

REVIEW ARTICLE

W. R. Bion's models of mind as the foundation of the concept of mentalization

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The purpose of this paper is to present those topics in Bion's theoretical system – in particular, the concepts centered around the theory of thinking – which greatly inspired the authors of the concept of mentalization. The article presents the sources of these models in the theories of classical psychoanalysis, as well as Bion's original contribution. It shows the roots of the analytical attitude rec-

ommended by Bion – the state of reverie, that allows the alpha function – receptive, including presence of the analyst – to stimulate the patient's process of dreaming, and so to process the sensory experience into alpha elements.

KEY WORDS

Bion's theory of thinking; mentalization; psychoanalysis

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BACKGROUND

Amongst the psychological approaches which became the cornerstone of contemporary conceptions referring to the idea of ‘mentalizing’, psychoanalysis enjoys a crucial position. In spite of the fact that, without any doubts, those conceptions owe their current shape to the discoveries made on the basis of other paradigms as well, notwithstanding that, in accordance with the convictions of numerous researchers, those conceptions originate from the psychoanalytical models of the understanding of cognitive and emotional processes, the representations of experiences in the mind, the mechanisms of normative and disordered development, or the factors and the means of treatment (Allen, Fonagy, & Bateman, 2008).

The category of mentalization is one which has a multi-aspect character, encompassing in itself a number of phenomena and mechanisms which are, in different places, considered to be separate ones. It provides practicing psychologists with theoretical frameworks, and makes it possible to organize the understanding of a patient, and also the thoughts and feelings of therapists in connection with a patient. It seems that the practical usefulness of the conceptions of mentalizations results, to a significant degree, from the methodology of the description of the experiences of intrapsychic and intersubjective nature provided by them. Perhaps, for that very reason, such a model, making it easier for a patient and for a therapist to conduct a detailed investigation into their own thoughts and feelings, constitutes a useful addition to the technique of psychoanalytical work (Holmes, 2005), and, in this aspect, fulfills a role similar to that of the system of the notation of mental phenomena developed by Bion in order to support the analyst’s abilities to observe and to think. Simultaneously, taking advantage of the wealth of the contemporary state of knowledge relevant to the phenomena and the mechanisms contained within the general conception, the construct of mentalizations seems to broaden the possibilities of theorization within the scope of the regularities of normative and disordered development. It is believed that, as the consequence, it provides promising frameworks for scientific research inspired by the psychoanalytical perspective.

The problems of which the notion of mentalization is composed have ever since constituted a subject matter of the interest of psychoanalysis. That fact is illustrated by the considerations conducted by Sigmund Freud (1950) into the subject matter of trauma, the conceptions of connection between somatic excitations and mental processes in the categories of binding (*Bindung*), so, for that very reason, transforming that what is non-mental into mental representations, or the theory of the birth of thinking

in response to the absence of a satisfying subject. In accordance with the opinion of Freud (1958), the absence of subject makes one inclined to imagine it, or to mentalize it, and, so, for that very reason, to think. This moment of thinking, preceding action under the influence exerted by the impulse which needs to be discharged (thinking suggesting a realistic course of action) is considered to constitute the core of mentalization (cf. Allen et al., 2008). Freud provides the foundations of the conceptions of mentalizations as well in the aspect of providing evidence for the claim that a human being masters the skills of cognition and that of thinking – to put it differently, giving things a mental dimension – in a relationship with the other.

Within the realm of contemporary psychoanalysis, it is possible to indicate a number of discoveries or theoretical perspectives which provided a contribution to the contemporary shape of the notion of mentalization. The early theses of Freud were followed by those of francophone psychoanalysts: in the 1970s, Pierre Marty (1991; Aisenstein & Smadja, 2010), the founder of the Psychosomatic School, in his considerations relevant to psychosomatic phenomena, took advantage of the notion of ‘mentalization’ (applied by Édouard Claparède in the year 1928). The independent contribution is constituted by the works of Pierre Luquet (1987), providing, among other things, a description of the levels of mentalization in terms of the topographic model of the mind. Important and inspiring characteristics of the dimensions of mentalization were formulated by Serge Lecours and Marc-André Bouchard (1997). Comments relevant to the participation of francophone analysts would be incomplete without a reference to the work of Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel (1990), or Andre Green (1975). Simultaneously, the conceptions of mentalization took advantage of the discoveries of British psychoanalysts, also taking up the problems of psychosomatic illnesses (cf. McDougall, 1989). One ought to emphasize the significance of the discoveries of Donald W. Winnicott (1971), which were applied to formulate this author’s conceptions of play, intermediate space, primary involvement or the role of maternal mirroring in the development of the ego. These ideas exerted a noticeable influence on the views of Mary Target and Peter Fonagy (1996; Fonagy & Target, 1997). Also, those authors take advantage directly of the perspective of Klein, in particular Hanna Segal’s conception of the symbolic representation and the symbolic equation (1957, 1978, 1991), and also the epistemological works of Wilfred R. Bion (1984a, 1984b, 1984e, 1984f; Fonagy, 2008; Lagos, 2007).

The objective of this paper is to provide more information about those threads of the theoretical system developed by Bion (in particular, the ideas concentrated around the theories of thinking) which constituted a significant source of inspiration for

the authors of the conceptions of mentalization. The epistemological period in the work of Bion had been preceded by investigations into groups, and also into the mechanisms of psychosis, which brought forth the ample fruit of original scientific works (Aguayo, 2009; Bion, 2004, 2005, 1984c, 1984d, 1984g; Fraley, 2007). In the papers written in that period, one may notice the portent of the contents constituting the subject matter of the further elaborations. At that time, Bion recognized the necessity of the reformulation of the hitherto accepted theory of the genesis and the nature of thoughts, and also of re-defining the mechanisms of 'thinking thoughts' (Bion, 1984f). The analysis of psychotic patients made this researcher confront the functioning of the mind not so much as divided, conflicted and inclined to repress, but as the mind incapable of coping with processing emotional experiences, with anxiety and with suffering. Working with patients whose thinking was failing them, who were incapable of understanding their own thoughts and feelings, and also those of other people, who were incapable of learning from experience and striving to survive by means of escaping from reality and from themselves, and, as the result, succumbing to even more severe derangement or numbness, made Bion inclined to search for a model encompassing the principles which govern thinking (Łapiński, 2011). Psychoanalytical practice, in combination with a philosophical background (Sandler, 2006), and also with personal experiences, among other things, the traumatic experience of the loss of the ability to think on a battlefield (an analogy to that was also noticed by Bion in an analytical consulting room) (Brown, 2012; Culbert-Koehn, 2011; Souter, 2009; Szykierski, 2010), became the foundation of his original theses and the innovative approach to the philosophical problems of the theory of knowledge.

Formulating opinions relevant to the nature of thinking and the source of thoughts, Bion presents a theoretical system resembling a philosophical theory. He also accepts the fact that a psychoanalyst acquainted with the functioning of a personality manifesting disorders of thinking may provide a new quality in philosophical considerations relevant to this same matter. He creates a model which, in practice, is to constitute the source of hypotheses translated into the empirical terms of verifiable data, namely the realizations or facts observed in psychoanalysis (Bion, 1984f). It seems that, formulating this thesis, Bion grants psychoanalytical practice the status of an experimental science. In the course of the further period, he revises his own early opinions, and warns against experiencing the feeling of safety, which may neutralize the sensation of being lost in the case of a scientist after a discovery, the discovery which reveals further unsolved problems (Bion, 1984h).

In accordance with the opinion of Bléandonu (1994), the output of Bion in the course of the epis-

temological period reaches both the highest level of originality, and also that of refinement, as well as hermeticity. Bion expresses his own thoughts applying the literary style resembling the psychoanalytical technique, and that means that this researcher invites a reader to receive the contents "without memory, desire and understanding", to activate the process of associations and individual elaborations. The text is to provide observations the objective of which is to evoke and sustain associations resonating with the experiences of a recipient, is to constitute "the intellectual container allowing the reader to introject a state of the mind conducive to the search for truth" (Bléandonu, 1994, p. 143). Simultaneously, the author confronts himself with his own incapability of explaining the intricacies of the problems being discussed (Bion, 1984f), which, as it may be thought, this researcher expresses in his own considerations relevant to the issues of publication, communication and 'common sense'.

Bion does not formulate unquestionable truths or complete theories. Instead of that, he presents models, tools for thinking about what is unknown, for personal reflection, for an analyst to understand his own experiences and the experiences of a patient. Bion does not take advantage of the ultimate contents, and merely contributes non-formed elements which are to be processed by a reader. He does that expressing the hope that independent attempts to understand the obscurities will become a source of satisfaction for a reader, and that they will not be considered to be an effort which a reader was forced to make by the fact that the author did not undertake it (Bion, 1984f). Bion initiates the work of a recipient by means of taking advantage of notions not having counterparts in the real world. Some of those elements of psychoanalysis are introduced by Bion himself, whereas others are given a new meaning. He does not deprive them of the 'penumbra of associations', and he takes advantage of the acquired semantic ambiguity (Bion, 1984f). Those are empty notions, filled by contents not sooner than in reference to the experiences of a reader. It is not possible to consider them as particular realizations. Within the frameworks of the model pictured in the form of the grid, they resemble pre-conceptions which have to be an appropriate realization, so that they could become formed conceptions. The empty notions of Bion make the world of primary phenomena a little more comprehensible for us, and that concerns phenomena whose presence may be presumed by us, but which cannot be described in a different manner because they are intrinsically incapable of being expressed.

Bion deliberately invokes notions originating from philosophy or mathematics in order to obtain ambiguity, and he does not become attached to the application of them in accordance with the princi-

ples of taking advantage of them in different fields of science. He indicates that, in psychoanalytical methodology, the ultimate criterion of the application of ideas is not whether “a particular usage is right or wrong, meaningful or verifiable, but whether it does, or does not, promote development” (Bion, 1984f, p. vii). In his opinions relevant to the epistemology of the mind, he departs from the positivistic patterns of scientific cognition (Williams, 1999). Constructing the model, Bion is aware of the results of attempted actions, and does it while being aware of the consequences; he expects that the recipient will experience realizations that approximate to the theory (Bion, 1984a). That which is experienced by the recipient does not have the character of acquiring access to the ultimate truth, which may never be fully attainable, but rather, it is exclusively a step in the direction towards cognition.

THEORY OF THINKING OF BION

Within the frameworks of the epistemological project, Bion attempts to discuss two fundamental questions. First of all, he intends to determine the foundations of scientific psychoanalysis and a description of the methodological problems of cognition in psychoanalysis. Bion develops, in connection with that fact, a system of scientific notation of mental phenomena: in the form of grid, he differentiates between abstract categories, which are intended to include phenomena and analytical theories, and also streamlined thinking and observational abilities of a practicing psychoanalyst. Second, he creates a theoretical system of the development of thoughts and thinking, constituting the subject matter of this paper.

In accordance with the opinion expressed by Bion, thinking originates from the successful realizations of two developmental achievements: the first is the development of thoughts, whereas the second one is the development of the apparatus to cope with them, which he refers to as thinking. In this manner of presentation, the thought is not the product of thinking, but rather, it precedes thinking – “thinking is a development forced on the psyche by the pressure of thoughts” (Bion, 1984a, p. 111). To put it differently, the mind commences thinking as the consequence of encountering thoughts. The development of each of those accomplishments may be disturbed, and that means that what may be broken is the development of thoughts, or the development of the apparatus for ‘thinking’ (and that means dealing with thoughts). What may also occur are disturbances within the scope of both of those accomplishments.

Bion classifies ‘thoughts’ and presents the conception of the development of them, commencing with pre-conceptions, to conceptions and thoughts, until the stage of concepts. The latter are the result of the

elimination of emotional elements, and the idiosyncratic ones, from thoughts and conceptions. Concepts are more general, defined and named, and by means of that fixed, thoughts or conceptions. As the starting point of his theory of thinking, Bion (1984a) selects the notion of pre-conception, which is treated by this researcher as the analog in psychoanalysis of Kant’s concept of ‘empty thoughts’, thoughts deprived of concepts. Developing this category, this researcher refers to the postulate of Kant that there exists *a priori* knowledge, innate and independent of reason.

Abstract considerations relevant to the origins of thinking are given by Bion the metaphorical form when this researcher includes them within the frameworks of the model the central element of which is psychosomatic digestive canal between a mother and an infant. The model instance of a pre-conception, the expectation which is not formed, and which is not saturated with contents of an expectation, is, for that very reason, the infant’s innate capacity to find the breast. Bion describes this earliest relationship with the primary object in accordance with the conceptual apparatus of Klein; however, that nomenclature acquires new meanings in the model developed by Bion. He presumes that a child is in the possession of *a priori* knowledge of breasts, that a child expects them to exist, or that a child expects the satisfaction given by what a more mature creature would identify as a breast (Bléandonu, 1994). When a child contacts with the breast, and that means when a child accepts a good breast, receiving milk, warmth and love in the course of being fed, then, in accordance with the nomenclature of Klein, and, so, for that very reason, when the pre-conception encounters the realization (constituting an approximation to the pre-conception), ‘an empty thought’ becomes filled with contents, and a conception is born. In the system developed by Bion, each junction of a pre-conception with its positive realization produces a conception, and the consequence is that all conceptions are conjoined with an emotional experience of satisfaction (Bion, 1984a).

Making attempts to accurately present the character of the experiences of an infant, and, simultaneously, being aware of the difficulties connected with describing the early states of the mind in the categories available to mature individuals, Bion invokes the phantasmatic model based on the theories of Freud and Klein (Bion Talamo, 1997; O’Shaughnessy, 1981, 2005; Symington & Symington, 1996). He presumes the existence of a psychosomatic breast, and also the respective psychosomatic digestive system of an infant. The breast is the subject matter of the needs of an infant, providing milk and good internal objects: the feelings of safety, love and well-being. Bion does not attribute to the infant the awareness of this need; however, he puts forward the thesis that a child is

aware of the sensation of frustrations in connection with not having satisfied the need in question; to put it differently, Bion claims that a child is aware of the need which has not been satisfied. Bion presumes, for that very reason, a certain rudimentary awareness of an infant, which is understood by him in accordance with the opinion of Freud as "a sense-organ for the perception of psychic qualities" (Bion, 1984f, p. 34).

Bion is convinced that the experiences of a good and a bad breast, associated, respectively, with the presence and the absence of milk satisfying hunger, are significantly different mental experiences (Jemstedt, 2007). He adheres to the opinion that the experience of a good breast is more similar to a contact with a thing-in-itself or a thing-in-actuality, in the meaning that a good breast exists when an infant is actually fed with milk (Bion, 1984f). It is possible to say that, in the course of the early sensual stage, it is the existence of the milk actually consumed by an infant. In accordance with the opinion expressed by Bion, sooner or later the experience of the presence of a bad breast is experienced as the idea of an absent and a desired breast. It is considered to be more likely by Bion that the source of the idea is 'non-existence' than 'thing-in-itself'. The term 'thought' is maintained, for that very reason, for the mating of a pre-conception with a frustration, a negative realization. In order to explain the matters, the author of the conception invokes one more time the model of an infant unsuccessfully waiting for the breast, which would provide satisfaction. An encounter with the negative realization is experienced as a no-breast, or "absent breast inside" (Bion, 1984a, p. 112).

The mind experiencing frustrations may adopt diametrically different trajectories, depending on the capacity of an individual for toleration of frustration. That potential is of decisive significance in terms of the selection of the strategies of coping with frustration by means of avoidance or by that of modification, so, for that very reason, it contributes to the development of the psychotic or, alternatively, the non-psychotic part of personality (Bion, 1984d).

Considering the consequences of frustration, Bion invokes the paper authored by Freud (1958), presenting changes in the mental apparatus, which starts to be controlled by the new principle of mental activity, namely the reality principle. In this paper, Freud describes the mechanism of satisfying needs resulting in establishing the subject matter of the wish by means of hallucinations, appropriate for the time of the domination of the pleasure principle. The paper presents the manner in which a disappointment which has originated from the absence of the expected satisfaction results in giving up attempts to satisfy the needs by means of hallucinatory satisfaction, and is replaced by imagining the actual relationships dominating in the external world, and by making efforts intending to cause an actual change.

Motor discharge, which, in the course of the period of the domination of the principle of pleasure, served as a means of immediately unburdening the mental apparatus from the intensified level of excitation, simultaneously with the introduction of the reality principle acquires a new function – it is converted into a deliberate action the intended result of which is changing reality. In accordance with the opinion of Freud, sustaining the activity requires, as an indispensable step, the process of thinking, shaped on the basis of the process of imagining. To put it differently, since the moment of the introduction of the new principle, motor discharge occurs with the participation of the process of thinking. Accompanied by acquiring access to reality by mentality, thinking may serve the objective of the modification of the environment. In addition to that, Freud points out that the ability to think facilitates bearing the higher level of the stimulus strain by the mental apparatus in the course of relocating the outlet until the moment of satisfaction thanks to taking an adequate action: "It is essentially an experimental kind of acting, accompanied by displacement of relatively small quantities of cathexis together with less expenditure (discharge) of them. For this purpose the conversion of freely displaceable cathexes into 'bound' cathexes was necessary, and this was brought about by means of raising the level of the whole cathectic process. It is probable that thinking was originally unconscious, in so far as it went beyond mere ideational presentations and was directed to the relations between impressions of objects, and that it did not acquire further qualities, perceptible to consciousness, until it became connected with verbal residues" (Freud, 1958, p. 221). The author puts forward, for that very reason, the thesis of the concurrence of the reality principle with the development of the ability to think, whereas he considers thinking to be the substitute for motor discharge. Bion notices the suggestion of Freud that the absence of the ability to tolerate frustrations contributes to increasing tension, whereas thought may fill in the space between the need to relieve mentality from the accumulation of stimuli and actually relieving it. If, for that very reason, the mental apparatus is capable of tolerating the tension increasing as the consequence of delayed discharge, the motoric outlet may be replaced by action. In the categories of the model developed by Bion (1984a), it means that thanks to the sufficient tolerance of frustrations, a bad external 'no-breast' becomes the thought, and that the apparatus for 'thinking' it develops. As a result, there occurs developmental feedback: the mind capable of tolerating frustrations generates the thought, because of which frustration becomes more tolerable.

The insufficient ability to tolerate frustrations results in the fact that there does not occur the recognition of a bad internal 'no-breast' as the thought, and

subordinating to the reality principle. To put it differently, the pre-conception, having encountered the negative realization, does not cause the formation of the thoughts, but rather, it initiates the existence of a bad object, indistinguishable from a thing-in-itself, which cannot be modified, and which is appropriate solely to be evacuated. The mind incapable of tolerating frustrations gives up making attempts to modify frustration, and replaces them with efforts intended to avoid it. The process of the avoidance of frustrations is captured by Bion in the categories of projective identification, namely a complex fantasy about the detachment of the parts of the self and projections into the object. One of the objectives of this mechanism is to release the self from the bad aspects threatening destruction from inside, and also acquiring control over the object and possessing it as the consequence of the attack on it which was conducted. In the initial vision of Klein, this phenomenon, even though it results in real consequences, has an imaginary form, and occurs exclusively in the internal world of a subject (Klein, 1975a, 1975b). In turn, in accordance with the opinion expressed by Bion, the pleasure principle is always accompanied by the reality principle, and, for that very reason, mentality sufficiently adjusted to reality, and simultaneously motivated by the omnipotent fantasy of projective identification, is capable of making this phantasy come true to a certain degree. Because of projective identification, the feelings which a patient does not want to experience, or which they want to be experienced by someone else, are evoked in that other person. From this perspective, that mechanism is of an intersubjective character, and actually involves another person.

Bion (1984a, 1984f) claims that the evacuation of a bad breast, namely getting rid of the experience of a frustration making it possible to become aware of the existence of a need, is equivalent to gaining access to a good breast. The mind incapable of tolerating frustrations, which may be referred to as the psychotic one, treats all thoughts as if they were bad internal objects. Instead of the development of apparatus for thinking thoughts, there occurs excessive development of the apparatus of projective identification, the function of which is to relieve mentality from the excessive quantity of evil tormenting it, and that means the evacuation of bad internal objects (Bion, 1984a). Bion (1984a) places emphasis on the pathogenic consequences of the domination of the inability to tolerate frustrations, and hypertrophic projective identification. This researcher describes the manner in which those factors bring about destructive attacks against the perception of realization, against the perception of space and time, against the confusion of the self and the external subject. As the consequences of the influence exerted by these elements, there also occurs termination of the develop-

ment of thoughts and the ability to think, namely, the elements which might weaken the experience of frustrations (Fleming, 2008).

In the theoretical system developed by Bion, conceptions constituting the consequences of the encounter between a pre-conception and the realization, in a more complex form, repeat the fates of pre-conceptions. The realization which is encountered by a conception is not always an approximation which would be sufficiently ultimate so as to ensure the feeling of satisfaction. In such a case, namely that of positive and negative realizations, the tolerance of frustrations makes it possible to learn from experiences. In accordance with the opinion expressed by Bion, the thinking mind makes efforts in the direction of cognition whose condition is the process of learning from personal experiences and maintaining the ability to tolerate frustration, which is the inseparable companion of learning (Łapiński, 2011).

Bléandonu (1994) indicates that, in the course of the epistemological period, Bion considers more complex intermediary states, situated between the psychotic personality and the non-psychotic one. For that very reason, he considers the situation in which the intolerance of frustrations, constituting part and parcel of learning, is not sufficiently strong so that it could activate the mechanisms of avoidance, but is sufficiently strong to accept the domination of the reality principle. In such conditions, omnipotence becomes the substitute for an encounter between pre-conceptions (or conceptions) and the negative realization. Instead of learning based on experience and on thoughts and thinking, there develops the fantasy of omniscience, the state in which things are known. As the result of that fact, cognition does not consist in 'getting to know', which in the system developed by Bion (1984f, p. 65) is determined as K, but in "having' some 'piece of' knowledge". Because of the fact that such a personality does not possess a tool for recognizing what the truth is and what it is not, psychotic pseudo-morality, morality borne out of omniscience denying reality is formed. When it is not possible to tell the difference between what is true and what is false, omniscience dictates what is and what is not appropriate in moral terms.

Wishing to perfect the psychoanalytical manner of seeing the principles which govern thinking, Bion differentiates between the separate fundamental elements of psychoanalysis. That author emphasizes the fact that the development of cognitive processes, and that of thought processes, takes place in the interaction between a mother and a child, and also in the dimension container-contained. This element, accompanied by the alpha function, and also the dimension of the dialectic relationship of the paranoid-schizoid position, and the depressive one, constitutes the model (referred to as the triad of Bion by Łapiński (2011)), and making it possible

to describe the action of the thinking mind. From the perspective of epistemology, a significant element is also the K link (knowledge), which, apart from H (hate), and also apart from L (love), defines interpersonal relationships. The significance of the K link is particularly noticeable in analytical work, in which understanding and insight are restricted as the consequence of disturbing cognitive functions. The notion of cognitive functions in the theory developed by Bion is understood in accordance with the Freudian conception of the functions of the ego, and it encompasses perception, consciousness, memory, attention, making inquiries, and also thought constituting the substitute for an action. What is of significance, thought processes have, as their inseparable companions, emotional processes the fates of which are investigated by Bion (Godbout, 2004).

Describing personality, Bion (1984f) takes advantage of the categories of a factor and a function. He applies the term 'factor' to the form of mental activity operating in consort with other mental activities (factors), combining to produce a stable unity, the mental activity, which he refers to as a function. Factors are, for that very reason, the elements of a function. A function may undergo transformation into a factor, and, alternatively, a factor may undergo transformation into a function, depending on the level of mental integrity. Thanks to the notion of a function, Bion combines a number of phenomena, for instance, thinking, relationships with other individuals, consciousness, or the ability to tolerate sensations which are difficult to tolerate. The theory of functions facilitates adjusting the realization to the system of deduction representing the former. Bion also emphasizes the fact that the observation of functions and formulating, on their basis, conclusions relevant to the existence of mutually connected factors makes it possible for an analyst to combine theories and observations without it being indispensable to develop new, and potentially erroneous, theories (Bion, 1984f).

Alpha function is one of the original terms developed by Bion, and is not saturated with a meaning. Accompanied by it, he introduces into psychoanalytical investigations the counterpart of the mathematical variable: "an unknown that can be invested with a value when its use has helped to determine what that value is" (Bion, 1984f, p. 3). Simultaneously, the author maintains the meaning of theories, which are granted the status of factors by this author. Defining the factors constituting the alpha function (modified in combination with different factors), Bion invokes certain theoretical formulations. As to the first, this researcher refers to theses formulated by Freud (1958), in accordance with which, simultaneously with increase in the meaning of external reality, there occurs increase in the meaning of the sense organs directed towards it, and also of

consciousness connected to them (which, since then, recognizes not only the qualities of pleasure and displeasures, but also the meaning of sensual qualities). Bion undertakes to investigate the question of the comprehension of the meaning of the sense impressions, and also the impressions of pleasure and pain, and he treats them as similarly real. *Ipsa facto*, Bion considers to be insignificant for the question of the comprehension of meaning the Freudian differentiation between the external world, and also that what is internal (displeasure and pleasure). In accordance with the opinion of Freud (1955), Bion understands consciousness as a sense organ for the perception of psychological qualities. It is following in the footsteps of Freud as well that he indicates different factors of the alpha function: attention (the objective of which is to penetrate the external world, so as to make sure that the data arriving from it are known at the very moment at which such an internal need appears) or memory (the system of memorizing, the action of which consists in depositing the results of the actions of attention). Presenting the alpha function, Bion invokes not only the opinions of Freud (1958) relevant to the phenomena which accompany establishing the principle of reality. He directly draws on several different theories, or, alternatively, factors of this function: the theory of splitting and projective identification, oscillation between a paranoid-schizoid and depressive position (Klein, 1975a), symbol formation (Klein, 1975c), and also his own previous work on the development of verbal thought (Bion, 1984d). That author emphasizes the fact that determining the alpha function is the name given to a certain abstract being, and it refers to the function having an unknown nature. Based on inquiries made with the application of the alpha function, an analyst may replace it in their considerations with factors the contribution of which was confirmed by them.

In accordance with the opinion of Bléandonu (1994), the first letter of the Greek alphabet in the name is intended to indicate the presence of the alpha function since the commencement of the life of a human being. It cannot be denied that this category makes thinking and the processes of cognition situated in the central point for psychoanalysis. The notion of the alpha function is applied to the hypothetical mechanism of the transformation of sense impressions, and also the emotional ones, into so-called alpha elements. These are visual images, auditory or olfactory patterns, which may be stored (memorized) and constitute the construction material of dream thoughts, of unconscious waking thinking, contact barrier, dreams, memories, etc. (Bion, 1984f). What is of significance, the objective of the alpha function is to receive and process sensations originating not only from the sense impressions of somatic origins, feelings or thoughts, and, so, for that very reason, sensations from the internal world, but also requiring

that data from the external reality be processed. Bion invokes the observation, made by Freud, that one of the functions of a dream is to preserve sleep. Failure of the alpha function is manifested by means of being incapable of dreaming, by the absence of the alpha elements, resembling visual images known from dreams – elements interpreted by a psychoanalyst. Drawing on the thought of Freud, Bion claims that an individual who cannot dream cannot sleep either. “As alpha-function makes the sense impressions of the emotional experience available for conscious and dream-thought the patient who cannot dream cannot go to sleep and cannot wake up” (Bion, 1984f, p. 7). To put it differently, the alpha function protects mentality against a psychotic state.

If it is the case that the alpha function is not active, sensual impressions, and also emotions which one is going through, remain in their primary state, as objects which cannot be the subjects of cognition for a human being. Bion names them the beta elements, and takes advantage of the notions of Kant, considering the alpha elements as ‘phenomena’, whereas the beta elements are considered as ‘things-in-themselves’. The beta elements are sensual impressions treated as if they were a part of the personality experiencing them, and also sensual impressions considered to be ‘things-in-themselves’, and matching given sensual impressions (Bion, 1984f; Tubert-Okländer, 2008). Bion presents his own abstract model with the intermediary application of a particular metaphor of the digestive process. In this model, the alpha elements are the result of digesting by the alpha function, and may be applied for thinking, be memories etc., whereas the beta elements, even though it is possible to store them, are not memories, but rather facts which have not yet been digested. They cannot serve the objective of creating thoughts, or dreamt thoughts. The beta elements may be subjected exclusively to projective identification. They are objects which may be evacuated, or, alternatively, applied in a particular manner, and acted out. In his own model of the development of the apparatus for thinking, Bion grants the beta element chronological precedence over the alpha elements. That author emphasizes the fact that the physical components of feeding, i.e. milk, discomfort and comfort connected with saturation, and also with hunger, are sensations accessible to the senses in a direct and an immediate manner. Access to the mental aspects of feeding is acquired by an infant no sooner than simultaneously with the transformation of an emotional experience into the alpha elements, and simultaneously with the development of the awareness of mental phenomena.

The influence exerted by the alpha function on an emotional experience and on the transformation of impressions connected with the experience into the alpha elements is the foundation of learning from experience (and also of taking advantage of analy-

sis). This function makes it possible to store an emotional experience, or a thought, which must initially have been conscious, and which, thanks to the alpha function, might have become unconscious. Thanks to that fact, it becomes possible to take advantage of thinking required for some kind of activity without becoming aware of this. The alpha function relieves consciousness from the intellectual burden accompanying learning: “[...] is needed for conscious thinking and reasoning and for the relegation of thinking to the unconscious when it is necessary to disencumber consciousness of the burden of thought by learning a skill” (Bion, 1984f, p. 8).

The psychotic state of the commonness of the beta elements, for which it is not possible to become unconscious, makes it not possible to repress it, suppress or to learn. An individual in such a state comes across as someone who cannot discriminate – “He cannot be unaware of any single sensory stimulus: yet such hypersensitivity is not contact with reality” (Bion, 1984f, p. 8). In addition to that fact, if the alpha function has been destroyed, be it as the consequence of envy, or of hate, a human being forfeits the ability to establish relationships with the living aspects of themselves, and their thinking may be based exclusively on the beta elements which are appropriate solely for evacuation. Those elements are subjected to the mechanism resembling, described by Freud (1958), motor discharge, the objective of which is to relieve a personality from the accumulated stimuli, and not the action changing the environment. The phenomenon described by Freud is, however of a normative character for Bion. The objective of the activity occurring in it is to relieve a personality from the excessive quantity of stimuli in the course of the domination of the pleasure principle. In turn, Bion sketches the case of removing the unwanted beta elements in the phase of the domination of the reality principle: “A smile or a verbal statement must be interpreted as an evacuatory muscular movement and not as a communication of feeling” (Bion, 1984f, pp. 13-14).

In accordance with the opinion expressed by Bion, a human being acquiring access to an emotional experience, when asleep or awake, having at their disposal the ability to convert it into alpha elements, may remain unconscious of this experience, or become conscious of it. To put it differently, a sleeping individual, who has an emotional experience, converts it into alpha elements and so becomes capable of dream thoughts. After waking up, i.e., after regaining consciousness, they may tell other individuals about this emotional experience in the form of narration (of a dream) (Bion, 1984f). For that very reason, a ‘dream’ combines in a narrative form the thoughts of a dream formed from the alpha elements (Bion, 1984f).

A similar process occurs while one is awake – Bion (1984f, p. 15) writes that “a man talking to a friend

converts the sense impressions of this emotional experience into alpha-elements”, and thanks to that fact, he becomes capable of dream thoughts, and so, for that very reason, “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’, so, for that very reason, not be conscious of elements that cannot penetrate the barrier presented by his ‘dream’. They may remain in the state of vigilance (consciously conversing with a friend), and simultaneously seek refuge in the state of sleep from those elements which, having crossed the barrier for ‘a dream’, would make his own mind controlled by the products of imagination and by ideas which usually remain unconscious. A ‘dream’ makes it possible, for that very reason, to function in the state of vigilance, whilst maintaining the consciousness of the actual events, deprived of a disturbing influence exerted by mental phenomena. Simultaneously, such a human being protects those mental phenomena against the disturbance of the consciousness of reality (Bion, 1984f). According to Bion (1984f), the ability to ‘dream’, namely to differentiate between the conscious and the unconscious, and also to maintain this differentiation, preserves the personality from what is virtually a psychotic state. This conception shows that in the theoretical system developed by Bion ‘a dream’, accompanied by the alpha function making the existence of it possible, plays a crucial role in differentiating between consciousness and unconsciousness, taking into consideration as well the perspective of the classical theory of dreams, resistance and censorship (Bion, 1984f; Ferro, 2006; Grotstein, 2009; Schneider, 2010).

Bion makes attempts to capture the nature of the border between consciousness and unconsciousness in the categories of ‘contact-barrier’. This researcher takes advantage of the term coined by Freud, giving it, however, a new meaning. His own thesis that a human being has to dream a current emotional experience, whether it occurs in sleep, or in waking life (Bion, 1984f), Bion explains in the following manner: “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” (Bion, 1984f, p. 54). There forms a certain constantly formed quality initiating the difference between elements. On one side of the barrier, there are conscious elements (constructing consciousness), whereas on the other side, there are unconscious elements (constructing unconsciousness). The idea of the barrier is connected with the existence of points of contact and separation between both of the sides. It makes it possible as well to suggest the thesis that consciousness and unconsciousness are incessantly created in company with one another, and they function as if they were binocular, and, for that very reason, capable of

correlations and recognizing one another mutually (Bion, 1984f).

The contact barrier safeguards the perception of reality against becoming overwhelmed by emotions and phantasies originating from the unconscious. Simultaneously, it protects the intrapsychic phenomena against the realistic attitude connected with the encroachment of perceptions relevant to reality. It does not recognize the real character of the alpha elements at those moments at which they are insignificant for the contact of a human being with the external reality, or at which they may disturb the organized course of thinking. The barrier differentiates between the conscious and the unconscious (or, alternatively, makes it possible for the unconscious to exist), and, simultaneously, provides the opportunity for the selective movement of the elements between those areas. The nature of the contact barrier exerts an influence on the transformation of these elements. Bion supports the conviction of the central position of investigations into dreams in psychoanalysis, ascertaining that they provide the opportunity for investigations into the barrier for contact and the alpha elements being parts of it. It is also worth adding that the active contact barrier makes it possible to differentiate between the processes occurring in one individual and the processes occurring in another one. The contrasting solution originates from the hypertrophy of the projective identification, and also from the presence of the beta screen, both of which are conducive to blurring the borders between the subjects, and a direct influence exerted on the mind of another individual as the consequence of moving the elements from one area into another one.

In the case of psychotic patients, who experience disorders of the ability to think, the situation is different. Bion differentiates between the two states resulting from the existence of the contact barrier, consisting of the alpha elements, and also of the contact barrier, consisting of the beta elements. The latter one, referred to as the beta screen, demonstrates similarity to the state of confusion resembling sleep, the major feature of which is the absence of differentiation between the conscious and the unconscious. Through the beta screen, a psychotic patient presents material (the associations of a patient constitute the elements of the beta screen) which provokes the emotional involvement of an analyst. A patient is guided more by making efforts towards arousing this involvement than by the willingness to take advantage of an analytical interpretation, reflections and thinking. The major feature of the beta screen is the ability to arouse the reaction demanded by a psychotic individual, or such a response from the analyst, which is strongly charged with counter-transference (Bion, 1984f). Bion emphasizes the fact that the essence of this phenomenon is not the attempt to manipulate an analyst which may be faced in the case of

neurotic patients. A psychotic individual is incapable of understanding their own state of the mind, and the words are applied by them not for speaking, but rather for a similar action, the objective of which is to release the mentality from the burden of accretions of stimuli (Bion, 1984f).

In accordance with the accepted model of the co-existence of the psychotic and non-psychotic part of personality, Bion indicates the dynamic character of the neurotic relationship between the contact barrier and the psychotic beta screen. This fluctuation is presented by means of invoking the instance of a figure presenting two profiles, or, alternatively, a vase, which is the expression of a reversible perspective. In this manner, this researcher refers to the fluctuation of the mind between the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive one, and also to the co-existence of psychosis and neurosis.

The contact barrier is formed when sensual impressions are subjected to transformation into the alpha elements, which may be applied for the objective of creating the thoughts of a dream, and for the unconscious thinking while one is awake. The reverse process occurs when, in connection with the absence of apparatus for 'thinking' thoughts, an individual removes thoughts from the mind. As the result of this solution, consisting in the destruction, or, rather, in reversing the direction of the alpha functions, the barrier for contact undergoes dispersion, and the elements of it are transformed into the alpha elements, deprived of the qualities making them different from the beta elements, which, in the further course, are subjected to the projection constituting the beta screen (Bion, 1984f). The reversal of the alpha function does not result in an ordinary return to the beta elements, but, instead, it brings about establishing so-called bizarre objects, consisting of the beta elements, and also of the elements of the ego and of the superego.

It ought to be emphasized that Bion found that the condition indispensable for the development apparatus for thinking (or the mind in general), and also learning from experience, is the primary presence of a motherly container. The birth of thinking is considered in the context of the interaction of the two minds, that of a mother and that of an infant. This model finds application both in the conception of the development of the mind of a child in a relationship with another individual and in the conception of the development of the mind suffering from disorders of cognitive function. *Ipsa facto*, that model sheds light on the function of an analyst in the process of therapy (Riesenberg-Malcolm, 2001).

It is also the dimension of container-contained that ought to be treated as an 'empty' notion. This abstract idea is made more comprehensible for us by the conception of a mother capable of *reverie*, of 'digesting' the intolerable and inassimilable

beta elements until they reach a 'digestible' form of the alpha elements. Numerous approximations to this pre-conception are provided by the situation of the relationships between a patient and a therapist. What is of significance, this construct collects a number of factors indicated by Bion, and presents the co-existence of them in a dyadic relationship. Placing the alpha functions within the frameworks of the container-contained dimension makes it possible for Bion to present the view that the thinking mind is formed by means of introjection by a child of the activity of both of the participants in the interaction (an intersubjective relationship) (Brown, 2012).

A child needs the capability of the mother of *reverie*, unconscious readiness to receive and transform projections, constituting the expression of motherly love, thanks to which a child may once again introject the contents of the projections in a form which is possible to be tolerated. The capability of mutual adjustment between a mother and a child, is, for that very reason, the crucial factor of development. The *reverie* of a mother is developed simultaneously at the emotional level, and at the intellectual one. Thanks to empathy, she is able to identify the needs and the emotions of a child, to adjust herself to them, to become aware whether they need to be relieved, and to modulate the emotional experiences of a child. Responding in an adequate manner, a mother helps a child to discover the need: she reacts to the need, and in the chaos of numerous needs, she identifies the most urgent one of them, and responds to it. As a consequence, she helps the child to discover their needs. The gradual internalization of this process is the foundation of the capability to think independently.

The container-contained dimension also makes it possible to capture the development of the limited rudimentary consciousness in a dyadic relationship. Bion presumes the existence of the alpha function transforming sensual data into the alpha elements, which constitute the material for the creation of the dream thoughts, ensuring the possibility of waking up or falling asleep, of being conscious or unconscious, for mentality. He accepts the indispensable character of this presumption in his theoretical system so as to be capable of accepting the thesis that the self is able to be conscious of itself in the sense of knowing itself from experience of itself (Bion, 1984a). The failure to establish such a relationship in which normal projective identification is possible precludes the development of an alpha function and therefore of a differentiation of elements into conscious and unconscious. That causes the fact that the consciousness of a child has no connections with the unconscious, and all sensations are of the same character, and that means that they are conscious.

A mother who is incapable of *reverie*, of receiving the projections of a child, forces a child to develop a pathological projective identification, which deprives the projection of 'penumbras of meanings'; instead of 'de-toxicating' unwanted emotions, it makes a child feel that their sensation is deprived of meaning. As a consequence, in accordance with the instance provided by Bion, instead of introjecting a metabolized projection ('a fear of dying'), which has become possible to be tolerated, a child reintrojects 'nameless dread' (cf. Bion, 1984a). A human being deprived of the possibility of understanding is incapable of taking advantage of their environment (and that is also true for an analyst and psychoanalysis). Instead of an understanding object, the one willfully misunderstanding with which an infant identifies themselves is established (Bion, 1984a).

One again, one may see what a dual treatment in this model is that of projective identification: on one hand, it constitutes the apparatus for getting rid of mental contents, contrasting with the apparatus for thinking (excessive omnipotent projective identification); on the other hand, this is the elementary tool of the mutual adjustment and communication between an infant and a mother, which acting on the dimension container-contained brings about the birth of the thinking mind. What is emphasized is the developmental role in a sufficiently adjusted mother of looking after her child, and also a realistic character, and that means manifesting in the form of behaviors which may actually evoke in a mother the feelings which a child wishes to get rid of (Bion, 1984a).

In accordance with the opinion expressed by Bion (1984a), mentality has, at its disposal, the apparatus which consists of four elements: 1) thinking, associated with modification and evasion; 2) projective identification, associated with evasion by evacuation (different from normal projective identification); 3) omniscience, and also 4) communication. This apparatus serves the objective of coping with thoughts (in the broad understanding of this word encompassing conceptions, thoughts, dream thoughts, alpha elements and beta elements). Those thoughts are treated in such a manner as if they were objects that had to be dealt with because: first, they in some form contained or expressed a problem; and second, they were themselves felt to be undesirable excrescences of the psyche. For that very reason, they require attention and elimination.

Drawing on the opinion of Freud, Bion states that thoughts have to be subjected to further working through, so that they can be translated into action. He suggests the process resembling the alpha function, modifying and working through sensual data, making it possible to recognize the meaning of these data, the process which would combine recognition and unknown absence with action which is supposed to modify this absence. In the theory of thinking, trans-

lating into action is connected by Bion with publication, communication, correlation and common sense (cf. Bion, 1984a). The publication serves an objective larger than obtaining the sensual data from consciousness (which is the function of thoughts) (Bion, 1984a). This term encompasses operations indispensable for making private recognition (the personal experience of an individual) become public. The process of publication is accompanied by technical and emotional difficulties. Emotional problems are connected with a conflict between narcissism and 'social-ism', which is the result of the social nature of a human being, the needs of a group and it being not possible to satisfy emotional urges without expressing their social components, in combination with the fact of the narcissistic character of human impulses. Technical problems are relevant to expressing thoughts or conceptions in a language, or in the counterpart of it, by means of signs. Communication in the opinion expressed by Bion is initially based on a realistic projective identification. A good relationship with objects makes it possible to develop skills for the self to tolerate one's own mental qualities, and it opens the road for the development of the alpha functions and normal thoughts. It also contributes to the development of social competences. In accordance with the opinion expressed by Bion (1984a), the absence of this development makes even scientific communication impossible. The presence of it, however, may evoke the feelings of being persecuted in the recipients of communication. The need to weaken this feeling of being persecuted makes one inclined to abstractions in formulating scientific communications. Bion (1984a) emphasizes the fact that an important function of communication is to achieve correlation. He indicates that the conceptions, thoughts and the verbalization of them make it possible to combine one set of sensual data with other ones. If the combined data are in harmony with themselves, it evokes the sense of truth. In turn, a failure within the scope of this combination of sensual data, and, *ipso facto*, it being not possible to form a commonplace view, evokes the state of debility and starvation of truth (as if desire to know the truth constituted a certain analogy to the hunger for food). Bion adheres to the belief that emotions fulfill for mentality a function similar to that which is fulfilled by senses in relation to objects situated in time and space. It means that the counterpart of the commonplace view in private knowledge is a common emotional opinion – the sense of truth is given birth to if the image of a hated subject may be connected with the image of this same subject, when it is loved, and the combination in question confirms that an object experienced by different emotions is, *ipso facto*, an object. *Ipso facto*, a correlation is established (Bion, 1984a).

SUMMARY

The above-described theoretical system places emotional experiences, thought and cognitive processes, the sources of them, development and possible disturbances in the center. Bion makes an effort to describe proto-mental contents that are difficult to capture. Even though the foundation of the model developed by Bion is constituted by investigations into psychotic patients, the formulated conclusions are characterized by a universal character justified by the presumption of the presence of the psychotic part of personality also in the case of non-psychotic individuals. Bion concentrates attention on emotional experience with which the mind not is capable of coping, be it as the consequence of the nature of these experiences (for instance, excessive excitations, which means the excessive quantity of the beta elements), or the nature of an individual (which means the failures of the alpha functions, being incapable of coping with emotional experiences). In these considerations, for that very reason, both innate factors and acquired ones are taken into consideration.

Simultaneously, Bion depicts the fates of these 'unthinkable' contents in the analytic field and considers the originally formulated model of the essence of psychoanalytical cognition. Ascertaining that making efforts on the road to cognition (the K link), which means searching for the truth, and also understanding that the internal and external reality are a fundamental human need, this researcher also refers to the actions of the mind of a psychoanalyst. Bion spurs him on to reflect constantly on his own internal process to adopt a critical look at the practice of psychoanalysis, and at the belief in omniscience and access to the truth. This researcher warns about the trap of determining the final meanings and the illusion of 'possessing' the truth, making it impossible to make discoveries. Those comments give rise to the analytical attitude recommended by Bion, the major feature of which is the state of *reverie*, making it possible for the alpha function to act, receptive and accommodating the presence of an analyst, which stimulates, in the case of a patient, the processes of dreaming, and so, for that very reason, of processing sensual sensations into the alpha elements. As a consequence, what becomes the objective of the analysis is supporting the conscious mind within the scope of identification, understanding and modification of experiences, contributing to the development of reflections and accommodation, to broadening the ability to think so as to make it possible to achieve a permanent contact with the areas of the mind which have hitherto been inaccessible.

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