

On Socio-Analysis

Alastair Bain

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In 1996 I asked members of AISA's first "Socio-Analytic Consultancy Program" to do individual drawings of what they understood "socio-analysis" to meanⁱ. To my surprise they all seemed to know what it meant, although the term had hardly been used within AISA at that time, and there were certainly no books or articles, which used the term in the sense we were starting to use it.ⁱⁱ When strangers ask me what I do, and I say I am a socio-analyst, they also seem to know what that means. So with this puzzle aside, with everyone seeming to have a good idea of its meaning, I am left with the very difficult task of describing it for you, a "you" who I am sure knows all about it!

Container and Contained as an Organising Idea

When I began to think about how to explore socio-analysis in this paper a number of disorganised thoughts came to mind: the origins of socio-analysis in the Northfield Experiments during the Second World War; Bion's explorations of group behaviour at the Tavistock Clinic in the 1940's; the "Glacier Experiment", an early action research project carried out by a Tavistock Institute Team; and so on up to the present day. Also a number of concepts came to mind which are significant in socio-analysis: the unconscious, splitting, projection, projective identification, transference, counter transference, primary task, social systems, socio-technical analysis, boundaries, role, inter-dependency, action research, action learning, the organisation in the mind, authority for task, an evolving consciousness for task, management of self in role, "not knowing", "primary process" within an organisation, Basic Assumptions Dependency, Fight/Flight, Pairing, Oneness, and Basic Assumption Me.

It is perhaps not surprising that I was flooded with concepts, ideas, theories, and the significant achievements in the history of socio-analysis, as socio-analysis is at the confluence of certain

disciplines, and we have only just begun the task of exploring what might be a constant conjunction. For me these disciplines are: psycho-analysis, group relations, social systems thinking, social dreaming, and organisational behaviour.

I needed an organising idea to manage the plethora of ideas which were conjured up for me when I thought of socio-analysis, what Bion, "borrowing a phrase from Poincare, has called a "selected fact". For Bion the "selected fact" emerges from the material of a psycho-analytic session, and it is used as a vertex, or perspective, for making sense of the material, and offering an interpretation. The "selected fact" I wish to use in this exploration of socio-analysis, is Bion's concept of "container and contained", which like the other concepts I have mentioned has a central place in the thinking and practice of socio-analysis. I think Bion first developed the concept of "container and contained" in the early 60's, and he wrote about it in *Learning from Experience*ⁱⁱⁱ, published in 1962, and *Elements of Psycho-analysis*^{iv}, published in 1963. Originally the concept was used to explore phenomena in psycho-analysis. Later Bion extended the use of the idea to also explore group, and institutional phenomena, which he writes about in *Attention and Interpretation*^v, published in 1970.

I would like to emphasize that the containers for socio-analysis that I will describe are personal to me, what I contain, when I think of socio-analysis and its meaning for me. I would be surprised, and concerned, if other people who are experienced socio-analysts, didn't have some different elements in their containers for socio-analysis, though I know that there are some things we share in common. There is no suggestion then of offering a definitory hypothesis. As I see it we are engaged in an exploration, which in one sense has just begun.

What is the concept "container and contained" about? It is both a very simple idea, and at the same time elusive. At a physical level it is easy to demonstrate its meaning. If you clasp your wrist with your hand, the hand is the "container", and the wrist the "contained. If you clasp too tightly i.e. the "container" is too strong, this will stop the blood flow in the wrist. If the clasp is too loose, the wrist can easily slip out of, or break the "container". At a mental level a Group Relations Conference with its primary task, different events, membership, time and territory is a container for the experiences that take place. But if you and I are taking part in this Conference as

members (or consultants) we are also containers for the stimulus of what may be contained. There is an inter-dependence between our individual experience of the member or consultant role, and our collective experience within the Conference. .

Bion (1970)^{vi} suggests that there are three possible relationships between container and contained: parasitic, where one (i.e. container or contained) feeds off the other to the eventual destruction of both; commensal, where container and contained co-exist harmoniously without affecting each other; and symbiotic, where the relationship stimulates growth in both container and contained. The essence of the concept is the potentiality for transformation of container and contained. Its beauty lies both in its dynamic relational meaning, which possibly leads to growth, and as linking and applicable to the individual, the couple, the family, the group, the organisation, community, society, the world and cosmos. The concept can also be used to describe the processes of growth in action research and socio-analytic consultancy, as I have done in a recent paper on "Social Defences against Organisational Learning"^{vii}. In this paper I suggest that the transformational process, or co-evolution, that occurs between organisational container and contained during socio-analytic consultancy can be used as a measure of organisational learning.

I will be using "container and contained" in four senses:

- as the ideas, hypotheses, concepts, thoughts and theories, which can be considered as constituting a container for the practice of socio-analysis, and thinking socio-analytic thoughts. Or alternatively, what is contained when one thinks of socio-analytic concepts, and theories.
- As the design, or methodology, for an exploration, e.g. for consultancy and action research, for studying small group behaviour, for designing a Group Relations Conference, or a Social Dreaming Matrix.
- The institution as a container for encouraging, and carrying out socio-analytic work, e.g. The Tavistock Institute, AISA.
- The individual as a container for the socio-analytic experience.

All four aspects of the container and contained of socio-analysis are interdependent: socio-analytic ideas and theory, design and methodology, the institution, and the individual as a container for the socio-analytic experience. All are needed for growth. In the exploration that follows I am not able to do justice to any of these four containers. I have time only for sketches.

Origins of Socio-analysis - the Northfield Experiments

I want now to sketch some of the elements of what I will call the "thoughts" container of socio-analysis, "thoughts" container as shorthand for ideas, hypotheses, concepts, theories etc. History is important in this, as it helps to remind us in a current culture of Basic Assumption Me^{viii} that ideas and concepts that we may take for granted in our practice were hard won through the efforts and struggles of others. As somebody has mentioned, we stand on the shoulders of others, some of whom were giants, and at least one was a genius. At the same time it is also worth remembering that some of the thoughts and concepts we take for granted today would not have been thinkable in the 1940' s, even by a genius such as Bion, as the container for thinking such thoughts was not yet available, and depended on work which was to come.

For me socio-analysis has its roots in the first Northfield Experiment carried out by Bion and Rickman, and reported in the Lancet in 1943^{ix}, and later by Bion in the Bulletin of the Meninger Clinic in 1946^x. Northfield was a military hospital, situated in the Midlands, with the task of treating soldiers who had developed psychiatric problems, with the aim of getting them back into the war. Bion was responsible for the "Military Training and Rehabilitation Wing". The tension the hospital, and the British Army, was having to cope with was a growing proportion of patients were being returned to civilian life, and not back into the Army.

Prior to being posted to Northfield Bion had been involved in the design and running of War Office Selection Boards - WOSBs for short - and had come up with an ingenious, but simple idea, of observing potential officers working on different tasks in a group. Leadership, followership, cooperation, competitiveness and so on could be directly observed. This idea has formed the backbone of selection processes used throughout the world. However, that is not what I want to pursue, but the notion of "person in a group" would have been something Bion took

with him to Northfield, and not only Bion, but also others like Harold Bridger, who was involved in the Second Northfield Experiment.

Tom Main (1977)^{xi} writes about the first Northfield Experiment: “Faced with a wardful of neurotic soldiers, who in Army terms were slovenly, undisciplined, idle and dirty in ways that were outside the medical model of illness, Bion had viewed their behaviour not as the result of massed personal illnesses but as a collusion by a group with the staff requirements of the hospital where the staff are to be well and self disciplined and patients are to be ill and disordered. He told his soldier patients at a daily ward parade that he was fed up with them, and henceforth refused to be responsible for caring about, treating or disciplining delinquent behaviour which was theirs and not his, created by them and not him. He would not punish them but would no longer visit them or their ward. He would be available for discussion in his office every morning but only for soldiers who presented themselves clean and properly dressed. In the next weeks they severely tested out his resolve. The ward became filthy, beds were not made for days, absence without leave and drunkenness increased and the whole hospital staff was alarmed and angry. It was chaotic, but Bion plainly did not get his D. S. O. in the first world war for nothing, and he stood firm. As the days passed a slowly increasing number of properly dressed soldiers began to attend his office and some N.C.O. patients soon begged him to intervene in the chaos. He refused to take over their indignation and military ideals but discussed these with them as their property and so freed them to own the conflict between fecklessness and efficiency inside them. They slowly grew responsible for themselves and their ward comrades and now formed their own discussion groups and rotas and disciplinary systems. Cleanliness and order, no longer imposed from above, grew inside the ward group. The military super-ego, no longer projected onto higher authority, had returned to the lower-order system and Bion's ward became the most efficient in the hospital.” (p. 7).

One can see in this description, as well as in Bion and Rickmans' 1943 article in *The Lancet*, and in Bion's article in the *Bulletin of the Meninger Clinic*, that the focus of Bion's attention was on the properties of the **group** as a whole. The group had its own dynamics and was not simply an aggregate of individuals. He was viewing the behaviour of his ward, from the point of view of the intra-group tensions that emerged, and as Main indicates, “not as the result of massed personal

illnesses but as a collusion by a group with the staff requirements of a hospital where the staff are to be well and self-disciplined and patients are to be ill and disordered". While Bion in *Experiences in Groups*^{xii} later makes explicit the significance of the unconscious in group behaviour, the stance he was working from during the Northfield Experiment was to make **hypotheses about unconscious functioning at the level of the group.**

But besides these innovations which constitute some of the foundations of socio-analysis there is also Bion's remarkable **courage** in exploring social phenomena (i.e. ward behaviour) from a stance of "**not knowing**" in a military setting in which "not knowing" was anathema, and "to know" and act according to the rules and regulations was the norm. Courage to hold onto and to pursue psychological truth, frequently in the face of mounting hostility is an essential attribute of a socio-analyst. In the N Northfield Experiment one also observes another aspect of socio-analysis, that it is frequently subversive of the establishment order.

From Bion's experiment at Northfield the socio-analytic roots in psychoanalysis are evident: the stance of enquiry akin to psycho-analysis; attention to projection, splitting, and how one is *made to feel*; and the courage to pursue psychological truth. At the same time the focus on group behaviour (patients and staff) marks the link to emergent group relations study and theory.

Bion was kicked out of Northfield after just six weeks, although the experiment at a ward level was very successful. According to Main this was because he paid insufficient attention to the "higher order system", the military authority in charge of the hospital, and the consequent and inevitable clash between a "lower order system" whose culture had changed as a result of the experiment, and a "higher order system" that had not been involved in the experiment. While Bridger^{xiii} (1985, p.96-97) indicates that there were also other reasons, both are agreed that Bion paid insufficient attention to the "higher order system", and failed to obtain the necessary sanction and support for the experiment. Their learning, which is also a significant element in our practice of socio-analysis today, contributed to the success of the Second Northfield Experiment. This second experiment, through the insights and leadership provided by Bridger and Main, has given us the concepts of working with the whole community, the idea and management of the

therapeutic community, and transitional space for action learning projects, therapy, and development.

Both Bridger and Main claim authorship of the idea of working with the "whole community" (Main, p.11), or "institution as a whole" (Bridger, p.98), and both are probably right. As far as I can piece together, they are describing two processes that were going on concurrently for part of the time, and both processes were innovations in terms of working with the "whole community" or the "institution as a whole".

The first innovation was introduced by Bridger in his role as "Social Therapist" to the "hospital-as-a-whole-institution" (Bridger p, 102). He had the brilliant idea of clearing the ward in the very centre of the hospital of all beds, furniture, and equipment, and create what he calls "a gap" (Bridger, p.102). This space was to be "The Club". When patients asked when it was going to start, and what it was for, Bridger's reply was "When any of you want it to happen", and "What would you like it to be?" It took some time before the soldiers realized he meant what he said. The culmination was a protest meeting to which Bridger was summoned. Bridger writes: "The protest was to ask why we were wasting public money and space in wartime - money and space that could be put to so many good uses! I agreed and suggested that we work out what could best be done with it and how, since it was ours to do with as we wished". (Bridger, p.104). All kinds of activities then developed: the publishing of a newspaper, working in the Austin Motor Works, repairing toys at a department store to develop cash for charity or hospital activities, a drama group, groups for carpentry, bricklaying, metalwork etc.

Main describes this as "therapy with action - groups" (P.10). Bridger indicates the value of this innovation: "Without giving a blow by blow account it is difficult to convey the tremendous energy and directive ability which can be generated when it is possible to find the transitional setting / experience through which the insights of therapy, derived from their treatment, could be allied with social purpose and satisfaction in identifying with institutional forms, infra-structure and activities". (Bridger, p.104).

All this began from the insight of creating a space, "The Club", which was not filled by social therapists, nurses, psychiatrists, or whoever knowing what it was for, but leaving it up to the 'patients to take their own authority to determine what it should be for, and then working with them on that task. The idea of "transitional space" for a group (although I doubt if it had that name at the time) parallels Winnicott's later psycho-analytic discoveries.

While Bridger's innovation was to work therapeutically through activity groups across the hospital, Main's innovation was to work directly on the tensions which affected the hospital as a whole community, i.e. from the perspective of people's usual roles within the hospital. Perhaps the major tension within the hospital was the split between the "therapeutic" staff headed by Main, and the military staff responsible for administrative and domestic tasks, headed by the Commanding Officer. While Bridger, according to Main, had always had "certain non-therapy staff sit on task-group discussions" (Main, p.12), the focus of these groups was not directly on the tensions between the military and therapeutic systems. For the most part the military were regarded as a nuisance or reactionary by the therapeutic staff. This split, and the associated tensions, between the sub-systems were projected directly into the relationships between Main and his Commanding Officer, resulting in almost daily rows. Main began to think about Bion's fate, which he wanted to strenuously resist.

Main writes: "One evening I suddenly realized the whole community, all staff as well as all patients, needed to be viewed as a troubled larger system which needed treatment".(Main, p.11). And out of this insight the military staff as well as the "therapeutic" staff and patients, and including at times the Commanding Officer, began to participate and work commonly on exploring the tensions within the system. The "container" for the work, and therefore what could be "contained", had changed to include the whole system, and this was the insight that Main added to Bion's first experiment.

In a sense Bridger's innovation can be thought of as looking "outward" in a new way, and Main's innovation was to look "inward" in a new way. Both were necessary for the success of the Second Northfield Experiment and both contribute elements to the current container of socio-analysis. For those familiar with Group Relations Conferences Harold Bridger initiated, and the

contrast with "Leicester" style Conferences, it is interesting to note that there is the same emphasis in Bridger's Conferences of looking "outward", compared with the "Leicester" emphasis of looking "inward". Only now the two approaches have taken separate paths, whereas at Northfield they were intertwined.

The Northfield Experiments contributed then the following elements to the container of socio-analysis:

- A "consultant" role of observing group, and institutional phenomena, akin to, but not the same as a psycho-analyst.
- Working with group and institutional tensions. (In my experience of socio-analytic consultancy there is invariably social pain, whether recognized or not, within the client system).
- Attention to, and making hypotheses, and interpretations, about unconscious functioning at the level of the group.
- Working from a stance of "not knowing", and paying attention to how one is made to feel.
- The use of psycho-analytic ideas, such as projection, and splitting, in a group and institutional setting.
- The courage to pursue psychological truth.
- Exploring the dynamics underlying a presenting problem e.g.: Main's relationship with his Commanding Officer.
- The need to gain the sanction, and continued support, from the "higher order" system in order to carry out an experiment with a sub-system"
- The significance of creating "transitional space" for therapy, action projects, and development, so that people, (in this case patients), are enabled to take up their own authority for task.
- The concept of working with the "institution as a whole", or the "whole community".

The Institutional Container

While I have concentrated on the innovations of Bion, Bridger, and Main in establishing the foundations of socio-analysis, their work was done in a community of very gifted colleagues, both at Northfield, and more widely. I once asked Bion during a seminar at the Tavistock Clinic whether he needed a group, to think the thoughts he had. I can't remember his reply, which is probably why I have been asking much the same question for the last twenty years! At any rate whatever his answer might have been the group or institutional container for experience and thinking is vital for practice, thinking new thoughts, and growth. Hence the significance of the formation of the Tavistock Institute in 1947. This is not the place to explore the institutional history of the Tavistock Institute, with its feuds, splits, great achievements, changes in direction, and frequent storms.

However what I do want to highlight is the value of bringing people together under one roof who share a common task. What is the value? Perhaps if there are a number of thinkers working on a task there is a greater likelihood of a new thought lodging in one or other of them. Certainly the Tavistock history in the 40's and 50's would indicate that this was so: Bion's discoveries of the basic assumptions, and work group; the Glacier project, an action research experiment led by Jaques^{xiv} the discovery of socio-technical analysis by Trist and Bamforth^{xv}, and later developments by Rice, Miller^{xvi}, Emery^{xvii} and others; the design and running of the first "Leicester" Conference in 1957^{xviii}, and Isabel Menzies work^{xix}, following Elliot Jaques^{xx}, on social defences within organisations.

At the time of the formation of the Tavistock Institute it was a requirement that all staff have a personal psycho-analysis, and as far as I can tell, there were efforts to work together on staff tensions and, dynamics. I would suggest that this, together with a shared task, created the institutional conditions for this immense creativity, and without this kind of institution these developments may not have occurred, at least at the T Tavistock. When I joined the staff in 1968 the requirement for a personal analysis had gone, and so had the willingness to work on staff tensions and dynamics, even within particular Units. The Unit I joined was the Centre for Applied Social Research, and the senior staff included Ken Rice, Isabel Menzies, Eric Miller,

John Hill, and Bob Wishlade. There were tensions at the time, and I remember as a very junior person having the temerity to suggest that perhaps we needed a consultant to work with us on these issues. I was told in no uncertain terms that the only consultant they would agree on would be Bion, and he was in California. Not surprisingly, CASR did not persist for many more years.

The reason I am exploring this in some depth is to emphasize the importance of the socio-analytic institution's health in establishing a setting for good work, and for thinking new thoughts. Within AISA we still have that possibility, and it has to be carefully nurtured. For all our many faults and weaknesses, we do try to work on our own dynamics, within the Executive, through development meetings, and the Member Conferences.

The growth of container and contained in socio-analysis

Each discovery in socio-analysis has enlarged the container of socio-analysis and what can be contained i.e. what can be experienced, felt, and thought. Thus a socio-analyst working at the Tavistock in the late 1940's after Bion published his seminal articles in *Human Relations*, would not have been able to work with a group without Bion's hypotheses about Basic Assumptions being somewhere in his /her mind. Similarly, the discovery of socio-technical systems by Trist and Bamforth altered the way socio-analysts view the world.

This thinking, together with ideas of Kurt Lewin's, and the experience of NTL in the U.S. in exploring behaviour in groups, went into the design of the first "Leicester" Group Relations Conference, sponsored by the Tavistock Institute and Leicester University in 1957. (Trist and Sofer, 1979, 9 - 12). This Conference, and later elaborations such as the Large Group^{xxi}, and the Institutional Event, changed the container for exploring and experiencing group, inter-group, and institutional phenomena, and oneself as part of these phenomena. While "Leicester" Conferences, and our own AISA Conferences, have emphasized the possible work benefits for participants, for many people, including myself, the value of the experience as a member has been much greater and extends to one's life as a whole. The experience can, and frequently does, lead to personal transformation.

Other, more recent developments in the containers of socio-analysis, include the development of the concept of Primary Task by Ken Rice and Eric Miller^{xxii}, Organisational Role Analysis developed by Bruce Reed and others at the Grubb Institute and Tavistock^{xxiii}, the Praxis Event invented by Gordon Lawrence^{xxiv}, Social Dreaming which was rediscovered by Gordon Lawrence in the 1980's^{xxv}, the design and experience of the International Conference on "Exploring Global Social Dynamics" which AISA sponsored in 1993^{xxvi}, the concept of "Primary Process" developed by David Armstrong in the 1990's^{xxvii}, and the concept of Basic Assumption Me developed by Gordon Lawrence and me, following the first AISA Perth Conference in 1991^{xxviii}.

Current Developments in the Containers for Socio-analysis

Gouranga Chattopadhyay has observed that all boundaries are man made^{xxix}. If we consider the growth of the containers of socio-analysis, and what can therefore be contained, in each case the kind of boundary that was drawn was changed as a result of intuition based on experience and knowledge of what had gone before. Perhaps the most striking of these boundary changes has been the invention of Social Dreaming, and the Matrix within which dreams are born and explored. A different kind of connectedness has opened up, which wasn't possible in the previous containers. What seems to be occurring, both in Group Relations Conferences and in Social Dreaming, is an awakening to individual and collective realities, where the boundary we draw between ourselves as individuals and the group or Matrix is changing and becoming thinner. The concept of the individual, in the way it is currently understood in the western world, as differentiated and separated from other individuals, may be obsolete. There are enough indications, from Social Dreaming, that dreams don't have this boundary in mind, nor do group and organisational dynamics. I think this has profound implications for our understanding of identity, (which was the theme of AISA's Inaugural Scientific Conference in 1998).