

Clearly, Winnicott found that the Squiggle Game suited his purpose for the first—although usually not more than the first—therapeutic interview. It was very much part of his character and the way in which he enjoyed playing; other consultants will need to find their own style, which may or may not involve squiggles.

The principle is that psychotherapy is done in an overlap of the area of play of the child and the area of play of the adult or therapist. The Squiggle Game is one example of the way in which such an interplay may be facilitated.

["Squiggle Game", p. 317]

(Detailed accounts of how Winnicott used the Squiggle Game can be found in *Therapeutic Consultations in Child Psychiatry* [W11].)

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Transitional phenomena

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The concept of transitional phenomena refers to a dimension of living that belongs neither to internal nor to external reality; rather, it is the place that both connects and separates inner and outer. Winnicott uses many terms to refer to this dimension—the third area, the intermediate area, the potential space, a resting place, and the location of cultural experience.

Developmentally, transitional phenomena occur from the beginning, even before birth, in relation to the mother–infant dyad. Here is located culture, being, and creativity.

As the infant begins to separate Me from Not-me, going from absolute dependence into the stage of relative dependence, he makes use of the transitional object. This necessary developmental journey leads to the use of illusion, the use of symbols, and the use of an object.

Transitional phenomena are inextricably linked with playing and creativity.

1 A triple statement on human nature

Before 1951, when Winnicott presented his seminal paper, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena", there was no accounting for the space between inside and outside in the psychoanalytic literature. Freud's concept of the developmental sequence of the pleasure principle moving on to the reality principle had contributed to an understanding of the transition the human infant has to go through, without focusing on the transitional process itself. Melanie Klein's focus on the inner world and the infant's phantasies did not seem to take sufficient account of the impact of the outer world on his perception, in Winnicott's opinion. Much work had also been done on the point in human development when the infant emerged from his own subjective state and began to become more objective and able to think symbolically. After more than thirty years of working with mothers and infants, and nearly twenty years of working as a psychoanalyst, Winnicott found himself positing an intermediate area: an area that is not completely subjective, nor completely objective.

It is generally acknowledged that a statement of human nature is inadequate when given in terms of interpersonal relationships, even when the imaginative elaboration of function, the whole of fantasy both conscious and unconscious, including the repressed unconscious, is allowed for. There is another way of describing persons that comes out of the researches of the past two decades, that suggests that of every individual who has reached to the stage of being a unit (with a limiting membrane and an outside and an inside) it can be said that there is an *inner reality* to that individual, an inner world which can be rich or poor and can be at peace or in a state of war.

My claim is that if there is a need for this double statement, there is need for a triple one; there is the third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area which is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related.

[*"Transitional Objects"*, p. 230]

Winnicott came to this realization of the third area from seeing a link between the newborn infant's use of fist, fingers, and thumbs and the older (anything from 3 to 12 months) infant's use of teddy, doll, or soft toy, sometimes in addition to thumb or finger sucking.

There is a wide variation to be found in a sequence of events which starts with the new-born infant's fist-in-mouth activities, and that leads eventually on to an attachment to a teddy, a doll or soft toy, or to a hard toy.

It is clear that something is important here other than oral excitement and satisfaction, although this may be the basis of everything else. Many other important things can be studied, and they include:

The nature of the object.

The infant's capacity to recognize the object as Not-me.

The place of the object—outside, inside, at the border.

The infant's capacity to create, think up, devise, originate, produce an object.

The initiation of an affectionate type of object relationship.

[*"Transitional Objects"*, pp. 229-230]

2 The truly Not-me object is a possession

The external object that the infant or child adopts is his first possession. In other words, from the observer's point of view, it is a symbol of the journey the infant is making from the experience of his mother's adaptation to his needs during the time of absolute dependence, to relative dependence, where he begins to see his mother as not himself and realizes that he must now start to stand on his own two feet so to speak (*see* DEPENDENCE: 1, 6). Thus although the external object represents all the components of mothering, it also signifies the infant's ability to *create* what he needs. This is how the transitional object is the infant's first possession: it truly belongs to him, because he has created it. (*see* CREATIVITY: 2; DEPENDENCE: 6)

Each individual infant finds his own unique way of creating the first possession:

In the case of some infants the thumb is placed in the mouth while fingers are made to caress the face by pronation and supination movements of the forearm. The mouth is then active in relation to the thumb, but not in relation to the fingers. The fingers caressing the upper lip, or some other part, may be or may become more important than the thumb engaging the mouth. Moreover this caressing activity may be found alone, without the more direct thumb-mouth union.

In common experience one of the following occurs, complicating an auto-erotic experience such as thumb-sucking:

1. with the other hand the baby takes an external object, say a part of a sheet or blanket, into the mouth along with the fingers; or
2. somehow or other the bit of cloth is held and sucked, or not actually sucked. The objects used naturally include napkins and (later) handkerchiefs, and this depends on what is readily and reliably available; or
3. the baby starts from early months to pluck wool and to collect it and to use it for the caressing part of the activity. Less commonly, the wool is swallowed, even causing trouble; or
4. mouthing, accompanied by sounds of "mum-mum", babbling, anal noises, the first musical notes and so on.

[*"Transitional Objects"*, pp. 231-232]

The transitional object need not be a real object; it may be

... a word or tune, or a mannerism, which becomes vitally important to the infant for use at the time of going to sleep, and is a defence against anxiety, especially anxiety of the depressive type.

[*"Transitional Objects"*, p. 232]

Mothers and fathers intuitively appreciate the importance of these objects to their child.

The parents get to know its value and carry it round when travelling. The mother lets it get dirty and even smelly, knowing that by washing it she introduces a break in continuity in the infant's experience, a break that may destroy the meaning and value of the object to the infant.

[*"Transitional Objects"*, p. 232]

The parents seem to know that for the infant the transitional object is absolutely a part of himself, like a mouth or breast:

... parents respect this object even more than they do the teddies and dolls and toys that quickly follow. The baby who loses the transitional object at the same time loses both mouth and breast, both hand and mother's skin, both creativity and objective perception. The object is one of the bridges that make contact possible between the individual psyche and external reality.

[*"Group Influences and the Maladjusted Child"*, 1955, p. 149]

Winnicott observes that apart from object choice, there is no difference in the way boys and girls use the transitional object:

Gradually in the life of an infant teddies and dolls and hard toys are acquired. Boys to some extent tend to go over to use hard objects, whereas girls tend to proceed right ahead to the acquisition of a family. It is important to note, however, that *there is no noticeable difference between boy and girl in their use of the original Not-me possession*, which I am calling the transitional object.

[*"Transitional Objects"*, p. 232]

The transitional object is usually named by the child as he acquires the use of sound, and it usually has a word used by the adult partly incorporated in it. For instance, "baa" may be the name, and the "b" may have come from the adult's use of the word "baby" or "bear". Although language acquisition is relevant here, Winnicott's emphasis is on the infant's creation of a personal word.

There are many other aspects to the transitional object, all part of what Winnicott describes as "special qualities in the relationship". He lists seven qualities:

1. The infant assumes rights over the object, and we agree to this assumption. Nevertheless some abrogation of omnipotence is a feature from the start.
2. The object is affectionately cuddled as well as excitedly loved and mutilated.

[*"Transitional Objects"*, p. 233]

Winnicott uses the word "affection" a great deal in relation to the infant's use of the transitional object. "Affectionately cuddled as

well as excitedly loved" refers to the infant's quiet and excited states in relation to his mother. At this stage of development, the infant is having to struggle inside with his experience of the object-mother, whom he excitedly loves, and his environment-mother, who is the mother of the quiet times. The transitional object can be seen as being used by the infant, through enactment, to relate to these two mothers and bring the two together (*see* AGGRESSION: 6, 9; CONCERN: 3; DEPENDENCE: 6, 7). This applies to Points 3 and 4.

3. It must never change, unless changed by the infant.
4. It must survive instinctual loving, and also hating, and, if it be a feature, pure aggression.
5. Yet it must seem to the infant to give warmth, or to move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own.
6. It comes from without from our point of view, but not so from the point of view of the baby. Neither does it come from within; it is not an hallucination.
7. Its fate is to be gradually allowed to be decathected, so that in the course of years it becomes not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo. By this I mean that in health the transitional object does not "go inside" nor does the feeling about it necessarily undergo repression. It is not forgotten and it is not mourned. It loses meaning, and this is because the transitional phenomena have become diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between "inner psychic reality" and "the external world as perceived by two persons in common", that is to say, over the whole cultural field.

[*"Transitional Objects"*, p. 233]

This last item makes the transitional object a unique object not just for the child in his developmental journey, but also for the development of psychoanalytic theory. Hitherto in psychoanalysis objects were either internalized or lost. For the first time, here is an object that is neither internalized nor lost but, rather, "relegated to limbo". But why?

Once the transition from object-relating to object-usage has taken place, the transitional object, in and of itself, is no longer needed by the infant, because its task, so to speak, is over. By now

the small child is able to distinguish between Me and Not-me and live in the third area, keeping inside and outside apart and yet inter-related. This is the "diffusion" and "spreading out" into, as Winnicott describes it, "the whole cultural field". Fifteen years later, on the occasion of the celebration of the completion of Strachey's translation of the complete works of Freud, Winnicott introduced the theme of the location of culture, which in 1967 became a paper—"The Location of Cultural Experience". (*see* CREATIVITY: 3; PLAYING: 1, 2)

The infant's use of the transitional object and the parent's ability to allow for this play are building on the foundations already set down in the early mother-infant relationship. (*see* BEING: 1, 3; CREATIVITY: 1; PLAYING: 2)

3 *Transitional objects and the journey to symbolism*

The transitional object is a symbol, from the observer's point of view, of an aspect of the infant's experience of his environment. However, this does not mean that the infant using a transitional object has reached the capacity to use symbols; rather, he is *on his way* to using symbols. Thus the transitional object indicates a transitional stage of development, from object-relating to use of an object. (*see* AGGRESSION: 10)

It is true that the piece of blanket (or whatever it is) is symbolical of some part-object, such as the breast. Nevertheless the point of it is not its symbolic value so much as its actuality. Its not being the breast (or the mother) is as important as the fact that it stands for the breast (or mother).

When symbolism is employed the infant is already clearly distinguishing between fantasy and fact, between inner objects and external objects, between primary creativity and perception. But the term transitional object, according to my suggestion, gives room for the process of becoming able to accept difference and similarity. I think there is use for a term for the root of symbolism in time, a term that describes the infant's journey from the purely subjective to objectivity; and it seems to me that the transitional object (piece of blanket,

etc.) is what we see of this journey of progress towards experiencing.

[“Transitional Objects”, pp. 233–234]

Symbolism, for Winnicott, is variable, depending on the infant’s stage of development.

It seems that symbolism can only be properly studied in the process of the growth of an individual, and that it has at the very best a variable meaning. For instance, if we consider the wafer of the Blessed Sacrament, which is symbolic of the body of Christ, I think I am right in saying that for the Roman Catholic community it is the body, and for the Protestant community it is a *substitute*, a reminder, and is essentially not, in fact, actually the body itself. Yet in both cases it is a symbol.

A schizoid patient asked me, after Christmas, had I enjoyed eating her at the feast. And then, *had I really eaten her or only in fantasy*. I knew that she could not be satisfied with either alternative. Her split needed the double answer.

[“Transitional Objects”, p. 234]

The “double answer”, we may assume, is that Winnicott eats her in fantasy and reality, in a parallel with the belief in transubstantiation in the Roman Catholic Church.

4 The function of the transitional object

At first the infant needs to believe that he is responsible for creating the breast. He is hungry, he cries, the breast is offered just at the right time, and he obtains what he needs. All this leads him to believe that he has created the breast. This is the necessary illusion (*see* MOTHER: 4). Once the illusion has been established, the mother’s function, during the time of the infant’s relative dependence, is to *disillusion* him. The infant starts to perceive objectively, instead of apperceiving subjectively (*see* DEPENDENCE: 6). But—and this is crucial to Winnicott’s theory—if the infant has not had enough experience of this illusion, he will not be able to perceive objectively, and the journey involved in working out the difference between Me and Not-me will be distorted.

From birth . . . the human being is concerned with the problem of the relationship between what is objectively perceived

and what is subjectively conceived of, and in the solution of this problem there is no health for the human being who has not been started off well enough by the mother. *The intermediate area to which I am referring is the area that is allowed to the infant between primary creativity and objective perception based on reality-testing*. The transitional phenomena represent the early stages of the use of illusion, without which there is no meaning for the human being in the idea of a relationship with an object that is perceived by others as external to that being.

[“Transitional Objects”, p. 239]

Winnicott illustrates his point with two diagrams. The first shows how object-presenting by the mother in a state of primary maternal preoccupation leads to the infant’s illusion that he has created what he needs, and the second demonstrates how the area of illusion is transformed into a shape—the transitional object.

In Fig. 20 a shape is given to the area of illusion, to illustrate what I consider to be the main function of the transitional object and of transitional phenomena. The



FIGURE 19

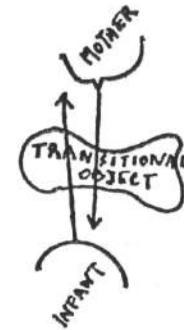


FIGURE 20

transitional object and the transitional phenomena start each human being off with what will always be important for them, i.e.: a neutral area of experience which will not be challenged. *Of the transitional object it can be said that it is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never ask the question “Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?” The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated.*

[“Transitional Objects”, pp. 239–240]

In another paper, "The Deprived Child and How He Can Be Compensated for Loss of Family Life" (1950), written a year prior to the paper on transitional phenomena, Winnicott explains a little further why the question must not be formulated:

... one difficulty every child experiences is to relate subjective reality to shared reality which can be objectively perceived. From waking to sleeping the child jumps from a perceived world to a self-created world. In between there is a need for all kinds of transitional phenomena—neutral territory. I would describe this precious object by saying that there is a tacit understanding that no one will claim that this real thing is a part of the world, or that it is created by the infant. It is understood that both these things are true: the infant created it and the world supplied it. This is the continuation forward of the initial task which the ordinary mother enables her infant to undertake, when by a most delicate active adaptation she offers herself, perhaps her breast, a thousand times at the moment that the baby is ready to create something like the breast that she offers.

["Deprived Child", pp. 143–144]

"From waking to sleeping" clearly illustrates the quality of the two different worlds—"inner" belonging to sleeping and dreaming, the unconscious and "subjective reality"; "outer" belonging to the environment and a "shared reality", which is perceived more consciously as Not-me. The transitional object can then be seen to be used by the child to bridge these two states, which accounts for children's need of the transitional object particularly at the time of going to sleep. By this time, the small child is already living in the intermediate area, although, as Winnicott points out, none of us are ever clear of the struggle of the inter-relationship between inside and outside.

It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.) This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is "lost" in play.

["Transitional Objects", p. 241]

The themes related to transitional phenomena play a large part in Winnicott's writings, and the chapters in his book, *Playing and Reality*, are all associated with the different aspects of transitional phenomena.

5 Cultural experience

In one chapter Winnicott examines "The Place Where We Live" (1971):

I wish to examine the place, using the word in an abstract sense, where we most of the time are when we are experiencing life.

["Place Where We Live", p. 104]

Here Winnicott extends the early mother–infant relationship into adult life and living. He looks at two extremes—that of behaviour and that of the inner life.

When considering the lives of human beings there are those who like to think superficially in terms of behaviour, and in terms of conditioned reflexes and conditioning; this leads to what is called behaviour therapy. But most of us get tired of restricting ourselves to behaviour or to the observable extrovert life of persons who, whether they like it or not, are motivated from the unconscious. By contrast, there are those who place emphasis on the "inner" life, who think that the effects of economics and even of starvation itself have but little importance as compared with mystical experience. . . .

I am attempting to get in between these two extremes. If we look at our lives we shall probably find that we spend most of our time neither in behaviour nor in contemplation, but somewhere else. I ask: where? And I try to suggest an answer.

["Place Where We Live", pp. 104–105]

The psychoanalytic literature, Winnicott points out, does not give an answer to the question of where we all live in our day-to-day lives.

What, for instance, are we doing when we are listening to a Beethoven symphony or making a pilgrimage to a picture gallery or reading *Troilus and Cressida* in bed, or playing tennis? What is a child doing when sitting on the floor play-

ing with toys under the aegis of the mother? What is a group of teenagers doing participating in a pop session?

It is not only: what are we doing? The question also needs to be posed: where are we (if anywhere at all)? We have used the concepts of inner and outer, and we want a third concept. Where are we when we are doing what in fact we do a great deal of our time, namely, enjoying ourselves?

["Place Where We Live", pp. 105-106]

Winnicott's answer is that we are living, in health, in the intermediate zone, the third area, the transitional space. And, depending into which culture we are born, our enjoyment will be pursued in different ways—reading, playing football, dancing. The primary culture, however, is the early mother-infant relationship. (*see CREATIVITY: 3*)

It is in the pursuit of these cultural activities that our self-experiencing is enhanced and developed. All these activities contribute to the quality of life.

... playing and cultural experience are things that we do value in a special way; these link the past, the present, and the future; *they take up time and space*. They demand and get our concentrated deliberate attention, deliberate but without too much of the deliberateness of trying.

["Place Where We Live", p. 109]

Marion Milner has written a great deal about the third area of experience throughout the whole of her work and her ideas were developed in parallel to Winnicott's. *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1950) is probably her major contribution to the themes of transitional phenomena.

6 Friendship and groups

The ego-relatedness of the mother-infant relationship, where being, creativity, unintegration, and cultural experiences are located, is seen by Winnicott as "the stuff out of which friendship is made" ("The Capacity to Be Alone", 1958, p. 33). It is from the original enjoyment of the relationship with mother and the environment (father, siblings, etc.) that the ability to play and make friends is made possible.

Just as some adults make friends and enemies easily at work whereas others may sit in a boarding-house for years and do no more than wonder why no one seems to want them, so do children make friends and enemies during play, while they do not easily make friends apart from play. Play provides an organization for the initiation of emotional relationships, and so enables social contacts to develop.

["Why Children Play", 1942, pp. 144-145]

The ability to make friends and maintain friendships is based on the capacity to be alone (*see ALONE: 1, 2*). Indeed a description of friendship, based on Winnicott's thesis, entails the capacity to hold the friend in mind whilst also recognizing separateness. Following cultural pursuits within the relationships of friendship is making use of the transitional space between individuals. (*see PLAYING: 7*)

Moving on from this, Winnicott speculates that the experience of transitional phenomena that are highly satisfactory could be thought of in terms of ecstasy or "ego orgasm". He asks:

... only whether there can be a value in thinking of ecstasy as an ego orgasm. In the normal person a highly satisfactory experience such as may be obtained at a concert or at the theatre or in a friendship may deserve a term such as ego orgasm, which draws attention to the climax and the importance of the climax.

["Capacity to Be Alone", p. 35]

The expression "ego orgasm" is not referred to specifically again by Winnicott to describe the sense of joy, happiness, and all those aspects involved in creative living. In 1960, Lacan refers to something of the same phenomenon as "*jouissance*", which later on in 1989 is taken up by Bollas in *Forces of Destiny*:

Jouissance is the subject's inalienable right to ecstasy, a virtually legal imperative to pursue desire.

[Bollas, 1989a, pp. 19-20]

The pursuit of happiness takes place in the transitional space, where satisfaction may or may not be fulfilled. If desire comes from the true self, there is more chance of a fulfilling outcome, in as much as it will "feel real".

Winnicott sees cultural pursuits as taking place in the third area through playing:

... it is play that is universal, and that belongs to health, playing facilitates growth and therefore health; playing leads into group relationships; playing can be a form of communication in psychotherapy; and, lastly, psychoanalysis has been developed as a highly specialized form of playing in the service of communication with oneself and others.

The natural thing is playing, and the highly sophisticated twentieth century phenomenon is psychoanalysis.

[“Playing: A Theoretical Statement”, 1971, p. 41]

7 *The potential space and separation*

The infant needs a good start by being merged with his mother. This experience, if all goes well, leads the infant to rely and trust in his mother, by internalizing the good experience of being inside her, born to her, and living with her. As he develops and comes out of the stage of absolute dependence, he needs to repudiate her as Not-me in order to separate out and understand the difference between inside and outside. As this happens, the mother must start to de-adapt—that is, remember her own self-needs—and thus disillusion the infant.

From a state of being merged in with the mother the baby is at a stage of separating out the mother from the self, and the mother is lowering the degree of adaptation to the baby's needs (both because of her recovery from a high degree of identification with her baby and because of her perception of the baby's new need, the need for her to be a separate phenomenon).

[“Place Where We Live”, p. 107]

Winnicott likens this period to the time in psychotherapy when the patient, having experienced trust and reliability, needs to separate and achieve autonomy.

Like the baby with the mother, the patient cannot become autonomous except in conjunction with the therapist's readiness to let go. . . .

[“Place Where We Live”, p. 107]

Winnicott poses the paradox that there is no such thing as separation, only the threat of separation. This is based on the same paradox that the capacity to be alone is based on the experience of being alone in the presence of another. In that sense, in unconscious fantasy, no one is ever truly alone, unless the continuity of being has been severed.

It could be said that with human beings there can be no separation, only a threat of separation; and the threat is maximally or minimally traumatic according to the experience of the first separatings.

How, one may ask, does separation of subject and object, of baby and mother, seem in fact to happen, and to happen with profit to all concerned, and in the vast majority of cases? And this in spite of the impossibility of separation? (The paradox must be tolerated).

[“Place Where We Live”, p. 108]

Through the mother's empathy with her infant and the therapist's empathy with the patient, the infant/patient is able to internalize and feel safe in his move from dependence to autonomy. Only through this reliability and trust does a potential space start to occur. Winnicott posits the paradox that at the point of the infant separating from mother he is at the same time filling up the potential space through playing and cultural experience.

The baby's confidence in the mother's reliability, and therefore in that of other people and things, makes possible a separating-out of the not-me from the me. At the same time, however, it can be said that separation is avoided by the filling in of the potential space with creative playing, with the use of symbols, and with all that eventually adds up to a cultural life.

[“Place Where We Live”, p. 109]

The “avoidance” to which Winnicott is referring here is another way of describing the inner phenomenon of relating to subjective objects. Autonomy, therefore, implies the continuation of the experienced union *in fantasy*. The use of the transitional object can be seen to be the enactment of both repudiation and internalization of the baby's first object.

This concept of Winnicott's that there is never separation, only the threat of separation, is not one he explores in any great detail,

but it is central to the concept of transitional phenomena because the transitional space both separates and brings together. It is a paradox that must be tolerated and not resolved.

The transitional object and the transitional phenomena start each human being off with what will always be important for them, i.e. a neutral area of experience which will not be challenged. *Of the transitional object it can be said that it is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never ask the question: "Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?" The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated.*

[*"Transitional Objects"*, pp. 239-240]

The paradox can be resolved through "flight to split-off intellectual functioning", but at the cost of losing its value.

This paradox, once accepted and tolerated, has value for every human individual who is not only alive and living in this world but is also capable of being infinitely enriched by exploitation of the cultural link with the past and with the future.

[*Playing and Reality*, 1971, p. xii]

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