

The Transitional Object as a Precursor to Strong Anticipation

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Abstract

This paper presents Winnicott's transitional objects and potential spaces as precursors to Dubois' endo-anticipation (anticipation of a system's behaviour which is established by or embedded in this very system). Transitional objects, phenomena and processes belong neither to the inside nor to the outside: they are interfaces which partake in both but are of an ephemeral nature. However, their meaning and function survive as internalized structures. When this happens strong anticipation governs, as the system has internalized a model of the potential space between inside and outside and is able to experience a shared reality as a true individual.

Keywords: transitional objects, potential space, interface, trust, endo-anticipation.

1. Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces

Anticipation may be attained by assimilating an external model of the world. This has been shown to work in various embodied observer extensions (A. Clark, 2008). Some assimilated models are tangible, others intangible. It is well-known that trust – our most powerful observer extension, manifestation of anticipation and social complexity reduction (N. Luhmann, 2000) – is generated by control loops based on less tangible objects or phenomena. However, it is far from clear how the most basic mechanisms of trust-building are generated. Precursors to trust-building and anticipation can be found in Winnicott's transitional objects and phenomena, which also include complex concepts such as science, religion and culture. This paper makes a connection between transitional phenomena and strong anticipation in Dubois' sense (D.M. Dubois, 2000). A transitional phenomenon in its accommodated state is a prerequisite for anticipation. Once assimilated, it manifests itself as strong anticipation.

Transitional objects and potential spaces belong neither to the inside nor to the outside but are interfaces which partake in both (Barkin, 1978). The initial transitional object is the first non-I: a teddy bear or a security blanket an infant uses to soothe himself in unfamiliar situations or before going to sleep. Transitional objects, phenomena and processes link inside and outside and form the potential space, which both separates and joins me-extensions and the not-me. The potential space hosts phenomena outside the observer's omnipotent control and evolves from a feeling of trust, of confidence gained from experience. This is true not only for infants, but applies throughout our lives. It becomes apparent in psychotherapy when people find it difficult

to define their boundaries and in old age when people revert to transitional objects such as pets or dolls to soothe them in increasingly unfamiliar environments.

Winnicott used the term “transitional” in the context of developmental psychology (Winnicott 1988, 1993). He referred to the transition from one state of infant development to the next. More recent usages of the word do not refer to succession but to the transition of the boundary between inside and outside, the interface between me and non-me.

The temporary state Winnicott describes belongs to early infancy, when “the infant is allowed to claim magical control over external reality, a control which we know is made real by the mother’s adapting, but the infant does not yet know this. The ‘transitional object’ or first possession is an object which the infant has created, although at the same time that we say this we actually know it to have been a bit of blanket or a fringe of a shawl ...” (Winnicott, 1988).

As infants, we get away with the claim that an object is both self-created and, at the same time, given by the outside world. If we try this at a later age in life we will almost certainly be called mad. However, Winnicott points out that there are niches such as religion and the arts, which allow for the extravaganza of mingling inside and outside: “...the individual is not called mad and can enjoy the exercise of religion or the practice and appreciation of the arts ...” (Winnicott, 1988)

The persistence of transitional objects and techniques such as art and religion in adult life shows their importance to the individual’s continuous attempts to create an external reality. All cultural experience lives in potential space, which extends between the individual and his environment.

Here, I use a broadened concept of transitional object and transitional phenomenon, which corresponds to the notion of an extended interface, i.e. an interface which encompasses part of the individual and part of his environment (Vrobel, 2007, 2008a, 2008b). Both his internal make up and the environment determine the shape of the transitional phenomena: “The specific nature of transitional phenomena will differ at each stage due to maturational and developmental shifts in cognitive functioning, defensive functioning, libidinal focus, affect organization, and the demands of the environment” (Sugarman and Jaffe, 1989).

2. Interfacing Inside and Outside: The Generation of an External Reality

Transitional objects, phenomena and processes are interfaces which separate and bridge internal and external reality. An initial indicator of interfacing inside and outside is the baby’s smile, as the first anticipative affective reaction to test reality. We may say the potential space is created by an interface which both separates and forms a union. Kestenberg and Weinstein point out that play and culture are “neither a matter of inner psychic reality nor a matter of external reality” but encompass both. Likewise, they also extend beyond the immediate present: “Transitional objects differ from all others because they contain elements of the past and present and are bridges to the future. They

are cherished and loved as special possessions which bring comfort and solace, and they act as integrators of body parts" (Kestenberg and Weinstein, 1978).

External objects, be they people or things, help to internalize images into self- and object-representations. As transitional objects, they integrate body parts, rhythms, and shapes into a body map, which requires recalibration throughout life: "The transitional objects and phenomena which create and re-create rhythms and shapes within the context of touching and being touched, seeing and being looked at, hearing and being heard carry with them a flux through which the individual can change, create and re-create his body-image in relation to the image of his love object." (Kestenberg and Weinstein, 1978).

I mentioned earlier that potential spaces and their transitional objects are extended interfaces which both connect and separate. This presupposes the existence of a separating space or gap. Initially, this gap is formed by absence or loss: "Transitional objects are created in loneliness. They are based on feeling alone, yearning for past intimacy, and the recreation of past togetherness, while weaving into it current wishes and hopes for the future." (Kestenberg and Weinstein, 1978). Winnicott stresses that the notions of absence and reappearance are our first building blocks of an external reality. When the infant begins to feel confident and anticipates that the momentarily absent object of desire can be found again, it will gradually tolerate the absence of that object, be it the mother or a cherished security blanket: "Thus starts the infant's concept of external reality, a place in which objects appear and from which they disappear" (Winnicott, 1988).

One recipe for bridging absence or potential loss is confidence, i.e. trust based on experience. In fact, the potential space between individuals as well as between individual and society or the world is shaped by experience which can lead to trust.

3. Internalized and Non-Internalized Interpersonal Distance Regulation

Four stages in transitional development have been postulated by Sugarman and Jaffe, in which the position of the transitional phenomenon is taken by (1) the body, (2) the object, (3) fantasy, and (4) the idea. However, both the body and particular objects retain the function of a transitional phenomenon throughout life. Most individuals undergo a development which comprises all four stages and thus get acquainted also with the more abstract transitional phenomena, which enable us to navigate and control complex internal and external networks and abstract environments.

However, some individuals are not capable of creating a potential space with fantasy or ideas. An example is people who suffer from borderline syndrome, who are limited largely to the first two stages and thus show a need for tangible transitional objects. In a nutshell, borderline syndrome is characterized by a fear of both 'losing and fusing': Being too close to another person threatens to lead to loss of the self. As a result, "a whole host of defensive manoeuvres can be called into service to defend against the threat of a closeness that might snuff the self out. Many borderline patients have elevated interpersonal distance regulation to the level of an art form" (Lewin and

Schulz, 1992). This distance regulation, however, is performed not only by individuals who have difficulty in setting comfortable boundaries between themselves and the rest of the world. It is a process which accompanies all interaction with the embedding environment.

4. Transitional Objects Become Obsolete but Survive as Internalized Structures

Transitional objects, phenomena and processes are ephemeral: Their meaning and function survive as internalized structures (Vrobel, 2009). When this happens, Dubois' strong anticipation governs (Dubois 2000, 2003), as the system has internalized a model of the potential space between inside and outside. Kestenberg and Weinstein point out that "the transitional process may be seen as the mortar that plays a crucial role in processes of internalization that are essential to structure formation." (Kestenberg and Weinstein, 1987)

Transitional objects are not lost. Having become obsolete, they survive as internalized structures. As such, they are not missed, as the gap they used to bridge is now filled by internalized structures in the shape of self- and object-representations: "It is because the functions are internalized that the transitional object is not mourned" (Barkin, 1987).

Once this internalization has been completed, the transitional object has lost, as Muensterberger put it, its soul and magic efficacy (Muensterberger, 1987). These have been absorbed by the individual, who now displays anticipatory faculties. The latter may manifest themselves in smooth interactions with the environment, making up for delays inherent in a control loop and, for living beings, in graceful, almost frictionless movement (Glaser, 1993).

Transitional objects and potential spaces belong neither to the inside nor to the outside but are interfaces which partake in both. If the development and use of potential spaces is limited or compromised, interpersonal distance regulation is no longer an automatic, internalized action but a painstakingly strenuous adaptation process. Being of ephemeral nature, transitional phenomena tend to become obsolete and are dropped while their meaning and function survive as internalized structures. When this happens strong anticipation governs, as the system has internalized a model of the potential space between inside and outside. Thus, transitional phenomena and the potential spaces they form can be seen as precursors to Dubois' endo-anticipation.

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