
Original Article

Social exclusion, difficulties with learning and symbol formation: A Bionian approach

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Abstract The paper discusses how social exclusion imposes a *parasitic container-contained relationship* and, consequently, a catastrophic experience on the subjects. Children who come from backgrounds of social exclusion and who were designated by their teachers as having difficulties learning and as making the teachers feel less than competent were observed at a school in Brazil. The children met with the researcher (the author) once a week, during which time they could play, read, draw, or just talk. Material is presented to show that catastrophe obstructs growth through the use of mechanisms that make contact between container and contained (or vice-versa) unviable. The path from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position is thus blocked, and, as a result, there tends to be difficulty in developing the capacity for symbol formation and then to learn how to read and write and to 'think thoughts'. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (2010) 15, 315–327. doi:10.1057/pcs.2010.26

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What Do We Mean by Social Exclusion?

According to Costa (2001), exclusion is associated with the degree of access that individuals and groups are allowed to have to basic social systems, such as communities, institutions, the territories to which they belong, and, not least, economic resources. The exclusion or marginalization from social participation thus concerns not only the question of having or not having rights, but also whether or not individuals will have the symbolic possibility of considering themselves to be subjects with rights. These questions add a subjective dimension to the concept of social exclusion.

To discover ourselves 'in the world' demands, obviously, that we find ourselves 'occupying a place in the world' among so many possible other places, in a web of relations, both interpersonal and economic, of community, territory, power, solidarity, or any combination of these. In the process of constitution and discovery, two paths necessarily cross: one that meets the needs of the subject; and one that orchestrates what society has to offer the subject.

At least three types of societal provision can be discerned: (1) that which extends to and meets an individual's need; (2) that which does not meet the need and is, therefore, a nonoffer; and, finally, (3) that which imposes on the need a predetermined response, as it is more aligned with social policies or with the intrinsic demands of the social dynamic than with the need of the subject. It could be said that it is an offer that aims at an abstract rather than a real need.

In the first instance, we have a favourable outcome; the second and third, however, obstruct the process of human development, for here people are not understood to have the right to recognition of their demands. In the case of the nonoffer, the subject finds emptiness where he should find resonance. Where a predetermined response is imposed, the 'other' violently forces on the subject a self-definition that is alien to the subject's demands.

In social and economic conditions in which access to institutions and possibilities for meeting a person's needs are extremely limited, a lack of response or an inadequate response will tend to dominate the person's experiences. Hence, it will probably result in even more severe effects and will likely cause more significant psychic damage. Social exclusion is a debilitating social process that creates in people a progressive loss of autonomy, a loss of a sense of worth; it has profound consequences for people's ability to make decisions about the course of their own lives or about the course of events for which they are responsible.

Social exclusion also has transgenerational effects. Exclusion affects the children of the excluded doubly: in a form we might call 'primary', where the children are subjected to the same perverse processes to which the parents or caregivers were subjected and, secondarily, where they are also subjected to the effects of the exclusion suffered by their parents or caregivers. In other words, the psychic effects of social exclusion become more severe with every passing generation. Not only do the 'children of the excluded' suffer social violence, but also their first socialization within the family leaves them with a self-representation associated with powerlessness and lack of agency.

The Research Project

The children I discuss here have suffered the consequences of social exclusion. They are from a school located in a marginal zone of the Brazilian city of

Campinas. They were designated by the teachers as having difficulties learning and as making the teachers feel less than competent.

The children were observed at school and also met with the researcher (the author) once a week, during which time they could play, read, draw, or just talk.

1. Adriano is 7 years old and in the first grade. He is very short, perhaps the smallest child in his class. He lives with his father, a stonemason; his mother, a housewife; an older sister around 11 years of age; and a newborn baby sister.
2. Wesley, 8 years old, is repeating the first grade. He is very friendly and cheerful and is described by his teacher as 'a boy with a heart of gold'. He lives with his mother (who is expecting a daughter) and her partner. He has three siblings (B, 14, who lives with her grandmother; R, 10; and M, 4).
3. Roseli is 10 years old and is in the second grade (two grades below grade level). She is much taller than the other students in her class. Even though none of her classmates would be considered to be nicely dressed, she is among the worst dressed, for she pays no attention to her personal hygiene. She lives with her father, a retired baker. Her mother lives far away with her partner and other children (a boy, 12, and a girl, 13, who is mother to a baby girl, A, a few months old).

Object Relations and the Catastrophic Dimension of the Context of Social Exclusion

Bion (1962) suggested that children become able to integrate their experience when mothers or other caregivers provide the kind of containment that enables the working-through of anxiety. As a central object relation among the many that structure the psyche of the subject, the one on which all others are built, the earliest object relationship bears witness to the infant's first terrifying experiences and potentially can assuage them. Bion referred to this process as catastrophic. According to Hinshelwood (2006), Freud, in 1909, spoke of trauma 'as overwhelming a psychic apparatus in childhood' (p. 307) and in relation to castration anxiety; but it is in Klein's (1930) work that the term 'catastrophe' began to take shape. It became a constant in Bion's writings and has been deepened and refined in the work of Bick. For Bion (1970), catastrophe is a 'normal experience', a necessary state in change processes, a moment between the disintegration of the mind and the moment when a new structure of thoughts and feelings can be formed. Should this not be a transitory state on the way to a qualitatively more stable mental state, however, the sense of psychological disaster will remain with the subject (p. 101). Terror will hinder the acquisition of new experiences, and the subject will tend to stagnate.

The concept of catastrophe can help us understand the effects of social exclusion on subjects' lives in general and on their learning experiences in particular, for social exclusion is a malignant and incapacitating process that continuously produces a sense of disaster and thus causes psychic stagnation.

The Communicative Dimension

Bion (1962) argued that the infant's mental apparatus is not sufficiently developed to process his first raw emotional states. If the child is to survive this catastrophe, there must be another mind into which he might project the unbearable anxieties that arise from his experiences. When things go well and the 'other mind' is available to be with the infant and to help him digest those anxieties, there occurs what Bion called 'the experience of containment'. The 'other', in this case, not only identifies the child's emotional state (the contained) but also temporarily lends his or her own mental apparatus (the container) to the processing of it. As the baby is not gifted with such capacity at birth, it is necessary that he live this situation repeatedly so that his own capacity can develop. Object relations, therefore, need to carry a communicative dimension between container and contained, and containment should enable progressive psychical integration.

In any relationship minds oscillate between the positions of container and contained. The mind that is asked to act as container at a given moment of the relationship, however, is not always capable of functioning or willing to function as such. When this happens, the contained does not find a containing mind, and the communicative dimension is jeopardized.

Moreover, the functions of container and contained also change depending on the perspective from which we observe a relation at a certain time. For instance, a parental rule might function to accommodate a child's conflicts and give the child a tool to deal with them (the rule as container). The same rule, however, might be experienced as an overwhelming moral burden more aligned with the child's parents' needs than with the child's, a rule from which the child does not benefit at all. As an imposition of moral knowledge on the child, the rule could be seen as contained.

According to Bion (1970, p. 95), object relations can be of three types: *commensal*, *symbiotic* or *parasitic*. Whether or not the communicative dimension mentioned already is realized depends on which type of relation exists.

In commensal relations, two objects share a third, and all three are enriched by the relation. This is a relation that facilitates and is facilitated by, for example, fundamentals of the culture to which container and contained belong. Symbiotic relations involve two objects that depend on and enrich each other. Bion gave as an example the case of a person who expresses his feelings through words so well that the words (container) allow for the organization,

communication and deepening of the understanding of feelings (contained), at the same time as that experience of communication (contained) improves the use of words (container) (pp. 95–96). In parasitic relations, an object depends on another to create a third, a process that is destructive for all three. The characteristic relations here tend to be as destructive for the container as for the contained, hindering the development of both.

Social exclusion systematically obstructs experience of the commensal type, and I would say that the children about whom I speak here have introjected social exclusion as a parasitic container–contained relationship – in other words, as a catastrophe.

Social Exclusion as a Parasitic Container–Contained Relationship

Adriano: The meeting

Adriano writes his name and immediately takes a coloured pencil and begins to draw. I ask him to tell me about his drawing. The first story is about bunny rabbits that live in the rainbow and make colourful things to give to poor children. The second was about a wicked witch who caught bad children to put in her cauldron and make them really wicked.

Wesley

2nd meeting

He chooses plasticine and makes a man. I ask him to tell me the story of that man. He says that the man went to the hairdresser's and had highlights and everybody was teasing him for being girly. 'He never left the house ever again'. He puts the plasticine back in its box and wants to draw.

He sketches a house with just one room and a roof. Inside, one can see three squares that look like windows and an object that he said was a chair (see Figure 1).

This is a house. There is a chair, a television and a stove [two of the squares].
Up here, there is a hole in the tiles [the other square], just like my house.

Roseli: 1st meeting

Roseli asks about the toy box. I tell her that in it are things that she can use in our meeting. Immediately she says she wants colored pencils to give to her brother, who has nothing. Despite handling a few toys, she does not develop a game with any of them. Our meeting is interspersed with speeches about her

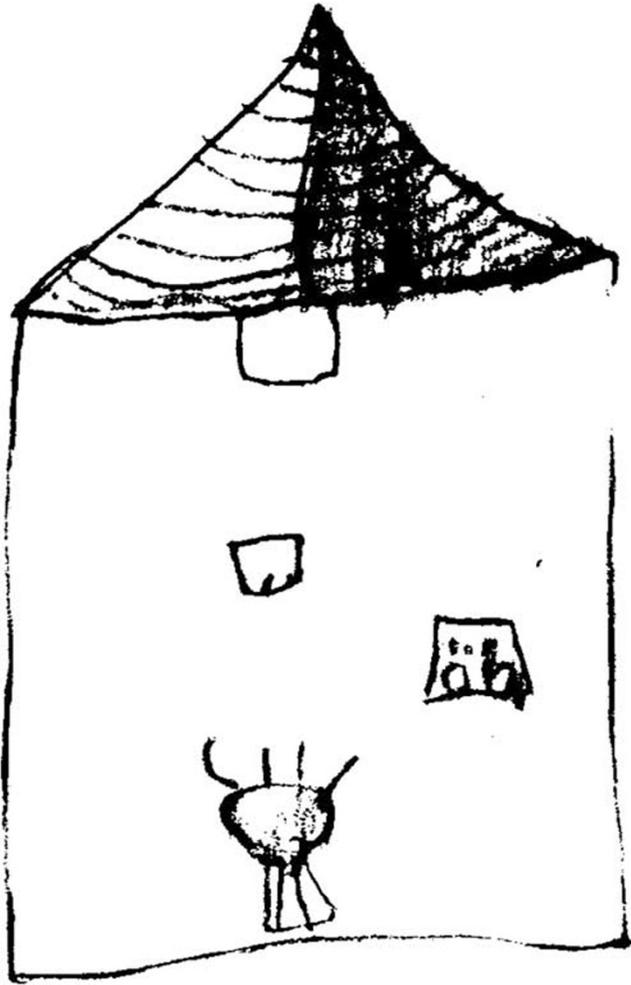


Figure 1: Wesley's house.

wish to give something to her brother or to give her niece clothes. She says there is no running water or electricity where her mother lives and that her father does not give money to her mother. She also says that her father gave them money when they – her brother, sister, mother and father – all lived together.

Discussion

The children's experience points to a pre-existing refusal on the part of the social container to function as such: houses poorly furnished, no running water, no

electricity, holes in the tiles ('just like my house'), brothers, nieces and mothers who have nothing. Then follows a wish to give to the poor (someone to look after and give them what they need?). In this case, the act of containing is insufficient, interrupted, even nonexistent, and the containment experience probably a violent and destructive one, given that no one 'wished to give to the poor', to take care of them and give them what would fulfill their real needs. In other words, there was no communicative experience between container and contained; on the contrary, there was a projective identification that ended up constituting a catastrophic experience, given that its product was nothing but violence.

Catastrophe is characteristic of parasitic relations, in which the coming together of container and contained is interwoven with an object that undermines the possibility of mutual development. That is, catastrophe (Bion, 1970) obstructs growth through the use of mechanisms that make contact between container and contained (or vice-versa) unviable. The path from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position is thus blocked.

As a result, there tends to be a difficulty in developing the capacity for symbol formation and then to 'think thoughts'. Not surprisingly, the children mentioned here struggled to learn to read and write – unfortunately, unsuccessfully most of the time.

Symbol Formation Within a Catastrophic Experience

Adriano

Classroom observation

When I arrive, the class is in progress. On the blackboard the letter G and a text titled *O Gato Gaiato*. (The equivalent of this would be something like the letter C and a text about the Comical Cat.) The task at hand is to search magazines for five words beginning with the letter G.

Adriano's demeanour is not typical of a child: he is closed, serious, like an adult who has been crossed. He is evidently close to an older girl, who he hopes will find a word for him. He places himself in front of her desk and, in spite of his size, assumes an almost imposing attitude, to which she appears to respond. Then he returns to his desk. He seems to concentrate. He goes back to his classmate, who gives him another word. Her response to Adriano's need is immediate, as though she already knows his requirements. He holds the magazine upside-down and cannot find anything.

Later, the teacher told me that the older girl is not a member of the class but is Adriano's big sister, who studies in another period¹ at the same school and who accompanies her brother. The teacher commented that he exploits his sister, as he does his mother. I asked the reason for the girl's presence in the classroom.

The teacher attempted to explain but finally acknowledged that she had no answer.

The meeting

Adriano writes his name and immediately takes a colored pencil and begins to draw. I ask him to tell me about his drawing. He tells me as he goes along, drawing. I ask him who invented these stories, and he says, 'Me!' He begins to tell me other stories, with bits from 'Snow White' and 'Rapunzel' and other well-known fairy tales. I ask him who told him these, and he replies, 'Nobody!' I persist and ask whether there is someone who tells him stories, to which he replies, 'No!'

It seems that Adriano tyrannizes in relationships, demanding total dominion over the other, in an attempt to take control over the threat of failure. Alternately, he refuses contact. As he tries to block contact (and possible sources of frustration), he does not allow any space for the development of thinking to occur. On one hand, he dominates those around him with a tyrannical type of relationship, imposing his needs on others. On the other hand, he is completely dependent on the ability of others to think and on the products the other is (or is not) able to offer him.

Wesley

Classroom observation

Each student has a sheet of stencilled drawings, all of them images of objects whose names begin with U. The activity is to write the names of those objects. Wesley seems to fit in well with his classmates. He comes toward me and, approaching me in a very friendly manner, says, 'Hi!' He immediately follows with, 'I know how to write'. I ask him to show me his classwork. It has good drawings, the writing is correct, and his handwriting is elegant. I ask him to read to me what is written. He 'reads' the words whose accompanying pictures enable him to recognize them (*uva* (grape), *unha* (fingernail), *urso* (bear)). He does not manage to read *urubu* (vulture), *uba* (dug-out canoe), or *urna* (ballot box) and says they are difficult.

Wesley was not able to decode even simple syllabic structures like *u-ba* (canoe). It is noteworthy that this observation took place less than two months before the end of the academic year and that this was the second year that Wesley had been placed in the first grade, the class for learning basic literacy.

1st meeting

I offer Wesley a blank sheet of paper and ask him to write his name. He does so. I ask him to write something else that he knows. He writes *bola* (ball). He sees the letters of the alphabet on the wall above the blackboard and begins to name them but gets mixed up over some, especially J. We search for words that begin

with J and, after a while, he says, 'janela [window]'. He tries to write it, but this presents great difficulty. He writes *ja*, then *jala* and *janla* (nonsense words, which omit key sounds in the word window).

Roseli

Classroom observation

The class is organized for an individual activity in mathematics. Roseli goes up to the teacher to get help. The teacher corrects the mistakes, shows Roseli what she got right, congratulates her and asks if she likes math. Roseli smiles. I notice that the mistakes and the correct answers seem to have been accidental and that Roseli first assumes that all her answers are wrong. She does not seem aware of either the mistakes or the correct answers and is able to identify the first answer only by comparison with the answer given by the teacher. It is interesting that the contrast confirms only the mistakes, not the correct answers. For these, the pupil needs to be informed by the teacher: 'You got this one right. Congratulations'.

1st meeting

Roseli takes a pencil. I ask what she knows how to write. She takes the paper and, speaking loudly, writes, *boca* (mouth), *bune* (does not mean anything, but says *bule*, which means teapot). She spends some time in silence, as if thinking, but it is as though nothing more comes to her mind that she knows or wants to write.

2nd meeting

She wants to draw and says she will use the red. She keeps waiting for me to get it for her, but I pass the box of pencils to her. I notice then that she does not know the colours. I point to some pencil-crayons but she does not know several of the names.

3rd meeting

Roseli takes a baby doll and asks me if the doll 'does anything'. I reply, 'She does whatever you imagine'. Roseli looks at me with a mixture of surprise and perplexity. I continue, 'You can make believe ... make believe that the baby did a poop'. She still seems not to understand. I ask what she wants the baby to do. She replies, 'That it cries'. I say, 'So then make believe that the baby is crying'. Her silence continues. I ask, 'What would you do if the baby were crying?' Roseli answers, 'I'd give it a pacifier'. 'And if she didn't stop crying?' I ask. Roseli looks at me, somewhere between surprise and anxiety, 'I'd make mushy food for her'. I persist, 'And if she still wouldn't stop crying?' Roseli puts the doll back in the box.

I have been wondering why I went so far in that situation with the doll. What caught my attention was Roseli's inability to imagine and to 'make believe' that something different can happen, or to think about very basic hypothetical situations. I also thought about Roseli's difficulty simulating maternal attitudes. The only thing that came to her mind was the reference to food (pacifier and baby food). Nothing came up regarding cradling, a bath, a song. Moreover, this situation was highly anxiety provoking for her. As I see it, this points to the existence of a constricted mental universe that cannot contain anything but very concrete aspects of daily life. What do we need to live? Answer: food. There are no means for mothering, for thinking, for a more responsive and creative container.

The difficulty these children have with symbol formation is crucial to this study. To understand what leads them to fail, it is useful to delve into the history of psychoanalytic theories that describe what constitutes the process of symbol formation. Jones (1916) made a significant contribution toward understanding symbolization processes. In particular, he argued that identification processes present in the choice of 'symbol-object' are motivated by the 'symbolized object's sharing the subject's libidinal investment.

Although Klein (1930), too, understood libidinal investment to be one of the starting points of symbol formation, she argued that the symbol-object would also share with the symbolized-object the anxieties present in the sadistic phase of a subject's life, specifically of the oedipal period. When projected into other objects, these anxieties promote identification of the original object with the object of the projections.

Segal (1957) revisited the processes of symbol formation described by Klein. According to Segal, Klein's view adequately describes the beginning of symbolization processes; Segal calls this phase 'symbolic equation', to distinguish it from symbolization proper. The act of symbolizing necessarily involves three elements: the symbolized object, the object that functions as a symbol, and the person for whom one object symbolizes another. Variations in the process of symbol formation depend on how the subject relates to the anxiety evoked by the original object.

Drawing on the Kleinian model of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, Segal states that, basically, what differentiates symbolic equation from symbolization is that, in the former, the subject encounters his own anxiety in the object that functions as a symbol, as opposed to its being a characteristic intrinsic to the object itself. That is, the identification of the symbolized object and the symbol-object would reside only in the subject's projective activity, marked by paranoid-schizoid anxieties. When this occurs, the object is seen not as a symbol but as identical with the object represented (symbolic equation).

Once the subject enters the depressive position, she or he is able to contain some of the anxiety. As a result of being less inclined to project anxiety, the subject is able to find objects that are more appropriate to represent the objects of his love and hatred.

According to Bion (1994), symbols are, by definition, shared by a group; that is, a union between symbolized-object and symbol-object can be recognized as a constant. The ability to join two objects so that their similarities become obvious and their differences avoided depends, to a great extent, on social approval of the validity of such a union.

What Bion introduced are two fundamental elements for understanding the processes of symbol formation and the failure of such processes. The first is that not only must there be differences between the symbolized-object and the symbol-object, but also the subject must be able to understand and acknowledge differences as well as similarities. Symbol formation would depend on the capacity to accept the existence of chance relations between certain aspects of the objects in question.

Here we might speak of the acceptance of a dimension of arbitrariness in the relation between symbol-object and symbolized-object, which brings us to Bion's second element: the need for a symbol to be recognizable by members of a given group. Recognition of the validity of a given connection between the symbol-object and the symbolized-object, a connection defined according to a tacit 'social contract' is what adds a communicative dimension to the symbol.

With this model, Bion asserted the possibility of thinking of language, which requires the ability to master the highest – or one of the highest – levels of arbitrariness in the socially grounded relation of symbol-object and symbolized-object. There are no natural 'signposts' for the meeting between words and things; such signposts are created only by other members of the group who master the collection of stipulated relations and present them to the subject.

Thus there is a substantial difference in the development of nonverbal and verbal thinking. The former is linked more to the capacity for imitation in the execution of activities and procedures in general and, therefore, has a less arbitrary and thus a less abstract character than does verbal thinking. The latter is much more dependent on the use of symbolization and, therefore, is much more dependent on the quality of established relations between those who supposedly dominate the shared codes and the 'learners' or 'apprentices'. If, indeed, verbal thought depends on access to an initially arbitrary linguistic code, we can say that the development of such thought also depends on the subject's capacity for abstraction and on a sense of belonging to a group in which that arbitrariness interacts with the relevant meanings (symbols) present in the code. Only then can the code be converted into language.

The 'three-term relationship' described by Segal (1957) – the symbolized thing, the thing that symbolizes, and the person for whom one thing represents another – becomes, in Bion's work, a relationship between four elements. The fourth element is the other subject, or the whole group for whom the initially arbitrary linguistic code has already been converted into a potentially communicative and interactive instrument.

Now we can better understand the effects of social exclusion on the individual. In interpersonal relations, a subject needs to feel that there is interest in what he communicates through shared symbols; that is, there needs to be resonance, ‘containment’ in relation to the subject’s attempts at communication. When this is not the case, words become empty signifiers, not filled with meaningful contents for the mind; words make up little fragmented sequences (Bion, 1962) and maintain a high degree of arbitrariness for the subject. The subject needs assurance that what he loses in the transformation of experience into symbolic abstraction he may gain in the experience of communication – assurance of the possibility of containment of his stories of loss, recovery and re-creation (Segal, 1957). In other words, the subject needs to see that he has something to gain from the possibility of transforming fragmentation and its confusion into a narrative that, to a certain extent, places the elements of experience into a complex, yet communicable relation. The children I have described do not envision this possibility, and I would say that this is why their narratives are so fragmented and so poorly expressed.

Final Comments

On the social level, processes of exclusion impose a split between social strata and, as a result, give rise to differences in the degree of resonance that groups and social institutions manifest in relation to subjects’ attempts at communication. Once again, we come back to just how damaging social exclusion can come to be for marginalized populations.

The children studied here cannot be characterized as psychotic. However, they suffer from a profound inability to symbolize, which is reflected in their problems with play, in their lack of capacity for narrative and – from the school’s point of view – in their difficulty learning to read and write.

I would say that, for these children, the activities of symbolization, like other activities, recapitulate anxieties related to invasive and violent (catastrophic) relations between container and contained, and thus they desperately need to avoid them. To transform letters (isolated, arbitrary, concrete and meaningless objects) into an instrument of communication would require new forms of relating between container and contained. The use of language should be, at the very least, of a symbiotic nature (Bion, 1970) – in which a third object (language) is introduced into the container–contained relationship for the benefit of both. In the cases studied, however, the use of language appears to be of a parasitic nature. For these children, language seems to signify yet another threat of destruction – among so many – rather than an opportunity for the production of new meanings, for growth, for life.

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Note

1 Many Brazilian schools have two periods of classes, in order to accommodate primary-aged pupils in the mornings and secondary school in the afternoons, or vice-versa. This school, however, followed a much more hectic schedule: 7am–11am; 11am–3pm; 3pm–7pm; 7pm–11pm.

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