

Valuable concepts – revisited

Psychoanalysis and psychotherapy undergo a constant evolution. Former theories and concepts are re-formed or adapted to new findings. Contemporary scientific publishing usually targets at new ideas and formulations. Thus a “new generation” of psychotherapists quite often miss an encounter with ideas conceptualized in former years. Concepts quite often do not constitute a whole theory, but they can be intriguing for deeper discussion.

We want to present valuable concepts of “former days” which we have assessed worth revisiting. Authors are invited to submit short papers outlining concepts and ideas they sensed influential on their own development as a therapist, or feel important to others as an impulse to think further.

Wertvolle Konzepte – wiederentdeckt

Psychoanalyse und Psychotherapie unterliegen einer ständigen Weiterentwicklung. Frühere Theorien und Konzepte werden neu formuliert oder neuen Erkenntnissen angepasst. Zeitgenössisches wissenschaftliches Publizieren zielt in der Regel auf neue Ideen und Formulierungen ab. So verpasst eine „neue Generation“ von Psychotherapeuten oft die Begegnung mit Ideen, die in früheren Jahren konzipiert wurden. Konzepte stellen oft keine ganze Theorie dar, aber sie können für eine tiefere Diskussion interessant sein.

Wir wollen wertvolle Konzepte „früherer Tage“ vorstellen, die wir nach wie vor für aktuell und lesenswert halten. Autoren sind eingeladen, kurze Beiträge einzureichen, in denen Konzepte und Ideen skizziert werden, die ihre eigene Entwicklung und ihr Denken als Therapeuten beeinflusst haben bzw. andere zum Weiterdenken anregen könnte.

Development through a holding therapeutic environment (Volker Trempler)¹

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Volker Trempler uses case vignettes to document and describes the developmental stages of disturbed symbol formation and its further development through the establishment of an appropriate setting or framework, particularly in youth welfare institutions. The settings as a means of containment enables to regulate emotions, a reversal of evacuations, and the formation of internal representations, as well as the development of symbol formation, thinking, and an inner psychological space. Trempler’s considerations are related to experiences with children and adolescents in foster care and to further considerations such as responding to others and epistemic trust, which is recognised as fundamental in mentalisation-based therapy.

Keywords: framework, setting, psychological space, adhesive identification, developmental psychology, youth welfare, epistemic trust

A first approach

A bit more than a quarter of a century ago, Volker Trempler’s work “On the Interplay between Framework and Content in the Treatment of Antisocial Youth. A psychoanalytic investigation of disturbed symbol formation processes“ (Trempler 1998) was published in the German journal *Praxis der Kinderpsychologie und Kinderpsychiatrie*. Unfortunately, it did not receive the attention it deserved during the years to follow.² Nevertheless, in 2024 Sammer-Schreckenthaler (2024) names Trempler’s contribution as one in only two papers that deal with the significance of settings and framework in child and adolescent psychotherapy in her very detailed literature review on child psychoanalysis.

Trempler’s title might have focused too much on a clientele that is difficult to reach in psychotherapy – antisocial children and adolescents – so that psychotherapists did not pick up his ideas. On the other hand, youth welfare workers rarely read psychoanalytical literature being non-therapists and using a pedagogical approach. Writing in German might have

¹ Trempler uses the German expression Rahmen – which could be translated as setting, milieu, framework, and even compass, with a connotation of boundaries – we use the English expression/translation we found on Pubpsych.

² On Google Scholar, there are five citations of Trempler’s paper, one of which is by Volker Trempler himself – retrieved 19 June 2025.

contributed to the weak reception.³ However, Trempler’s concept of the significance of a holding environment and framework seems so fundamental that it should definitely be taken up as a valuable concept.

Trempler presents findings of a group formed by the L beck Child Psychosomatics Clinic and the L beck John Rittmeister Training Institute of the DGPT. The main result conveys that the development of symbolization and of an inner space can be stimulated, when a development-promoting framework for dissociated or antisocial children and adolescents in residential facilities is procured.⁴ In a wider context, Trempler’s considerations are also applicable to inpatient treatment, to milieu therapy, to residential groups for adults and, furthermore, to ‘normal psychological’ group situations.

Framework and psychological development

Trempler refers to the early mother-child relationship as containing, ‘in the sense of withholding, enduring and transforming’ (p. 390), the emotional states that are unbearable for the infant. Trempler emphasises the maternal alpha function (according to Bion, see R uth 2005), providing a stimulus protection as well as a stimulus filter, enabling sensory impressions to be ‘sorted, organised and classified so that dream thoughts, pre-symbols, dreams and higher-order concepts (symbols) can emerge’ (p. 390). In this respect, successful maternal containment is an initial ‘framework’ that mediates psychological development.

Based on these considerations, the working group conceptualized three stages of psychological development.

At the first stage, ‘without finality and history’, actions are still performed at the level of (Bionian) beta elements. Emotional states are evacuated into the interactional space. Thinking stays concrete, and the symbol (as an object) and what is symbolised are equated.

At the second stage, where ‘signs’ are already possible, there are sub-objects and adhesive identifications (Meltzer 1975a, Meltzer 1975b, R uth & Ehrenreich 2024) – and mimicry of emotions and states (Streck-Fischer 1995) determines behaviour. Trempler assumes that dissociated groups func-

³ In this day and age of automated translation of complete PDF articles, such an obstacle no longer exists.

⁴ This paper cannot address conflicting educational conditions, such as those currently being impressively demonstrated in the context of dealing with the trauma of ‘displaced children’ in the context of children’s rehabilitation treatments in the 1950s and 1960s.

tion on such a level. However, this functional level can also be observed in residential facilities. Clients in care not only submit to required rules, but also want to fulfil them through identification and adaptation. Such psychological functioning is less determined by “evacuative or discharge processes“, but by “primitive identification processes that can be described as imitative or adhesive [...]“ (p. 396). According to Trempler, such children and adolescents have developed little or no inner psychological space. They regulate their behaviour „according to predefined sign systems that lead to more or less automatic affect and behaviour regulation“ (p. 396).

Only at the third stage, a “verbal self“ begin to show up, and we observe the emergence of more complex concepts, secondary representations, symbols and, finally, a psychological three-dimensionality. That means that at that stage an inner space of individual affective experience and – in today’s terminology – the mentalisation of one’s own and others’ selves come into existence.

The importance of the framework for development

Trempler argues that temporal and spatial relations remain uncertain in children and adolescents with early disturbances, but also in psychotherapy patients with early disturbances. In contrast, a “stable and secure framework [...] creates temporal and spatial coordinates. The framework represents a place or an area, where or within which something can happen at a certain point in time. The framework enables the binding of inner chaotic experiences, which, in favourable cases, leads to the formation of symbols through processes of condensation and displacement“ (p. 397).

Trempler argues that a framework must also be able to withstand “down-right explosive pressure“ in order to avoid “falling out of the framework“ in order to be therapeutically effective (p. 397).

Trempler states that basic functions of the pedagogical therapeutic framework are therefore: “Holding, retaining, containing, binding, condensing, creating meaning, allowing thoughts and thinking to arise [...]. It [the framework] supports the development of the ability to deal with one’s own immediate impulses, fears and all the minor or major catastrophes that may arise in a therapeutic environment in order to advance development“ (p. 397/398).

Trempler does not lose sight of the institution’s organisational framework. He emphasizes that the residential facility “in terms of creating a

secure framework, it plays a major role whether employees feel supported by management and administration, left alone, restricted or given preferential treatment“ (p. 400).

The inner space

Only those who develop an inner space can subsequently make meaningful use of “free spaces“. In youth welfare “free spaces” comprise extended social spaces in particular. Trempler assumes that inner spaces are „the prerequisite for thinking in the sense of ‘preliminary action’ (Freud) and for thinking as a communication of inner objects“. Only the concept of one’s own inner world and the inner world of other people enable learning through experience (Bion 1962) in the form of a deeper, emotional exchange. Trempler postulates that this could “simultaneously create a buffer against soulless conformity and soulless functioning“ (p. 402).

Further developments

Remarkably, young people who have been “successfully“ placed in care repeatedly show lasting identification with the structures and rules imposed during their time in care, predominantly when describing positive relationships with peers and carers. However, even this reference is often limited to very concrete descriptions of shared peer experiences or specific behaviours of their caregivers. The question arises: has sufficient inner space been developed? Or is this an identification with an aggressor – albeit one who is experienced as positive? It could be interesting to note that after placement, in the TAS-26-questionnaire (Kupfer et al. 2001) repeatedly there is a subjective ability to identify and verbalise feelings – without showing an above-average interest in inner connections. However, this finding would require a separate research approach.

From a socio-educational perspective, when young people with early developmental disorders are placed in residential care, there is often a reluctance to initiate genuine psychotherapy at the beginning of the stay. Commonly the caregivers argue: “Let the youngster settle first into the environment!“ The initial focus is on external identification with the framework, which should not be disturbed – e.g. by the reflective space of psychotherapy and the possible “gossiping“ about rules and carers that might occur there. Streeck-Fischer (1991) described the function of the framework as boundary setting, containment and triangulation, and

attributed a supportive function to the framework. A genuine therapeutic space should not be contaminated too early with aspects of the real space – in this respect, only the real space and the framework create an interior space in which something like therapy (even if not yet psychotherapy) can take place. These considerations could support distancing oneself from “too early“ psychotherapy in the case of external accommodation. Similar considerations apply to offering genuine psychotherapy only after a certain interval following a framework-providing hospital stay, because only then has the viability of the non-clinical framework been proven (Rüth & Holch 2020).

When discussing the framework as an agent that promotes development, experiential education projects for structurally disturbed young people should also be included in our considerations: experiential education works through action and framework, and only secondly on a reflective stance (Eckstein & Rüth 2015). According to OPD, structural disorders, such as diminished self- and object perception, weak impulse control, low affect tolerance and self-esteem regulation, lacking anticipation, absent affect experience, affect communication, and lacking search for help (among others) are addressed at the action of concrete action.

- If I get up late, I have to cycle the mountain pass in the midday heat – so I should overcome inertia, relate my actions to reality, regulate my emotions, anticipate ...
- If I am responsible for catering on the sailing project, I have to do my work in the galley, because otherwise I will receive highly negative feedback from the crew ...

Only by a second step, and by symbolisation enforced by the trainer, a transfer of the real situation towards one’s own and others’ emotions, such as motivations, will take place.

Providing a holding framework for emotional development and maintaining it, corresponds to “responding“ to emotional needs on the level of action – as Symington proposed it either for educational, personal as well as therapeutic situations (Symington 1990, Rüth 2022). The “quality of the educational relationship“⁵ could be characterised by the fact that, despite

⁵ Bion speaks of “the quality of contact“ in connection with the successful fulfilment of a leadership role, see Lipgar 1998.

stress and conflict, the personal relationship can be maintained on both sides – in contrast to the experiences with primary caregivers.

With a successfully holding pedagogical framework, epistemic trust in attachment figures (Fonagy & Allison 2014) can develop, possibly for the first time in a youngster’s life – which in turn is a prerequisite for successful mentalisation steps.

Trempler’s reference to Freud’s group psychology and ego analysis (Freud 1921, p. 115) might irritate while considering developments in modern societies during the last quarter of a century. Trempler quotes Freud’s description of an “orientation of thoughts and feelings in the same directions, the predominance of affectivity and the unconscious mind, [...] all of which corresponds to a state of regression to primitive mental activity.“ Looking at our present, there seems to be a regressive movement taking place throughout society, away from differentiated inner spaces towards large group events in which conformity and adhesive identification prevail.

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The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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