

W. R. Bion's Concepts of Negative Capacity and of the Contact Barrier

Ulrich R  th (M  nchen), Astrid Holch (M  nchen)

Like other concepts developed by Bion, his ideas regarding both negative capability and the contact barrier appear cryptic and have received little attention outside the relatively narrow circle of Kleinian analysts. Negative capacity is closely related to the concept of containment, which also originates from Bion. Negative capacity refers to the ability to remain open to the unconscious and the unknown, and to tolerate and – where appropriate – incorporate what is not yet consciously graspable. Negative capacity was particularly taken up in Kleinian-oriented psychoanalytic organizational consulting, as the concept is useful to describe fundamental psychological states in leaders, especially when taking leadership decisions. According to Bion, however, negative capacity is essential for all therapeutic work. The contact barrier mediates between the unconscious and the conscious – and in this respect functions less as a barrier and more as a membrane: part of the contact barrier is the so-called alpha-function, through which conceivable thoughts are generated from mere perceptions and sensations (beta-elements). The contact barrier serves to protect the ego on the one hand, while on the other hand making available to the ego contents beyond the provisional threshold of consciousness. Negative capacity is enhanced by a flexible contact barrier. Negative capacity and a flexible contact barrier are both helpful and necessary – in the sense of intuitive-artistic moments – for therapeutic work, as well as for responding to patients and social situations – as opposed to merely reacting.

Keywords: Bion, negative capacity, contact barrier, alpha function, training therapy, supervision, beta-screen

Negative Capacity

Bion borrowed the term “negative capability” from a letter by the poet John Keats to his brother. In his letter, Keats described a particular inner state of the poet, who, through his artistic receptivity, opens himself to the doubts, mysteries, and uncertainties surrounding him without seeking explanations or facts.¹

Bion himself rarely revisited his concept, and its reception remained rather limited. For instance, it is not mentioned in the *New Dictionary*

¹ “... is capable of living with uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, without any impatient striving for fact and reason” (Keats, J. [1970]: *The Letters of John Keats: A Selection*. Ed. Gittings, R., Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 43).

of *Kleinian Thoughts* (Bott Spilius et al. 2011) – which may be related to the “negativity” of the concept. Negative Capacity is mentioned in the *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* and defined there in short as „the capacity to tolerate frustration because of the faith that meaning can ultimately be found“ (Grotstein 2005). Anyway, Bion's concept is rarely encountered in psychotherapeutic research (exception: Lampard 2021).

Interestingly, the concept of negative capability has found its way into psychoanalytic organizational consulting (Crossmann & Doshi 2015, French 2001, French & Simpson 2001, French et al. 2009) as management decisions are quite often based on a bet on the future without reliable data.

Summary of the concept of negative capacity

Negative capacity can be understood as the ability to open oneself to the unconscious and the unknown and, where appropriate, to incorporate such content into one's own thinking and actions even before it has been cognitively validated through conscious awareness.

There is a clear affinity here with Bion's container-contained concept in the sense of an active receptivity and willingness to embrace “*uncertainties, mysteries, doubts.*”

Contact barrier

Like other concepts of W. R. Bion, the term “contact barrier” also seems rather cryptic at first. However, it should be borne in mind that Bion repeatedly uses terms – and thus abstractions – which he himself says must be filled through realization. In this respect, a cryptic term leaves the realization initially “unfilled” and leaves the mental work – and thus the “filling” of the concept with content – to the respective recipient.

In short, the contact barrier mediates between the unconscious/unknown and consciousness. It can be viewed both as a function and as a “place”: impressions originating from both the unconscious and consciousness are transformed into proto-thoughts. Affects, impressions, “bizarre perceptions” – which represent according to Bion beta-elements – are transformed by the contact barrier into conceivable thoughts, that is, alpha-elements.

While a contact barrier consisting of alpha-elements conveys emotional meaning and resonances in communication with the external object, it can also be transformed into an impermeable beta screen consisting of

untransformed beta-elements. This leads to the blocking of internal communication between consciousness and the unconscious (Segal 2005).

The contact barrier can thus be viewed as an ego function that assimilates content from the unconscious while simultaneously protecting the consciousness from being overwhelmed. It is not a “defense mechanism” against conflicts or emotions, and rather represents an active capacity. The concept draws parallels with Bion’s reflections on “binocular thinking”, in which perception and thought occur simultaneously within both the conscious and the unconscious.

Integration of Negative Capacity and the Contact Barrier

In short, negative capacity and the contact barrier can be summarized and related as follows:

- Negative capacity refers to opening oneself to the unconscious.
- The contact barrier conveys the energetically charged, unknown contents to consciousness.

Digression on Everyday Experiences

A sentence spoken during a lecture is preformulated as an “unconscious” thought and then (usually) meaningfully articulated and spoken out through a complex process.

Exams should be “let to be written”: Actively utilizing one’s own negative capacity opens access to intuitive aspects and to information that is not immediately “wanted” or consciously retrievable: In the oral exam, “it speaks out of me”.

Psychodynamic therapy

In therapy, “emerging” affects are initially captured in sentences that may be quite inadequate, only to be brought into a “fitting” formulation through a process of exploration – resulting in a subsequent experience of “evidence” or “satiation.”

When affects “arise”, there is an openness to the unconscious – thus, negative capacity is “at work”.

When proto-thoughts and emotions are reformulated into sentences, the contact barrier is “at work”, and “beta” is transformed into “alpha”.

When the preliminary formulation is evaluated and improved in a search process, this occurs through the interaction of negative capacity and the contact barrier.

When something “feels right” affectively, and is consequently perceived as “accurate”, a sense of “satiation” of the thoughts sets in.

Working on (and with) the patient’s negative capacity leads to an increased openness to the unconscious.

Working on the contact barrier – regardless of the question of defense mechanisms – leads to a greater ability to find an expression, or even better, formulations for what has previously been unthought.

Bion: “Entering the therapeutic session without memory or desire”

Bion’s demand implies that the therapist’s negative capacity should be continually expanded – that is, to increase one’s ability to open up to the unconscious, to actively perceive the unconscious, and to open oneself to “emerging” thoughts.

At the same time, Bion argues that the therapist’s contact barrier should become increasingly flexible, thereby enhancing their own ability to verbalize complex affective perceptions and dynamic interrelationships.

In summary, Bion envisions an ever-increasing ability to “respond” (Symington 1990, R  th 2022) to the state and history of the respective patient rather than merely to “react”.

Training Analysis/Training Therapy

In training therapy, the focus is on working on openness toward the unconscious, and thus on increasing the future therapist’s negative capacity.

By fostering the distinction between one’s own affects/reactions and the perception of the patient’s aspects, work is done to strengthen the contact barrier and to use projective identification more precisely (R  th 2024).

Psychotherapy

An increase in negative capacity is achieved “classically” through free association and work with dreams (the king’s road to the unconscious), or, for example, through nonverbal methods (play therapy, painting). By making the contact barrier more flexible, neurotically defended conflicts become more integrable.

Supervision

In supervision, negative capacity and contact barrier enable more in-depth work on the case material. In the analysis of second-order countertransference – that is, projective identifications – negative capacity as well as “contact barriers” can be made tangible.

What if negative capacity is not active?

Consequences of a lack of negative capacity would include

- an increase in anxiety – such as exam nerves;
- an increase in floating anxiety within organizations; this is then defended against by the way of seemingly strong, cognitively grounded, but potentially incorrect decisions, whereby the working group mode is abandoned and the original working group “slips” into a basic assumption mode according to Bion (Bion 1971, R  th & Kapsberger 2026).

When negative capacity is present?

Consequences of existing negative capability would be:

- Negative capability and a flexible contact barrier enable a mental search process, and with it, analytical reflection.
- Those in leadership roles often have to make the right decision – whether intuitively or analytically – based on a rather limited amount of information (following a prior limited search process).
- However, negative capability – within leadership or among people in leadership roles – requires both a willingness to think intuitively and the ability to “contain” uncertainty. In addition, there must be an openness to exploratory processes that are resumed whenever new information becomes available, along with a willingness to revise assessments and decisions.

Further “Applications” of Negative Capacity

In the Balint group, negative ability helps participants experience and learn what function unspoken emotions or relational aspects can serve (R  th & Holch 2020). When reviewing professional assessments, negative capacity enables an intuitive grasp of what is missing and what still needs to be asked – since one actively seeks out doubts and uncertainties.

Summary

Negative capability, according to Bion, can be positively formulated as receptivity to uncertainties and doubts, and thus as openness to the unknown.

Contact barrier, according to Bion, refers (here) to the ability to transform vague, emotional, and intuitive perceptions into tangible and verifiable thoughts (beta becomes alpha), so that these thoughts can in turn be subjected to examination through Negative Capacity.

References

- Bion, W.R. (1971): *Erfahrungen in Gruppen*. Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta; Frankfurt/ Main, Fischer.
[Engl.: *Experiences in groups*. London: Tavistock; 1961]
- Bott Spilius, E.; Milton, J.; Garvey, P.,; Cove, C.; Steiner, D. (2011): *New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*. London: Routledge
- Crossmann, J.; Doshi, V. (2015): When Not Knowing is a Virtue: A Business Ethics Perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics* 131: 1–8
- French, R. (2001): “Negative capability”: managing the confusing uncertainties of change. *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 1 (4): 480–492
- French, R.; Simpson, F. (2001): Learning at the edges between knowing and not-knowing: Translating Bion. *Organisational and Social Dynamics* 1,1: 54–77.
<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/323904833.pdf>
- French, R.; Simpson, P.; Harvey C. (2009): Negative capability. A contribution to the understanding of creative leadership. In: Sievers B, Brunning H, De Gooijer J, Gould L (eds.): *Psychoanalytic Studies of Organizations: Contributions from the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations*. London: Karnac
<https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/1002563/negative-capability-a-contribution-to-the-understanding-of-creative-leadership>
- Grotstein, J. S. (2005): Negative Capability. Entry in the *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (ed. A. de Mijolla), pp. 1123–1124.
<https://www.psychoanalysis.org.il/wp-content/uploads/securepdfs/2018/12/InternationalDictionaryofPsychoanalysis.pdf>
- Keats, J. (1970): *The Letters of John Keats: A Selection*. Ed. Gittings, R., Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Lampard, B. (2021): *Sitting with unknowns when working with chronicity: A hermeneutic literature review*. Ph.D.-Dissertation, Auckland University.
<https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/2eaacab2-7c06-4654-9ffe-5c526e150549/content>
- Lopez-Corvo, R.E. (2003): *The Dictionary of the Work of Bion*. London: Karnac
- Rüth, U. (2005): Bion für Beginner – Eine Einführung zu Wilfred Ruprecht Bion (1897–1979): *Leben und Werk*. *Forum der Kinder- und Jugendpsychiatrie und Psychotherapie*, 15(4): 66–81

- Rüth, U. (2022): Responding versus Reacting: Neville Symington's On the Possibility of Human Freedom (1990) and the concept of Projective Identification. *Dynamische Psychiatrie* 55(1–2): 38–43
- Rüth, U. (2024): Projective Identification. *Dynamic Psychiatry* 57: 12–25
- Rüth, U.; Holch, A. (2020): Negative Fähigkeit nach W.R. Bion und die Balintarbeit – Aspekte bei Leiter und Teilnehmer. *Balintjournal* 21: 81–85
- Rüth, U. ; Kapsberger, S. (2026) : Leitung in Institutionen – Arbeitsaufgaben und das Management von Grenzen. Eine kleinianisch-psychoanalytische Annäherung. *Forum der Kinder- und Jugend-psychiatrie und Psychotherapie* 36, 76–89
- Segal, H. (2005): Contact-barrier. In: International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis. Editor: A. de Mijolla. Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale. pp. 339–340
- Simpson P, French R, Harvey C (2002): Leadership and negative capability. *Human Relations* 55, 10: 1209–1226
- Symington, N. (1990): The possibility of human freedom and its transmission (with particular reference to the thought of Bion). *Int J Psycho-Analysis* 71: 95–106

Conflicts of interest:

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Corresponding author:

Ulrich Rüth, Metzstraße 12, D-81667 München.

Email: praxis.rueth@mnnet-online.de