

## **Capacity for Maternal Reverie**

[Gale Dictionary of Psychoanalysis:](#)

Wilfred R. Bion developed the concept of the capacity for maternal reverie in his three books written during the 1960s: *Learning from Experience* (1962), *Elements of Psycho-Analysis* (1963), and *Transformations: Change from Learning to Growth* (1965).

Although he was an adult analyst and was primarily interested in group dynamics and the workings of psychosis, the concepts that he proposed (based on study of the analytic relationship in these two areas) in fact also proved to be very dynamic and very productive in connection with study of the foundations of the psychic apparatus—that is, the ontogenesis of the psyche.

In Bion's view, this ontogenesis of the psyche can be related to a digestive model of the workings of the "thought-thinking apparatus." At the beginning of its life, the baby does not have access to a thought-thinking apparatus that is mature enough to metabolize—that is, to use and integrate its very first mental or proto-mental materials. Bion thus described the beta (b) elements, which correspond to extremely archaic bodily feelings, to emotional states linked to the infant's very earliest sensory and relational experiences, which it cannot utilize as such. There is thus a need, for the baby—that is, for its mental growth and maturation—for a detour through the Other.

The infant projects these beta elements into the psyche of its mother (or other adult caregiver); this adult effectively lends the child their own "thought-thinking apparatus" to reshape, detoxify, and transform the beta elements into alpha (a) elements, which can then be assimilated by the infant and integrated into its own mental functioning. This transformation is due to the "alpha function" of the mother's psyche, or "capacity for maternal reverie," which thus fulfills what could be described as a "desaturating" function with regard to the beta elements produced and felt by the infant (or by the patient).

From vantage point of the history of ideas, the emergence of this concept is situated at the confluence of Bion's ideas on the functioning of groups, which also have a containing and transformative function (containers), and his analytic practice with adult psychotics: "If the patient cannot transform his emotional experience into alpha elements, he cannot dream," he wrote in *Elements of Psycho-Analysis*.

This model is indissociable from the grid that Bion proposed to categorize the different types of mental materials (horizontal rows) and the various ways these can be used in communication (vertical columns). The beta and alpha elements correspond to the first two horizontal rows (A and B) of the grid, the last row of which is the "algebraic calculus" (H).

The extrapolation of this model to early psychic development was effected more by later theorists of child analysis than by Bion himself. In France, René Diatkine published *L'Enfant dans l'adulte ou l'éternelle capacité de rêverie* (1994; The child in the adult; or, the eternal capacity for reverie), in an implicit homage to all that this concept has contributed to the work of child analysts. In Diatkine's view, the concept of the maternal reverie must be understood along with Jean Laplanche's work on psychic translation in the context of his theory of generalized seduction.

### Bibliography

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