access to its study they retain the central position in psycho-analysis that Freud assigned to them.

dreams give direct access to study of contact barrier

contact barrier + its elements affect memory

The nature of the transition from conscious to unconscious and vice versa, and therefore the nature of the contact-barrier and its component alpha-elements affect memory and the characteristics of any given memory.

memory

critical use of theory of fact + theory of fact

3. In practice the theory of functions and the theory of an alpha-function make possible interpretations showing precisely how the patient feels that he has feelings, but cannot learn from them; sensations, some of which are extremely faint, but cannot learn from them either. A determination not to experience anything can be shown to co-exist with an inability to reject or ignore any stimulus. Sense-impressions can be seen to have some meaning but the patient feels incapable of knowing what the meaning is.

4. Interpretations derived from these theories appear to effect changes in the patient's capacity for thinking and therefore of understanding. Such a response is itself sufficiently peculiar, in view of the phenomenon being investigated, to require explanation. In the first place the nature of the difficulties, if indeed they are being accurately described, would seem to rule out the possibility that the patient could grasp the description. Such a difficulty may be surmounted by an elucidation of different degrees of disability. From the point of view of technique it would be agreeable if the response to interpretations based on a use of a theory of functions, alpha-function and contact-barrier carried some element of confirmation that a realization approximated to these theoretical concepts. Scientifically, validation of the theory would then be supported by a correlation between evidence that capacity for thinking had been increased by analysis and evidence of the existence of a realization that corresponded to the abstract theoretical construct. There is in fact an "echo" effect when an interpretation is given that lends support to the idea that the theoretical concept of contact-barrier has a corresponding realization. Discussion of this is outside the scope of this subject and I leave it for another occasion.

echo effect

In Chapters 3-8 I have used the concept of alpha-function to fill gaps in my knowledge of a state of mind which is met with in analytic practice and that I want to describe. I have

thus been able to proceed with the communication without having to wait for discovery of the missing facts and without making statements that might appear to suggest that the facts were already known.

I must now show how the theory of functions is used as a tool in the analytic work. I give examples of the background of emotional experiences (realizations) from which the theory was abstracted and pass on to give examples of realizations, unknown when the theory was abstracted, that were subsequently found to approximate to the theory. The material unfortunately does not lend itself to such logical exposition without producing misleading distortion of the facts. In the next chapter emphasis is on the background of emotional experience from which the theory is abstracted. The description is of elements from which the abstraction was made but these are mixed with so many others that it is impossible to claim for it qualities that are ordinarily regarded as essential to a scientific production.

realization from which theory abstracted

Review

7 CHAPTER TWELVE

1. THE ACTIVITY WE KNOW as "thinking" was in origin a procedure for unburdening the psyche of accretions of stimuli and the mechanism is that which has been described by Melanie Klein as projective identification. The broad outline of this theory is that there exists an omnipotent phantasy that it is possible to split off temporarily undesired, though sometimes valued, parts of the personality and put them into an object. In practice it is possible, and desirable in the interests of beneficial therapy, to observe and interpret the evidence that supports this theory and which this theory explains in a way that no other theory does.

unburdening

P.I.

importance to int. P.I.

2. It is also possible, and in fact essential, to observe evidence which shows that a patient in whom the operation of this omnipotent phantasy can be deduced is capable of behaviour which is related to a counterpart in reality of this phantasy. The patient, even at the outset of life, has contact with reality sufficient to enable him to act in a way that engenders in the mother feelings that he does not want, or which he wants the mother to have. To make theory correspond to these clinical findings I have suggested an emended version of Freud's pleasure principle theory so that the reality principle should be considered to operate co-existentially with the pleasure principle. An instance of an attempt to make the omnipotent phantasy a reality can be seen in the patient who has the impulse to force others to feel that he is capable of murdering the sexual parents so that he may feel capable of a loving sexual relationship free from the fear that he would murder his partner and himself if, as he would be bound to do, he observed himself and his partner displaying evidence of mutual sexual passion. I have suggested

body's ability to affect

modification of Freud's theory of reality principle pleasure & co-exist

EP

that in an extreme form this may even lead to murder as a method of giving effect, in the world of reality, to the omnipotent phantasy of projective identification which, without such action, would remain only an omnipotent phantasy.

3. There are instances far less dramatic and therefore demanding some perspicacity in the analyst to discern them. It is of importance that the analyst should observe them. That is to say, he should observe and interpret the operation of the phantasy as a mental phenomenon deducible from the evidence and also observe signs that the patient is sufficiently adjusted to reality to be able to manipulate his environment so that the phantasy of projective identification appears to have substance in reality.

4. The more this realistic component is in evidence, and can be made evident to the patient, the more it is possible to judge the extent to which a gravely ill and indeed certifiable patient has contact with reality albeit a reality not always familiar to better developed individuals.

5. The patient's ability to gear his omnipotent phantasy of projective identification to reality is directly related to his capacity for tolerance of frustration. If he cannot tolerate frustration the omnipotent phantasy of projective identification has proportionately less factual counterpart in external reality. This contributes to the state Melanie Klein describes as excessive projective identification. The excess however must be scrutinized carefully. It may appear to be excessive because the analyst is forced to be aware of it by the realistic steps which the patient takes to make the analyst in fact experience emotions of a kind the patient does not want to have (M. Klein). This excess must be sharply distinguished from the excessive projective identification which represents a resort to omnipotent phantasy as a flight from reality, and in particular from feelings which are not wanted. But projective identification cannot exist without its reciprocal, namely an introjective activity intended to lead to an accumulation of good internal objects.

6. Let us now suppose that in reality the breast supplies the infant with milk and sensations of security, warmth,

vicary
p. 2.
+
rationalization
of p.t.
rationalization
& contact
with reality
frustr. tol.
p.t. +
rational.
excessive p.t.
communication
→
avoidance
milk

well-being, love. Let us suppose further that the infant needs—I deliberately avoid saying "wishes"—to possess itself of the milk itself and the related sensations. We may make a distinction between milk and love by appropriate classification or we may emphasize, if it suits us, the respects in which they appear similar. Thus we may say that milk is a material substance and is related to alimentation and is presumably dealt with by the digestive tract. Love on the other hand we may regard as immaterial though comparable with milk for the mental welfare of the child. We may place it in one or more of a number of different categories that philosophy, religion and other disciplines place at our disposal. The only reason for limiting our classificatory apparatus to one discipline is the desire to achieve simplicity. Whether we employ philosophical concepts, religious concepts, endocrinological concepts or concepts employed by the neuro-physiologist they will be open to the same objection, namely that they describe states of mind with which we are familiar and shall require them to describe phenomena, or the realities we assume to be the counterpart of those phenomena, with which we are not familiar but believe we have correctly observed and correctly imputed to the infant. Two adults may mean widely different things by the same word "love", yet this word is one I must use to describe part of what I believe to be an infant's experience (I include lack of love). It is clear therefore that there are two major sources of error that immediately present themselves, one being the semantic gap which has to be bridged between adults discussing the problem and the other the scientific propriety of attributing to infant experience a modified yet recognizably similar experience.

7. The milk, we may assume with a degree of conviction we cannot feel about love, is received and dealt with by the alimentary canal; what receives and deals with the love? The question may be a formulation based on inadequate thinking, and therefore liable to lead to error, unless we consider what the situation is with the mother. As the infant receives the milk and deals with it by the alimentary system, so the mother provides it by the glandular system, yet milk has been known to fail and the failure has been attributed to emotional upsets.

love
use of words of foundation concepts & devoid of uniformity
2 major sources of error
1. demands of adult - infant
reception
love
milk
alimentary
glandular
system
must specify
emotional
upsets

communication my impression is that her love is expressed by reverie.

10. Though the difficulties of penetrating the adult mind in analysis are great they are less so than attempting to penetrate the infant's by speculative hypothesis; investigation of reverie in the adult may afford us an entry into this problem. We may deduce from reverie, as the psychological source of supply of the infant's needs for love and understanding, what kind of psychological receptor organ is required if the infant is to be able to profit from reverie as it is able, thanks to the digestive capacities of the alimentary canal, to profit from the breast and the milk it supplies. Put in another way, assuming alpha-function as that which makes available to the infant what would otherwise remain unavailable for any purpose other than evacuation as beta-elements, what are the factors of this function that relate directly to the mother's capacity for reverie?

11. The mother's capacity for reverie is here considered as inseparable from the content for clearly one depends on the other. If the feeding mother cannot allow reverie or if the reverie is allowed but is not associated with love for the child or its father this fact will be communicated to the infant even though incomprehensible to the infant. Psychical quality will be imparted to the channels of communication, the links with the child. What happens will depend on the nature of these maternal psychical qualities and their impact on the psychical qualities of the infant, for the impact of the one upon the other is an emotional experience subject, from the point of view of the development of the couple and the individuals composing it, to transformation by alpha-function. The term reverie may be applied to almost any content. I wish to reserve it only for such content as is suffused with love or hate. Using it in this restricted sense reverie is that state of mind which is open to the reception of any "objects" from the loved object and is therefore capable of reception of the infant's projective identifications whether they are felt by the infant to be good or bad. In short, reverie is a factor of the mother's alpha-function.

12. Returning now to the infant containing¹ a "need for

love is expressed
of reverie

investigating
infant's
mind by
investigating
adult's
reverie.

factor of
mother's
communication
to infant

psychical
qualities
of infant
and
mother's
reverie
(h, h)

reverie is
not of mind
of child

the breast" which I have said is a feeling that is equated with a "bad breast".² This bad breast has to be exchanged for a good breast. An infant capable of tolerating frustration can permit itself to have a sense of reality, to be dominated by the reality principle. If its intolerance of frustration reaches beyond a certain degree, omnipotent mechanisms come into operation, notably projective identification. This might still be regarded as realistic, in that it suggests awareness of the value of a capacity for thought as a means of softening frustration when the reality principle is dominant. But it depends for its efficacy on the existence of the mother's capacity for reverie. If the mother fails then a further burden is thrown on the infant's capacity for toleration of frustration for now its capacity for toleration of frustration of thought itself is tested. I am here supposing that projective identification is an early form of that which later is called a capacity for thinking. An infant endowed with marked capacity for toleration of frustration might survive the ordeal of a mother incapable of reverie and therefore incapable of supplying its mental needs. At the other extreme an infant markedly incapable of tolerating frustration cannot survive without breakdown even the experience of projective identification with a mother capable of reverie; nothing less than unceasing breast feeding would serve and that is not possible through lack of appetite if for no other reason. We have thus approached a mental life unmapped by the theories elaborated for the understanding of neurosis. I do not propose to pursue this investigation now, except in so far as it bears on alpha-function.

bad breast of frustration

intolerance of frustration

early form of capacity for thinking

V V

JAMES A. GOOCH, M.D.

Workshop of Freud's theory of consciousness as sense organ of psychic qualities and of Primary + Secondary Processes - both to be regulated by theory of K-fct

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

1. IN THE WORK DONE HERE (K activity) I have resorted to abstraction, in contrast to that reverse process of concretization by which words cease to be abstract signs but become things themselves. To demonstrate relationship adequately abstraction and formalization are essential.

abstraction + formalization essential for demonstration of links

2. The problem is not merely the use of words already invested with a penumbra of associations to describe an unprecedented situation; it is that this penumbra of associations has been acquired in pursuit of the establishment of a mental relationship with concrete objects. This pursuit, in the development of the individual, is far less exacting than the attempt to establish a mental relationship with a personality either the individual's own or that of another person. The senses present the personality with material on which work has to be done to produce what Freud calls the "conscious awareness attached to them", that is to the sense data. But it is hard to believe that sense data, as ordinarily understood, could bring much material of value when the object of the senses is an emotional experience of a personality (to whomever it may belong). The senses may be able in a state of fear or rage to contribute data concerning the heart-beat, and similar events peripheral, as we see it, to an emotional state. But there are no sense-data directly related to psychic quality, as there are sense-data directly related to concrete objects. Hypochondriacal symptoms may therefore be signs of an attempt to establish contact with psychic quality by substituting physical sensation for the missing sense data of psychical quality. It seems possible that it was in response to his awareness of this difficulty that Freud felt disposed to postulate consciousness as the sense-organ of

lack of work of senses re emotional experience

no sense data for psyche

hypochondriacal symptoms substitute for missing psychic quality

consciousness - sense organ of psychical quality

psychic quality. I have no doubt whatever of the need for something in the personality to make contact with psychic quality.

3. For personalities that seem to be incapable of true dreaming, the border-line psychotic and psychotic parts of the personality, the theory of consciousness as the sense-organ of psychic quality is not satisfactory; by the standards of clinical practice contradictions become apparent which are resolved if the problems are approached with a different theory. The weakness of this theory of consciousness is manifest in the situation for which I have proposed the theory that alpha-function, by proliferating alpha-elements, is producing the contact-barrier, an entity that separates elements so that those on one side are, and form, the conscious and on the other side are, and form, the unconscious. The theory of consciousness is weak, not false, because by amending it to state that the conscious and the unconscious thus constantly produced together do function as if they were binocular therefore capable of correlation and self-regard. Because of the manner of its genesis, impartial register of psychic quality of the self is precluded: the "view" of one part by the other is, as it were, "monocular". For these reasons, and others arising from clinical experience of psycho-analysis of that class of patient in whom the psychotic part of the personality is obtrusive, I find the theory of primary and secondary processes unsatisfactory. This theory is weak in the need to postulate two systems at the point where, in my theory of an alpha-function, an emotional experience is transformed into alpha-elements, to make dream thought, unconscious waking thinking and storage in the mind (memory) possible. I attribute the appearance of beta-elements, the closely associated bizarre objects and the serious disturbances ordinarily associated with excessive obtrusion of the psychotic elements of the personality, to the failure of alpha-function.

inadequacy of
consciousness
of same organ
in border-line
psychotic
part of personality

theory of S
set

theory of
consciousness
weak - not
true
AMENDED
THEORY

weakness of
theory of
primary &
secondary
processes
of S set
theory

failure of S set → p element, by one object, producing
disturbance