Containing States of Mind

Exploring Bion's 'Container Model' in Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy

DUNCAN CARTWRIGHT

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Wilfred Bion's insights into the analytic process have had a profound influence on how psychoanalysts and psychotherapists understand emotional change and pathological mental states. One of his most influential ideas concerns the notion that we need the minds of others to develop our own emotional and cognitive capacities.

In *Containing States of Mind*, Duncan Cartwright explores and develops some of the implications that Bion's container model has for clinical practice. He argues that the analyst or therapist best fulfils a containing function by negotiating irreconcilable internal tensions between his role as 'dream object' and 'proper object'. The container model is also used to illustrate different 'modes of interaction' in the analytic field, the nature of particular pathological states and some of the key dilemmas faced in attempting to make unbearable mental states more bearable.

As well as addressing key theoretical problems, *Containing States of Mind* is a clinical text that renders complex ideas accessible and useful for psychotherapeutic and analytic practice and as such will be essential reading for all those involved in the fields of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy.

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For Gabriel and Jamie

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Preface

I consider Bion's theory of the container as an invaluable starting point to understanding how change occurs both in the 'nearness' of the clinical hour and in more abstract formulations about psychic transformation. Ideas expressed in this book represent many years of engaging with Bion's work in clinical practice. I remember, as a trainee, puzzling over how 'containing' might be translated into technique. The answers did not come easily and my thinking started with how Bion's concept appeared to be used in clinical settings in a somewhat idealized way. This appeared to have particular implications for technique. To this end, the first paper I wrote on the subject was a version of 'idealizing the container' (Chapter 8 in this book).

Clearly, Bion's contribution to psychoanalysis is much broader than his ideas about the container and the contained. In this book, however, I make them central to the analytic process and see his ideas as outlining a 'container model' that represents an ongoing clinical reality, an ongoing process in the analytic relationship, and a particular way of working with patients. I have tried to make my ideas available for clinical application both in terms of psychotherapeutic process and understanding some aspects of pathological thinking. My hope is that they express some useful clinical 'truths' that resonate with trainees, analysts and psychotherapists. In this sense, the book is about 'clinical thinking' as opposed to just an attempt at theoretical elaboration. As there is a clinical focus to most of the book, some theoretical arguments and literature reviews have been deliberately limited.

It is often said that Bion's work underwent different periods of development. In many ways his 'container model' can be located in his earlier work. In my thinking on the topic, I pay little attention to the historical development of his ideas. In fact, on reflection, it appears I read him 'backwards' and tend to bring some of his later ideas (e.g., 'becoming', 'O', the ephemeral nature of experience, and his thoughts on clinical practice) to bear on his earlier notions of the container.

Like most psychoanalytic theory, many of the concepts Bion developed were derived from experiences in traditional psychoanalytic settings (the use of the couch, frequency of sessions, etc.). Clearly this has an influence on

how psychoanalytic concepts are understood and applied in other modes of psychoanalytic treatment. In this regard, one may question the usefulness of Bion's containing model in chair-to-chair psychoanalytic psychotherapy. For instance, following Bion, the analyst's reverie is seen as an important means of engaging the containing function. In traditional analytic practice the analyst is permitted more privacy and space to contemplate states of reverie, thoughts at the periphery of awareness. In a chair-to-chair setting can the therapist make use of his reverie in similar ways? I never address this directly in this book. In my experience, many of Bion's ideas are applicable to psychoanalytic psychotherapy but greater demands are made on the therapist to actively engage with the patient while still considering his own fleeting internal thoughts and responses. The ongoing challenge in psychoanalytic psychotherapy is finding ways of applying such concepts in a useful way. In this sense, implicit in many of the ideas presented in this book are considerations about using 'containment' in psychoanalytic psychotherapy.

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Chapter 1

Encountering unbearable states of mind

Wilfred Bion's ideas about psychoanalysis and psychotherapy continue to enrich our thinking about how we should approach analytic encounters. In this book I explore and develop his model of the container and related ideas. Bion's ideas about the container stand out as a major contribution to understanding the invariants of analytic experience and the transformatory conditions for generating psychic meaning and change. Grotstein (1979) goes so far as to say that the container–contained configuration uncovers 'a new natural law' (p.110), a new way of organizing material that exposes new ways of seeing the order of things. However, despite the usefulness and popularity of the idea of 'containing' in various forms of psychoanalytic practice, understanding and application of 'the container model' varies greatly and still remains relatively under-theorized. The focus of this volume is twofold: first, I explore various theoretical aspects of the container model putting forward ideas about how I apply it in the therapeutic setting; second, I explore and develop some implications that the model has for understanding the development of pathological states or ways of thinking.

Developing Melanie Klein's (1946) ideas about projective identification, Bion thought that projective identifications, split-off parts of the self that are located in other objects, required containment in another mind if they were to be modified in some way. His thinking introduces a particular dynamic that he based on the prototype of a sexual union denoted by ♀♂ (container–contained).

Bion's container model can be applied in various ways at different levels of abstraction. In the clinical setting it translates into a model whereby the analytic pair (predominantly the analyst) attempt to make unbearable mental states more bearable, in turn, enriching the scope of the experiential field. Because unbearable mental states remain separated, split off, from the patient's core self, the therapist's containing function relies on attending to thoughts and feelings at the periphery of his awareness. For this reason the therapist's reverie, his dream thoughts, become a gateway to accessing unprocessed experience that requires further psychic work. In this way the therapist's container function becomes part of broader psychic processing

system, picking up on and attending to parts of the patient's internal world that for various reasons cannot be tolerated or given meaning. There are many questions here:

- How does one apply Bion's container–contained configuration to the clinical setting?
- What is the difference between the 'container' function and the container–contained configuration?
- How does the analyst make use of his reverie in this process?
- What implications does the container have for understanding pathological processes?

It could be said that Freud chartered a metapsychology that had as its driving force the energetics of the unconscious pitted against reality. Klein, on the other hand, sought to understand the concrete nature of internal objects, phantasy, and their management through projective and introjective processes. Bion's point of entry is quite different. It lies at the interface between objects and thinking, between individuals' minds, in search of transformative links that make change possible. In this way, Bion brought to psychoanalysis a unique perspective on what might be called the *psychoanalysis of encounter*. Although his work underwent a number of transformations it is the encounter between minds, and how this generates change, that remains a constant fascination to Bion. He emphasizes, particularly in his later work, the idea that the mind is always in transit and is constantly in a state of 'becoming' something else. External reality is not thought of as being a stable, consistent, objective entity, suitable for Cartesian apprehension. Rather, it is always mediated through the mind of an other. From this perspective we are left with a difficult set of parameters to work with: a mind is dependent on another mind for meaning but this necessarily remains ineffable, opaque, and always in flux.

Perhaps along with Winnicott, Bion was a true innovator of the *in between*. Rather than getting mired in theoretical dilemmas about the role of affect, sexuality, the drives and so forth, much of his thinking focused on understanding how the encounter between subjectivities is able to transform psychic occurrences (bearing influences from internal and external experience) into meaningful experience, in turn, leading to growth of the personality. In many ways Bion's thinking can be seen to pre-empt some of the current debates on intersubjectivity[1] in psychoanalysis (e.g. Beebe *et al.*, 2005; Benjamin, 1990; 1998; Gentile, 2007; Mitchell, 2000; Stolorow *et al.*, 2002).

1 Intersubjectivity has been used in such different ways that it is perhaps best to refer to 'forms of intersubjectivity' as Beebe *et al.* (2005) suggest. I follow them in using the term in its broadest sense to connote all that occurs *between* minds.

Unlike much of the thinking about intersubjectivity, however, which tends to emphasize a 'harmonious mutuality' between patient and client, Bion's ideas attempt to articulate the struggle we are engaged in when we are truly engaged with an other. For Bion, a real human mental connection is like an emotional storm caused by the coming together of minds that crave and resist each other. Although we are equipped with some kind of primary awareness of sensory objects and emotions, the ability to think and generate meaning demands that the encounter be subjected to a series of transformations that Bion made central to his work. The task becomes finding ways of tolerating this emotional storm for long enough so that it can be thought about and given particular personal meaning. As put by Bion, it involves working out how 'to make the best of a bad job' (1987, p.247). It is here that he locates the model of the container.

Despite Bion's often abstruse use of abstract terms and complex theoretical notions, it seems to me that the essence of his contribution lies in his struggle to articulate the transformatory qualities of *lived experience* always unfolding at the cusp of our awareness. He is interested in the minutiae of experience, how we come to know our experience and learn from it, use it, and be transformed by it. I read him as constantly puzzling over dilemmas about how to engage or encounter the 'nearness' of analytical experience. In his words:

> I am not very interested in the theories of psychoanalysis or psychiatry or any other theories; the important point is what I call 'the real thing', the practice of analysis, the practice of treatment, the practice of communication.
>
> (Bion, 2005b, p.16)

Unfortunately, this 'radical experiential view' (Godbout, 2004, p.1125) is often obscured by Bion's marshalling of 'empty' nomenclature in an attempt to avoid the 'penumbra of associations' linked to the concepts he is discussing.[2] Despite this, however, a number of his theoretical contributions have markedly changed the way one might think about psychoanalytic experience, bringing the 'nearness' of the clinical encounter into full focus. To this end he replaces 'invisible' instincts with the emotional links between objects (Loving, Hating and Knowing), the formation of thoughts cannot be considered apart from affective experience and its inherent link to 'other

2 *Transformations* stands out as his most audacious attempt at understanding the analytic encounter through the use of near-mathematical formulae but, in doing so, it fails as an attempt to remain close to analytic experience 'usable' to the practising analytic therapist (Meltzer, 1975b). Further, as Matte-Blanco (1988) has pointed out, the fact that they are 'empty' concepts does not make their 'emptiness' or the signs that Bion employs devoid of meaning.

minds', the analyst's 'free floating attention' is given 'subjective depth' in his use of the term reverie. Further, Bion's focus on dream-work-alpha and the 'waking-dream' draws the analyst's attention to the real-time processing of analytic experience and the creative aspects involved in transforming raw experience into mentation. Similarly, in the heat of the analytic encounter, the concept of the container becomes a means of tolerating and transforming unassimilated experience through building meaningful commentaries about the self in interaction, the self in the encounter. Put simply, the container makes unbearable mental states more tolerable through making them meaningful as they emerge.

The container function

In order to locate the container function I start with a very brief sketch of mental functioning as conceptualized by Bion. He used the terms 'dream-work-α' (Bion, 1992)[3] and later 'alpha-function' (Bion, 1962b) to isolate a function in the psyche that transforms sense impressions into elemental psychic impressions (alpha-elements) or proto-thoughts and proto-emotion. Alpha-function is responsible for animating the psyche, imbuing it with a sense of subjectivity (Symington and Symington, 1986). To use an example, let us say I observe a couple kiss. It impacts my senses, creating sensory impressions on the mind (beta-elements). To this I have an unconscious response which involves transforming the experience into pictograms (Rocha Barros, 2000) using alpha-function. This, in turn, leads to the emergence of images and psychic impressions, largely unconscious or preconscious. For example, we may imagine that this experience simultaneously elicits arousing physical sensations and 'pleasant undefined feelings', undefined 'bad' feelings associated with the image of an evil figure, images of a child alone, a vague sense of feeling alone, images of babies, images of my mother, a sense of deadness or hate, and so forth. These alpha-elements are best thought of as being the 'components of thought' (Ferro, 2005a, p.1) that can then be stored in memory and used to create dream-thoughts and later, reflective conscious thought. These components of thought may appear in consciousness in the form of momentary 'flash' images (similar to those experienced by trauma victims) but lack any particular narrative or developed meaning.

With the capacity to create basic proto-thoughts or pictograms set in motion, further psychic operations are required to develop these pictograms into dream-thoughts which eventually form coherent narratives. For this Bion deduced Ps‹ ›D[4] and the container function as the mechanisms that

3 Term first used in notes made in 1959 and published in *Cognitions* (Bion, 1992).

4 Bion (1963) derives Ps↔D from Klein's paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. However, the double-headed arrow is used to depict a more fluid, dynamic process where psychic elements constantly move between moments of disintegration and integration.

make psychic change possible, processes used to work on the relationships between psychic objects in order to generate psychic growth. 'Ps' represents a process of fragmentation or disintegration that allows psychic elements to be reintegrated (D) in different ways, creating a changed relationship between disparate elements. Through the process of disintegration (Ps) and integration (D), psychic impressions or pictograms integrate and recombine into constellations that await meaning. In terms of the above example, this might include: 'I love my father and my mother is evil and I feel left out' or, 'I feel evil witnessing such intimacy,' or, 'I feel hate towards my parents but I also feel pleasant loving feelings', and so forth.

The containing function, on the other hand, works to hold these thoughts in mind so that they can be 'detoxified' and permitted to gather new meaning. Ps↔D and the container essentially work in a dialectical way. In Bion's words: 'On the Ps↔D operation depends the delineation of the whole object: on the successful operation of ♀♂ depends the meaning of the whole object' (1963, p.90).

In sum, the container comprises a mental function that allows such thoughts to be held in mind long enough so that these dream-thoughts, in the processes of integration and disintegration, can be thought about. To continue with the example, perhaps with the aid of my therapist's 'containing' capacities I begin to think about the idea that I have feelings of hate towards my mother and I feel rejected by how my father seems to prefer her. From this, a meaningful narrative begins to form that can then be recycled through the same process in search of other 'selected facts' (Bion, 1962b) or sources of meaning that allow these narratives to reconfigure. Put simply, the containing function represents an area of mind or a mental connection that attempts to find ways of tolerating undeveloped psychic content and emotions so they can be held in mind and understood. But how is this to be applied to the therapeutic situation? What does the analyst actually do when he says he is using his containing function in working with the patient?

Bott Spillius (1988) argues that the container model along with Bion's alpha-function is the most widely accepted and best understood idea in Bion's work. In my experience it certainly seems to be tacitly accepted by most (across a number psychoanalytic orientations), but I would not concur that it is well understood. Although the idea of the therapist's 'container function' has taken hold as a key psychoanalytic concept, it has undergone relatively little development in theory and practice. Caper (1999) has similar concerns about the theory of 'the container':

> Considering the impact that this theory has had on psychoanalytic thinking, it is surprisingly sketchy, and it is remarkable how little it tells us about how containment is actually supposed to work.
>
> (p.141)

Caper (1999) wonders if this was deliberate on Bion's part; another of his concepts that require the analyst to fill in the details using his or her own experience. As mentioned earlier, Bion deliberately uses the signs ♀♂ for container–contained in an attempt to prevent the meaning of the concept being saturated by fixed ideas that prevent ongoing thought. In my view, however, there seem to be other important factors at play here that relate to its intuitive appeal.

Bion's 'containing analyst' often seems to be used as a saturated term where assumptions about it as a theoretical and technical idea are simply assumed. In my experience, it is often said that 'we need to contain emotions and thoughts' or 'contain the patient' and there are many nods of acknowledgment but little unpacking of what this might actually mean. There may be a number of reasons for this. First, Bion's often schematic descriptions of the containing process have an almost seductive ring to them where objects can be transformed through allowing the mother to metabolize them. To quote Bion:

> The infant projects a part of its psyche, namely its bad feelings, into a good breast. Thence in due course they are removed and re-introjected. During their sojourn in the good breast they are felt to have been modified in such a way that the object that is re-introjected has become tolerable to the infant psyche.
>
> (Bion, 1962b, p.90)

How this actually occurs is often not apparent in Bion's writings. It appears that this sometimes leads to the idea that containment, along with projective identification, is quite a magical and mysterious process. How projections are 'detoxified' is simply taken for granted. One possible reason for the tacit acceptance of the analyst's container function might be that it parallels deep unconscious phantasies, inherent preconceptions, about the maternal object and about the need to be 'contained'. In Chapter 8, I explore how such phantasies contribute to countertransference states that I call 'idealizing the container', a psychic state often employed defensively to avoid thinking about intolerable affects. The second reason why the container appears to be taken for granted is related to the idea it represents a three-dimensional object, a near-physical repository. This conception has technical implications for the therapist. For instance, from this point of view, 'containing' is often viewed as being synonymous with the therapist being 'silently and passively receptive' to the patient's emotions and projections. Alternatively 'containing' often takes on a 'protective function' or a sense of empathizing and needing to 'be there' for the patient. All these are associated with the idea that the container is a near-physical, 'concrete' object with an interpersonal emphasis. The above may be important therapeutic factors in some cases, but Bion had in mind a much more active,

transformative psychical process. To this end he makes clear that 'containing' demands much more than the dutiful presence of the therapist or mother (Bion, 1959). Here Bion is developing the idea that the containing function represents a mental connection that goes beyond reified or interpersonal conceptions of the container. From this perspective it is the mother's ability to retain 'a balanced outlook' (1959, p.313) that seems to be important. But what might a 'balanced outlook' mean? In this book I make this idea central to informing what might be considered to be 'containing' aspects of the analyst's mind when applied to the clinical setting.

Following Bion, there appears to be broad agreement that the process of containing involves an interchange between patient and analyst whereby the analyst, receptive to the patient's projections, introjects them, somehow 'detoxifying' them making them available to the patient via interpretation so they can be taken back in a more manageable form. This model, as it stands, seems to make intuitive sense, especially when it is seen as analogous to the process that occurs between mother and infant. But what does this actually all mean? What do I mean when I say I needed to contain my patient's hate? How is it possible that projections are 'exchanged', modified, and 'given back'? How does all this differ from Winnicott's much used concept of 'holding'? How should we understand the role of interpretation in the containing process? What are the precursors to the containing function? One of the main problems here is making clear the distinction between psychic reality and external reality in therapeutic interaction. Although we may conceive of projections as 'flying across the room' and being contained by the therapist in terms of phantasy (psychical reality), the reality of how this impacts on technique and therapeutic interaction is a different story.

In Chapter 2, I consider the relationship between projective identification and the container, as well as the role of countertransference, as a starting point to exploring what might constitute 'containing' in the analytic relationship. In essence Bion could be understood as introducing two related ideas that bring the idea of 'containment' to life. First, he introduces the idea that some phantasies of projective identification encompass a wish not only to split-off parts of the self, but also a wish for containment. Second, Bion introduces the notion that the container has a 'transformational' function. These ideas first emerge in 'Attacks on Linking': Bion is making the point that the infant *seeks* 'to investigate his own feelings in a personality powerful enough to contain them' (Bion, 1959, p.314). Statements like this appear to mark the start of one of Bion's most profound contributions: the idea that knowing (K) the other (and by implication, self), and being known by them, constitutes an emotional link intimately connected to the growth of the personality. Here the role of 'truth' and curiosity become a crucial means of reframing emotions, desires, and thought in the service of the reality principle (Grotstein, 2004).

One of the central ideas I consider further in Chapters 3 and 4 is the idea that the containing function is best understood as a fragile mental connection, a process through which the analyst attempts to negotiate irreconcilable tensions within himself. I conceptualize these tensions to be principally between the analyst's role as 'proper object' and 'dream object'. Within this the analyst strives to maintain his position as a 'real contemplative object' in an effort to make unbearable mental states more bearable. My intention here is to free the containing function from being conceptualized in three-dimensional terms, emphasizing it as an ongoing mental connection that is characterized by a state of 'becoming'.

The container–contained configuration

Bion uses the container and contained at different levels of abstraction. At a more local level he uses the model to refer to a mental function involved in making psychic states more bearable and thinkable, as discussed above. But it is also a model that can be applied to any relationship between objects. For my purposes I will use the terms 'container function' and 'container container configuration' to represent these different levels of abstraction respectively. Although both concepts are related, there are important differences that require clarification. Differences between the concepts can be stated as follows:

1 The container contained configuration refers to an abstraction that can be applied to all asymmetrical relationships between objects. The container function, on the other hand, refers to part of a set of mental apparatus that enables the creation of thoughts so as to give rise to new meaning.[5]
2 The container function is intimately related to the concept of projective identification where the container refers to the receptive mind of the recipient. The container contained configuration, on the other hand, does not necessarily involve projective identification.
3 The container–contained is an abstraction to be applied after sessions and should not intrude on the therapeutic interaction. The container function forms part of the 'meaning-making' process that operates unconsciously and preconsciously in the 'here-and-now' of the therapeutic process.

5 For those familiar with Bion's (1962b) *Grid*, the container contained configuration is probably best classified as a concept (Row F), whereas the container function is best understood as being a mental function that facilitates movement down the rows in the grid from inchoate components of thought (alpha-elements) and beta-elements to more abstract conceptualizations (Row A-H).

4 The container contained configuration is an abstraction that generates spatial imagery, delineations of 'inside' and 'outside' the area of enquiry (e.g. the analyst contains the patient's anger, the maternal object contains his love). The container function, on the other hand, represents an unknowable entity that does not lend itself to representation in three-dimensional space.
5 While the container contained configuration can be used as an abstract representation of the dynamic relationships between the container function and its contents, or between analyst and patients (e.g. the patient projects into the analyst), the reverse cannot be applied.

I consider these to be important differences. Conflating the use of the container function and the container contained configuration leads to a number of misunderstandings. Notably, if the container function is conceptualized as a three-dimensional object (similar to the configuration) it easily fosters misguided clinical thinking where the therapist's containing mind is seen as being synonymous with qualities of robustness, passivity, protectiveness, or with fantasies that the mind can literally contain parts of the patient. This kind of reasoning has a seductive ring to it that we will discuss further in later chapters. In my understanding, it runs contrary to more accurate views of the container function as representing a fairly precarious relational link or mental attitude that attempts to hold in mind unbearable psychic states so they gather meaning and understanding.[6]

The basic premise behind the container contained configuration is deceptively simple: one object (container) external to another (the contained) influences the contained in some way, whilst the contained, in turn, alters the qualities of the container. Here interaction between the two gives rise to various possibilities: the container may compress the contained, the contained may overwhelm the container, the contained may resist containment, and so forth. Bion meant container–contained configurations to be 'abstract representations of psychoanalytic realizations' (Bion, 1962b, p.90) that serve to illuminate particular relationships between objects. The relationship between language and emotion, for instance, has different outcomes depending on if language 'contains' emotion or vice versa. If the patient's speech can contain emotions, language used will convey emotions meaningfully. If on the other hand emotions overwhelm the patient's speech, language is not able to contain emotions meaningfully and might be expressed as stuttering or incoherent speech. To use another example, the 'containing' establishment or group may restrict the growth of an individual's ideas or

6 This problem led Meltzer (1986) to propose that the 'container' concept be reserved for abstract conceptualization and separated from clinical work and its links to projective identification. I have chosen to retain the use of the 'container' concept but emphasize the distinction between 'the configuration' and 'the container function'.

beliefs (contained) and prevent further development unless the container expands or a new container is sought. Alternatively, the individual may be so destructive or influential that his or her action destroys the existing establishment or group (container). In a similar way, Bion uses the configuration to illuminate group dynamics, the relationship between the mystic and the establishment, between the individual and culture, preconception and realization, society and the individual and so forth.

The idea of a containing object is of course not something unique to Bion or psychoanalysis and often emerges in everyday usage: 'I feel like I'm going to explode','I need to hold these feeling inside me', or 'I wish you would contain yourself'. All these make use of the containing image as a three-dimensional form representing our minds or bodies. But implicit in the container contained configuration are a number of factors. First, the configuration suggests that inherent in each mental object is the capacity to contain and be contained. For example, the image of my father may contain anger (contained), or he could be contained by my image of an angry family. Here the image of my father has the capacity to be container or contained depending on the point of view.

Second, the configuration generates a way of understanding emerging boundaries that give rise to conceptions of what is inside or outside, background or foreground. Where the figurative boundaries lie would depend on how objects separate and interact to generate dynamic qualities. Third, as a model of change, the container–contained configuration implies the acceptance of what could be called a *necessary or 'forced' asymmetry* between objects for change (destructive or growth promoting) to occur: one object has to assume the containing or background position in order for the other to be 'contained'. This appears to represent a distinguishing feature of Bion's model of change contributing particular qualities to the dialectical relationship between container and contained. Above all Bion's emphasis is on *the relationship* between container and contained as core to understanding all analytic objects of study:

> The breast [container] and the mouth [contained] are only important in so far as they serve to define the bridge between the two. When the 'anchors' usurp the importance which belongs to the qualities which they should be imparting to the bridge growth is impaired.
>
> (Bion, 1989, p.26)

Bion is making the point that the container and the contained signify the qualities of a particular kind of relationship, a basic relational unit. This is disrupted or breaks down when the container and contained act as separate objects or when individual qualities of an object are privileged over their relationship to other objects.

Container–contained configurations can be applied to relationships between objects as part of a systemic model representing different levels of

abstraction. For instance, thoughts may contain emotions, some thoughts may contain other thoughts, internal objects are contained or contain others, each having influence on the other. The result is an infinite number of configurations of the container–contained that, in turn, have relationships with each other so that a dynamic nesting process emerges (Billow, 2003), an image of expanding concentric circles of different qualities that set up complex systems within and between minds. It therefore seems possible to begin to think about *containment systems* here. To use an example, a patient's understanding of marriage may be contained by his cultural identity. This may, in turn, be contained by differing dominant societal values. We could imagine that this might impact his need to contain or be contained by his wife's ideas about marriage. Further, if the patient's beliefs about marriage contain his wife's understanding in such a way that they cannot be expressed, this may influence other object relationships such as his relationship with his son and so forth.

In this volume I restrict myself to exploring the clinical implications of the container contained configuration. To this end, in Chapter 7 I return to the idea of 'forced asymmetry' and how this plays itself out in 'modes of relating' between container contained that can be applied to understanding core organizing phantasies between therapist and patient.

Key features of the container model

Some introduction is required to the way I conceptualize the container model throughout the book and some of the key dilemmas and issues this presents. I consider the container to be part of an analytic field where it finds representation at different levels of psychic experience. In exploring what constitutes 'containing' in the analytic relationship I also want to make some introductory comments about the relationship between the container and psychic space, the emotions, internalization and pathology.

The bi-directional field and containment systems

I conceptualize the container function, the therapist's containing mind, as being embedded in a field of complex interpersonal and intrapsychic relationships. The idea of the therapist and patient being part of a bi-directional field has been emphasized by Baranger *et al.* (1983). In Madeleine Baranger's view analysis is conducted

> within an intersubjective relationship in which each participant is defined by the other. In speaking of the analysis, we are referring to the formation of a structure which is a product of the two participants in the relationship but which in turn involves them in a dynamic and possibly creative process.
>
> (Baranger, 1993, p.16)

The idea that interaction takes place in a bi-directional field means that the analyst and patient both contribute to a field of meaning that is bigger than the sum of its parts. The meeting of two minds generates new meaning that can be understood by trying to understand how both therapist and patient are drawn into the field and the transference–countertransference response. From the field theory perspective transference and countertransference have their source in underlying organizing phantasies co-created as a product of the field in which patient and analyst personify different positions or roles. Through tolerating and thinking about his position of being embedded in the field, the analyst attempts to broaden the analytic field using his containing function.

Part of the analytic field comprises cycles of introjective and projective communications (Hamilton, 1990; Klein, 1957; Money-Kyrle, 1956; Schafer, 2000) between therapist and patient that exist at different levels of intensity. The analyst's containing mind functions to make bearable emotions and thoughts that are communicated via projective identification because they cannot yet be thought or rendered meaningful. Although the analyst's role is to make thinkable the unthinkable, the containing function exists in a field of intrapsychic and interpersonal relations and, as Bion suggested, is reciprocal and recursive in nature. In moment-to-moment interaction the patient also attempts to hold in mind unbearable states of mind and calls on his or her containing function to assimilate the analyst's interpretations. What is hoped for, prompted mostly by the therapist, is an expansion to the analytic couple's containing capacity. Therefore, from a field theory perspective, the containing function depends on two or more minds and cannot be located solely in the mind of the analyst.

Field theory also permits a dynamic systems view of the encounter between minds. The analyst and patient meet each other at conscious and unconscious levels of experience, creating multiple tracks that organize inchoate sensory experience, the components of thought (alpha-elements), verbal communications and consequent interpersonal processes. It is also possible to think about how different tracks of experience might influence each other, in turn, generating emergent new experience. Here, non-conscious interpersonal processes, psychic functions and processes, internal objects, form a complex influencing system. From this perspective the ability to hold unbearable psychic states in mind so that they become thinkable and meaningful is dependent on complex psychical and interpersonal processes that occur at different levels, each level having non-linear influences on the other.

This can be further conceptualized by making use of the principle of *self-similarity* from non-linear systems theory (Gleick, 1987; Marks-Tarlow, 1999; Schroeder, 1991). Simply put, I use self-similarity to refer to the way different elements of the system, in part, take on the form of each other leading to the emergence of patterns, fractals, that repeat themselves at

various levels of psychic organization. In other words it provides a way of thinking about how different levels of psychic experience, psychic functions, processes in the bi-directional field, have a referential influence on each element of the psychic system. In this way we can start to think about the fractal effects of container–contained configurations, containment systems, that can be applied to internal or external relationships.

Fractals can be readily observed in clinical material. A controlling patient, for instance, may relate to his words, emotional well-being, thoughts, money, his dreams, others, the session, in invariant controlling ways. The repetition of control occurs like a fractal in the person's experience. In thinking about the experiential field, I am making the assumption that a similar process can be applied to psychic functions and structures. The assumption here is that each psychic process or relationship reverberates through multiple dimensions, creating fractals that mimic some of the features of other systems of generating experience. Furthermore, assuming the principle of self-similarity allows for some understanding of how aspects of the psyche acquire some stability through 'mimicking' the form and function of other psychic elements (Quinodoz, 1997).

Considering the fractal or emergent effects of psychic processes is implicit in many psychoanalytic ideas. To mentions a few, Freud's (1900) 'return of the repressed' can be understood as a way of examining fractal effects of repressed ideas as they manifest at different levels of the psyche or in different symptoms. Ogden's (1992) and Grotstein's (2000) ideas about how multiple tracks or levels of generating psychic experience work in a synchronous fashion offer views of psychic development that cannot be understood in a linear fashion. Further, Matte-Blanco's (1988) courageous attempts at exploring the psyche using mathematical principles draws on ideas that the symmetrical and asymmetrical modes gives rise to emergent properties in the psyche.

The principle of self-similarity is also evident in Bion's (1963) theory, particularly when he considers how the psychic process of disintegration integration (Ps↔D) often mimics the container contained where disparate thoughts (disintegration) take on the form of the container and vice versa. Bion also suggests that sense impressions (beta-elements) may have the capacity to become 'abortive prototypes' of the container function proper. In locating the containing function in a field of experience we can start to consider what non-linear effects the containing function may have on other psychic processes.

Based on the above assumptions my understanding is that components of the containing function occur in the analytic field at different levels of psychic complexity. Invariant at all levels, and following Bion, is the drive to 'know' or apprehend the object. Below I outline three different levels of psychic experience to help locate representations or fractal elements of the container. Although inseparable and always having reciprocal influences on

each other, for the sake of exploration I divide these levels into non-symbolic, preverbal and symbolic.

My understanding of non-symbolic processes is influenced by Bucci's multiple (1997a, 1997b) code theory. Bucci makes use of cognitive and developmental research to account for various psychoanalytic processes and concepts. Non-symbolic activity involves the processing of sensory patterns, continuous gradients of experience (through perceptual, affective and motoric channels). At this level there are no specified categories of experience. This would include the analyst's abilities to make fine non-conscious distinctions on sensory and bodily levels without being able to express this in any clear way. Sub-symbolic processes often cannot be directly experienced and yield a sense of being 'outside the self' (1997b, p.159). They are 'non-conscious' in the sense that they remain largely out of awareness as opposed to being unconscious due to intrapsychic forces (the dynamic unconscious). This level of experience includes procedural mental activity regarding behaviour and emotion (Clyman, 1991; Emde, 1993), interpersonal learning based on action schemas that grant us implicit ways of being with an other. Important for my purpose is the assumption that there exists a form of primary intersubjectivity derived from sensorimotor attunement, a non-symbolic attentiveness to the actions and movements of the other. This occurs in the immediacy of interaction forming a sense of 'self-resonating-with the other' (Bråten, 2003; Stern, 2000). Clearly, there is a great deal of debate in psychoanalysis regarding non-conscious activity and findings from cognitive science, developmental psychology and neuroscience. I will not debate these issues in this book. I do, however, take the position that these findings have important implications for psychoanalysis. In terms of the container model, I am interested in speculating about the emergent psychic effects these implicit interpersonal processes have on the mind. To this end I link the non-symbolic level of generating experience to what I call proto-containing experiences (see Chapter 6). Here action-movement systems, ways-of-being-with-the-other, give rise to emergent experiences based on the patterning of 'sameness' and 'difference' in the analytic field. I argue that because this level of mind has no concept of negation such experiences generate a sense of 'flow' or 'moving along' in interaction. Further, I put forward the idea that such experiences generate preconceptions of the containing function proper.

The second level of psychic organization might be called the preverbal level. Here psychic impressions based on sensory information assume a different level of organization. Inchoate images, feelings, sounds, begin to form psychic representations that refer to particular internal objects. Using Bion's model, this is an area of mind where sensory impressions pass through alpha-function transforming them into inchoate psychic objects (alpha-elements). The organization of such experiences depends primarily on splitting and cycles of projective and introjective identification between

internal objects, processes that are broadly part of the dynamic unconscious and preconscious experience. This level of mind depends on the containing function to give meaning to, and make more bearable, unformulated experience.

Finally, the third level of psychic organization, the symbolic level, allows for the full use of symbolic meaning through language. Here, following Bucci, symbols 'have properties of reference and generativity; they refer to or represent other entities, and they can be combined to generate infinite varieties of composite images and meanings' (Bucci, 1997a, p.159). At this level of mind, once unformulated experience has been rendered bearable and 'thinkable', symbols themselves become the containers of meaning, allowing the verbal communication of shared meaning systems.

In this book I focus mainly on the first two levels in the analytic field: the emergence of proto-containing experience and the containing function proper. Consistent with a dynamic systems perspective it appears that all three levels interact in complex ways. For instance, it appears that characteristics of proto-containing experiences can be appropriated at more mature levels of mind to shut down representational experience and projective processes (see Chapters 10 and 11) or can be used to mimic the containing function (Chapter 9). Alternatively the psychic 'movements' of projection and introjection might be understood to rupture or disrupt proto-containing experiences. Further, symbolic objects may be seen to lose their meaning if removed from their experiential proto-containing context or if their meaning is not continually revised or reconfigured by the containing function. We shall return to some of these possibilities in other sections.

Psychic space

What is the relationship between psychic space and the container model? The container–contained configuration easily lends itself to being conceptualized in spatial terms. When applied to the clinical setting the mechanism of projective identification easily assumes a crude form of three-dimensionality and the phantasy is coupled with the idea of projection into a receptacle. Implicit in this is the idea that the container has an 'inside' and 'outside'. It emerges as a three-dimensional image similar to that of a real physical vessel. This in itself is not unusual in the sense that most of our thinking takes place in three-dimensional psychic space: 'in my family', 'in my mind', 'getting these thoughts out of my head'; all suggest a distinction between inside and outside and a sense of space that is three-dimensional (with the addition of time). In psychoanalysis we often use terms like internal and external, introjection and projection. These terms portray the three-dimensional perspective within which most thinking takes place. The restrictiveness of three-dimensional space impressed Matte-Blanco (1988)

and led him to explore the theoretical and clinical implications of this. He used principles of basic mathematical logic to show how psychic space exists in multiple, if not infinite, dimensions. Matte-Blanco argues it is virtually impossible to discuss our thoughts without referring to metaphor or pictorial representations. However, it does not necessarily follow that internal space should be based on conceptions of three-dimensional space just because it is a somewhat inevitable consequence of the limitations of our capacity to think. There are shortcomings to limiting the container–contained model to three-dimensional space.

Bion was aware of these limitations. In a footnote in *Learning From Experience* he explains that he is using the container contained configuration with reluctance because it is more 'appropriate to immature than mature scientific thinking' (1962b, p.102). He is referring here to the limitations of using three-dimensional models or metaphors to explain complex multidimensional mental processes.

It appears that due to the pictorial qualities that the container contained readily elicits contained being inside a container Bion was also concerned that it conveyed a 'static condition' that did not convey its essential dynamical qualities:

> Considering now whether it is necessary to abstract the idea of container and contained as an element of psycho-analysis I am met with doubt. Container and contained implies a static condition and this implication is one that must be foreign to our elements; . . . I shall therefore close the discussion by assuming there is a central abstraction unknown because unknowable yet revealed in an impure form in statements such as 'container or contained' and that it is to the central abstraction alone that the term 'psycho-analytic element' can be properly applied.
>
> (1963, p.7)

Although Bion demonstrated the dynamic qualities of the container–contained and understood it to exist as a reciprocal relationship, often the container does appear to take on static three-dimensional qualities, the very problems he sought to avoid by conceptualizing it as an 'unknowable' abstraction.

It appears more accurate to view psychic space and the container model as multidimensional in nature: our thoughts can be in many places at the same time (through projection), we can experience many different thoughts about the same object at the same moment, ideas and thoughts disappear and re-emerge and so forth. Bion (2005b) appears to be referring to such complexities in describing how the analyst does not approach his task by simply listening or interacting with one (physical, three-dimensional) person. Rather, 'it is like having the whole of one person at all ages and at all times spread out in one room at one time' (Bion, 2005b, p.32).