

Clinical features of the container function

Duncan Cartwright

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Abstract

Bion's model of 'containing' has had considerable impact on psychoanalytic theory and technique. After briefly reviewing his key contributions and clarifying the essential aspects of container-contained relations, this paper explores the clinical features of the container function as they unfold in the analytic encounter. Central to my argument is the idea that containing takes place within a bi-personal field and relies on the fictionalisation of experience. I interpret Bion's idea about maintaining a 'balanced outlook' as referring to the therapist's ability to negotiate the necessary tensions between the roles of 'dream object' and 'proper object'. The therapist's subjective presence is also explored as a central clinical feature of containment. A case is used to illustrate the dynamic features of containment as therapist and patient engage in an intersubjective experiencing process that attempts to expand the patient's capacity for thinking, feeling and meaning-making.