Symbolic Equation and Symbolic Representation: An Appraisal of Hanna Segal's Work

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Abstract

Hanna Segal's original paper in 1957 on symbol-formation is a classic. It makes clinical observations of concrete symbolic equation and theorizes the contrast with normal representation. In the process of developing the most accurate and most useful theory of symbol-formation that psychoanalysis possesses, Segal brought the psychoanalytic symbol into connection with the wider meaning of symbols in linguistics and other academic disciplines. It is less well known that she modified the theoretical conceptualization of her observations in the light of Bion's development of the theory of container-contained. Perhaps because of the clinical usefulness, little serious criticisms has been made of either the original theory or its modifications. In this paper, an appraisal will be made of these major conceptualizations. This paper looks again at the theory she used to make the distinction between normal symbols 'proper', or representations, and the concrete symbolic equation associated with the primitive or psychic defences.

Klein's paper (1946) on schizoid mechanisms opened up the possibility of greater access to psychotics and near psychotic experience, which many analysts have since found fruitful. A group of recently qualified Kleinian analysts at that time exploited those possibilities in experimental analyses. In particular, Herbert Rosenfeld (1947, 1965) investigated psychotic problems of identity. Segal (1950, 1957) investigated the problems of symbol formation and concrete thinking, and Wilfred Bion (1951, 192) the forms of thought disorder.

Segal's original paper in 1957 drew especially on her patient Edward (Segal, 1956), who suffered from a schizophrenic condition. Later she was influenced conceptually by Bion's development of the model of container-contained (Segal, 1978). Thereafter, Segal (2003) refers often to symbol-formation, normal and abnormal, but makes no change in her conceptualizations. There are surprisingly few critiques of the theory, although some exist (Robbins, 2008; Fonagy & Target, 2000; Grostein, 1983; Loxerkamp, 1999, 2000; Money-Kyrle, 1968; Steiner, 1999). Those critiques have received more or less no response from Segal or others, but it is fair to say that mostly they are minor, have not seriously invalidated the general idea, and have therefore required little response, anyway.

In the present paper, certain more unnoticed questions about the conceptual model are presented and discussed, whilst respecting the great validity of the clinical observations of symbol-formation and malformations.

THE CORE IDEA

It is commonplace in psychiatry (Mayer-Gross, Slater & Roth, 1969) that people with schizophrenia employ a concrete form of thinking in which symbolic forms appear to be confused with what the symbol would normally symbolize. Segal, however, gave a psychodynamic explanation based on the subjects' use of projective identification as a defence to avoid the experience of separation from his important others (his 'objects'). By projecting aspects of the self into an 'other', that self becomes merged with the other in an identity which is, at least in part, a confused mixture between the two.
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(Stampfli & O'Shaughnessy, 2012). Then that confusion - of self, due to projective identification - inevitably results in another, the confusion, between symbol and its referent: "Disruptions in differentiation between ego and object lead to disturbances in differentiation between the symbol and the object symbolized and therefore concrete thinking characteristic of psychoses" (Segal, 1957, p. 393). Segal presented this with a brief account of Klein's description of projective identification in the paranoid-schizoid position:

"A leading defence mechanism in this phase is projective identification. In projective identification, the subject in phantasy projects large parts of himself into the object, and the object becomes identified with the parts of the self that it is felt to contain. (Segal, 1957, p. 393)"

The 'identity' between self and object leads to the 'symbolic equation', the term for that confusion between the symbol and the things symbolized: 'Often [the analyst] is faced with the task of understanding and recognizing the meaning not only of a particular symbol but also of the whole process of symbol formation' (Segal, 1957, p. 391). The symbol no longer represents (as in a depressive position). It is the thing symbolized (typical of the paranoid-schizoid position).

Segal stressed the clinical observation of the process of confusion using her previously reported case of Edward. His mind was disturbed, due to projective identification. She gave an important illustration: "He felt that his own hallucinations were in everybody's mind. At times the boundary between the internal and external world seemed completely obliterated" (Segal, 1950, p. 269). The phantasy that aspects of his mind are in someone else's was exactly the projective process Klein had described in 1946 (and also Rosenfeld, 1947). The confusion is between self and other:

"When he had hallucinations, he felt that the voices he heard were ubiquitous. He would say 'All prisoners hear voices', or, speaking of shock treatment, 'the doctors were so maddened by voices that they tried to stop them by killing the poor patients.' (Segal, 1950, p. 269)"

The confusion of his own identity (ego) with other prisoners and with doctors demonstrated well the effect of projective identification. She stressed these processes as normal in the paranoid-schizoid position.

Segal associated these primitive dynamics with the equation underlying the concrete symbol. The evidence is that these two equations - self with other, and symbol with referent - occur within her one patient, Edward. But then, building on that association, Segal implicitly claimed an inference - that projective identification was the cause of the symbolic equation. The one causes the other.

This is the crux of Segal's argument - her inference of a causal connection underlying the association. It has seemed so intuitively plausible that it has become widely accepted and used among analysts.

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC SYMBOL AND ORDINARY SYMBOLS

Classical psychoanalysis started with Freud's (1900) analysis of dream symbols, elaborated by Jones (1918), Ferenczi (1922) and many others. Symbols from a psychoanalytic point of view are for hiding something. But in the ordinary understanding of a symbol, the intention is to express and communicate meanings as clearly as possible.

A symbol ordinarily understood, in linguistics to which Segal turned, is composed of two parts: the thing symbolized and the symbol to represent it (Saussure, 1916). The two are joined by convention, not by similarity. Segal agreed with the linguists:

"[There are very great advantages in extending the definition to cover symbols used in sublimation. In the first place the wider definition corresponds better to common linguistic usage, Jones's concept excludes most of that which is called 'symbol' in other sciences and in everyday language. (Segal, 1957, p. 392)"

And Jacques Lacan took seriously this linguistic understanding of a symbol in order to develop a semiotic version of psychoanalysis (and also a version of the psychotic disorders of symbolization).

It is clear that in the concrete use of symbols this differentiation that is central to the bi-parte symbol collapses; the symbol becomes the thing symbolized. However, the two-part symbol does not go far enough. As with Ferenczi and Jones, as well as other psychoanalysts, Segal postulated a tripartite form of symbol. That is, a symbol and the thing symbolized are conjoined by an ego or self, the symbolizer. Segal followed this psychoanalytic elaboration and saw symbol-formation as a process arising in the ego. Segal's theory was an attempt to explain how the non-separation or equation of the symbol and thing symbolized is located within the symbolizer. Dynamically, as she said, the symbolic equation

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deals with the intolerable problem of separation, and the solution is projective identification. Using the symbol requires a psychologically competent symbol-former.

Interestingly, Segal found another psychologist who had postulated a tripartite form of the symbol. That was Charles Morris:

"It is helpful, following C. Morris [1938], to consider symbolizing as a three-term relation, i.e., a relation between the thing symbolized, the thing functioning as a symbol, and a person for whom the one represents the other. In psychological terms, symbolism would be a relation between the ego, the object, and the symbol. (Segal, 1957, p. 392)"

Morris was a philosopher and psychologist in the US. Despite what she says, Segal did not really follow Morris. Morris was a behavourialist, and interested in linguistic behaviour, not the interior dynamics within that third part of the symbol. This difference between behaviour and internal dynamics did not really matter so much, as she did not use Morris' theorizations. It just added strength to her argument if the tripartite symbol was proposed by two radically different, even opposing, schools of psychology.

SEGAL'S ILLUSTRATIONS

The 1957 paper starts dramatically with three small vignettes. The first vignette compared a psychotic person with a neurotic one. Both play the violin:

"To give a very elementary example from two patients. One - whom I will call A - was a schizophrenic in a mental hospital. He was once asked by his doctor why it was that since his illness he had stopped playing the violin. He replied with some violence: 'Why do you expect me to masturbate in public?' Another (neurotic) patient, B, dreamt one night that he and a young girl were playing a violin duet. He had associations to fiddling, masturbating, etc., from which it emerged clearly that the violin represented his genital and the violin represented a masturbation phantasy of a relation with the girl. (Segal, 1957, p. 391)"

She said in her earlier clinical paper, of the patient with schizophrenia (not Edward): 'When I asked him why he did not want to play the violin any more, (he) answered with a shrug, 'Fancy masturbating in public' (Segal, 1950, p. 270). Although the link between playing the violin and masturbation is conscious in the schizophrenic man, and an unconscious symbol for B, the neurotic, that distinction between conscious and unconscious, is not the important one. The crucial issue is that 'In the first case (the violin) was felt to be the genital, and in the second to represent it' (Segal, 1957, p. 391).

These vivid illustrations of the concretizing confusion in psychosis are convincing. The person in a psychotic state confused the rhythmic movements of playing the violin with the somewhat similar movements of masturbating his penis. This is not a verbal symbol; it was an actual similarity between two similar movements. Though a similarity is often called a 'sign' rather than a 'symbol', this does not matter for Segal's purposes. What impresses is the equation of the two things for one of these violologists, whilst the other maintains the distinction. Sexual meaning pervades both, but one was able to recognize that the violin is not actually the penis, whilst the other made a symbolic equation.

With her patient, Edward, when Segal interpreted his equation (not representation) the response confirmed the accuracy of the equation she interpreted. He had broken down in military service: 'Edward could not bear being a private. He felt that he had lost control and (felt) imprisoned' (Segal, 1950, p. 269). And the interpretation she gave:

"On my suggesting that being in the hospital was like being a prisoner, and being like a prisoner meant to him being actually imprisoned, he seemed relieved and said it was so, but would I please keep it secret. (Segal, 1950, p. 269)"

Here the clinical process effected a change and he could regain a capacity to represent. This elucidation of the problem made Edward feel understood, it seems. And that sense of being understood restored his sense of reality, undoing the equation. He could then make a move towards understanding (for himself) how one thing (the hospital) could represent another (a prison). So, his capacity to represent was not forever over-ridden by the confusion of a projective identification. The interpretation brought back the capacity to represent, and therefore the clearer distinction between the hospital and a prison.

Interestingly, despite Segal including linguistic symbols, none of her illustrations of equations actually concern words directly.


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WORDS AND SYMBOLIC EQUATIONS

Segal gave another vignette. Edward brought to his session a canvas stool he had been making in the occupational therapy department. He became very embarrassed, and would not talk.

"He blushed, stammered, giggled and apologised in turn. He behaved as if he had offered me an actual faecal stool ... Edward did form symbols but he could not use them as mere symbols. Unlike Dick (Klein's (1930) patient who could not form symbols) he could transfer his interest from the object to the substitute symbol, for instance, from faeces to the canvas stool. Once formed however, the symbol did not function as a symbol but became in all respects equivalent to the object itself. (Segal, 1950, pp.269-70)

Segal's point was again the concrete equation. The stool was faeces; it did not represent faeces. This example illustrates the same non-separation. There is an equation between two things - like the violin and the penis. Here the canvas stool was equated with the faecal stool. The canvas stool acquired the interest, meaning and shame of a faecal stool.

In fact it is more complex. A verbal symbol is involved in this, but it is not corrupted into a concrete one. The word 'stool', surprisingly, functions well enough as a symbol representing both things. For much of the time the function of verbal symbols was preserved, and Segal could communicate well enough at a verbal level with Edward, although there was a period when his use of words was disturbed:

"That phase of his analysis, which lasted several months, was characterized by an extreme narrowing of his interests in the external world. At that point also his vocabulary became very poor. He forbade himself and me the use of many words which he felt had the power to produce hallucinations and therefore had to be abolished. (Segal, 1950, p. 394)

Clearly in that phase many words were identified with something that could seriously disturb his mind. However, instead of giving us an example from Edward's case, Segal turned to an anthropological observation of a Paraguayan tribe which developed phobias for words after someone's death. The excursion into anthropology makes it seem that any example from Edward's analysis was not clear enough for use.

It seems there are a variety of processes going on, sometimes difficult to capture. The emphasis in Segal's examples has been on those occasions when symbolic equations have appeared between solid, material entities and not between verbal symbols and the referents they represent. The equation between similar physical things may just be more apparent, as in violin and penis.

But in the case of the stool the symbolization is not provoked by similarity. The symbol, the canvas stool, is equated with the faecal stool on the basis of each having a similar verbal symbol. But this is not the same as a verbal symbol equating with what it symbolizes. What then is the non-separation in that example? Possibly it is the equation of the two meanings of the pun on the word 'stool'. But that is not a confusion between the symbol and the meaning it represents; it is a confusion between two meanings, between two referents. There is no discussion of why this word was a symbol that was spared the confusing non-separation of its parts, whilst the physical things that were represented did become equated.

Then she gave an example of a child who had suffered schizophrenic states since the age of 4 years. In a better phase of the treatment, the patient had written a fairy tale about witches, which then in a more disturbed phase became real witches concreting visible as people, including the analyst and others. In this case the verbal production could slide in and out of a confusion with physical reality. No details are given of the provocation of this symbolic equation of words, or the emergence from that state. What Segal was interested in at that point was the regression reversion from a more advanced (depressive position) use of words to more primitive dynamics. However, she acknowledged how that reversion to the functioning typical of the paranoid-schizoid position gave an opportunity for a further chance to resolve early problems.

There appears then to be less clarity about verbal symbols than is acceptable. It is likely that Segal realized this, though she did not explicitly refer to the issues which arise from the unclarity. However, she did write a further paper modifying the argument just examined and making reference to cases where use of words is abnormal.

A QUESTION TO BE ASKED

Before proceeding to the 1978 modification, I propose to deal with a problem of the symbolic equation as outlined in the 1957 paper.
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If we look in detail at Segal's account, a question arises. She is associating the equation between self and object with the equation between symbol and thing symbolized. Although this is a creative step, it may need some justification. Why should one boundary - between symbol and thing symbolized - have to follow the fate of another boundary - between self and object?

To see the question more clearly, we can use the diagram (Figure 1). The symbolic equation can be pictured as the loss of differentiation along line C - so, the symbol and the thing symbolized are equated. But, unfortunately, projective identification is a loss of differentiation along line B - between the self and an external object. On the face of it, there is no reason why the loss of side B of the triangle should be inevitably linked to the loss of side C, and Segal did not explain that correlation in her paper. Some justification is needed for why both differentiations disappear together.

![Figure 1](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/prox/beta.com/doi/10.1111/j.1234)

Segal's triangle of symbol formation. Source: author

It may be that Segal assumed that the symbol is an element of the ego/self, and the thing symbolized is the external concrete thing the symbol represents. Thus, the loss of the two distinctions might well be linked. This is a line of argument possibly worth pursuing. However, on the face of it there are problems with it. First, though some symbols, like dream symbols, are created by the ego/self, many such as words are given from outside the self, from the language community of which the person is a part. Second, language and many other things are used in the form of internal communication within the mind of the self, and thus the 'object' may be seen as an internal one, a thought or a feeling belonging to the self. These are complex issues which may need to be pursued in the clinical setting.

THE 1978 MODIFICATION, 'ON SYMBOLISM'

Some shortcomings were apparent to Segal when she wrote again on symbols 20 years later, saying:

"""(I had) come to see that it is an oversimplified view to think that projective identification per se leads to concretization ... A great deal of work has been done on projective identification since Melanie Klein formulated it, particularly by Bion in his work on the relation between the container and the contained. (Segal, 1978, p. 317)"

There is no account here of the limitations which provoked Segal to seek new solutions. There are three possible limitations we have encountered: (1) in 20 years there had indeed been an advance in the understanding of projective identification and various forms had begun to be recognized; (2) the link between the loss of ego boundary and the symbolic equation was left uneventied and as self-evident, and seemingly unproblematic; and (3) the complex issues of words as symbols and as symbolic equations.

Dealing first with the problem of attributing symbolic equation to projective identification in general, when a variety of forms have appeared, she needed to specify which forms, all or some. Looking back, a further 30 years later, Segal stated explicitly: 'In my later papers, I follow Bion in accepting that it is not excessive projective identification, which is responsible for the disturbance, but pathological projective identification' (Segal, 2002, p. 113). In the 1978 paper, she also used the term 'massive projective identification' (Segal, 1978, p. 310). There is a need for some clarification of these types of projective identification - excessive, pathological and massive - which by 1978 she referred to. There is little clarification in the literature. The various forms tend to be demonstrated, but rarely arranged systematically (Rosenfield, 1983; Hinselwood, 1992). Despite contrasting 'excessive' and 'pathological'
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forms. Segal did not make the difference clear. Referring to Bion she later said: 'In pathological projective identification, part of the ego is mentally fragmented and projected into an object which becomes equally fragmented, and identified with the projected bits of the ego' (Segal, 1958, p. 355). This description of pathological projective identification as the ejection of fragmented particles does capture Bion's (1957, 1958) description in states of schizophrenia:

"[The psychotic state] depends on a minute splitting of all that part of the personality that is concerned with awareness of internal and external reality, and the expulsion of these fragments so that they enter into or engulf their objects. (Bion, 1957, pp. 266-7)"

But, instead of the term 'pathological projective identification' that Segal said he used, in fact, his word was 'excessive': 'It is a quite excessive projection of these fragments of personality into external objects' (Bion, 1957, p. 267).

Setting aside the use of terms, Segal seems to accept that it is not this projection of fragmented streams of mental particles which accounts for the symbolic equation, because that is not the form of projective identification involved in Bion's description of the container-contained relationship (Bion, 1959, 1962). To clarify the second form, Bion gave a graphic description:

"When the patient strove to rid himself of fears of death which were felt to be too powerful for his personality to contain he split off his fears and put them into me, the idea apparently being that if they were allowed to repress there long enough they would undergo modification by my psyche and could then be safely reintrojected. (Bion, 1958, p. 312)"

In this case a specific part of the ego, a part that can generate a fear of death, is split off but not fragmented, and delivered as that experience into another mind for the purpose of communication and containment.

For clarity, in this paper I will use the term 'psychotic projective identification' for the expulsion of minute-fragmented parts of the ego, and 'communicative projective identification' for that mechanism central to container-contained, although it is also called 'normal projective identification' sometimes (Bion, 1959, p. 312). This accepts that a distinction can be clearly made between the two kinds of projective identification. Distinguishing features are the quality of splitting which leaves either a stream of fragments or alternatively a coherent ego experience; and the motivation, being either to avoid separation, or alternatively to communicate.

In this paper in 1978, Segal now claimed Bion's model, based on 'communicative projective identification' was 'the most useful' (Segal, 1978, p. 317). She proceeded to give a detailed, concise and useful account of that modification to her theory of 1957:

"The mother elaborates [a baby's unbearable feelings] and if she gives an appropriate response, the child can introject the breast as a container capable of dealing with feelings. The introjection of such a container is the necessary precondition for the elaboration of the depressive position. (Segal, 1978, p. 317)"

An implication is that the container-contained process is normal in babyhood: 'The infant has had an experience and mother provides the word or phrase which circumscribes this experience. It contains, encompasses and expresses the meaning. It provides a container for it' (Segal, 1978, p. 318). This is the process of the 'talking cure', psychoanalysis; and it is probably crucial to certain supportive relationships in adulthood as well as in childhood. However, Bion had also described how this process can go wrong and containment then fails. As Segal continued to summarize: 'But a great deal can go wrong in the projection. The relation between the container and the contained may be felt as mutually destructive or mutually emptying, as well as being mutually creative' (Segal, 1978, p. 317). And continuing:

"When the patient is over-concrete, the projected part is totally identified with the container. When she is empty of meaning, the container and the contained have a relation of mutually emptying one another. When she is fragmented and produces 'bizarre objects' type of associations, her projection has split the container into fragments. (Segal, 1978, p. 318)"

If a symbol is that into which some experience is projected, then this can have an explosive effect, or can paralyse the containing symbol into meaninglessness. The new theory of containment has allowed a variety of relations between container and contained, not just the normal form which enables growth.
of the ego. This therefore allows the possibility that various disorders of symbol-formation may occur, not just symbolic equation.

The advance in the understanding of projective identification has been accommodated and has expanded the understanding of symbol-formation. However, this revision was led by clinical observations, so that some specific mechanisms of interest did not emerge as clearly as might have been needed. The result is that new issues emerge. I want to turn to these further questions that arise from modifying the theory.

FURTHER QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED

The shift in the original conceptualization of symbolic equation gives rise to several issues that need more clarification; different forms of projective identification, fragmentation and containing; the role of aggression; and representing internal objects.

Two Forms of Projective Identification

There are now two forms of projective identification with different characters (fragmentary versus coherent splitting) and different motives (to annihilate meaning or to communicate in order to make meaning). Originally, Segal argued that symbolic equation occurs because the fragmenting annihilation of meaning destroys the ego boundary and reality. In 1957, that loss of the ego boundary (resulting from psychotic projective identification) is a necessary condition for the equation of symbol with the thing symbolized. Therefore, the question arises; how does symbolic equation occur with a communicative projective identification which preserves the coherence of contents and container - the transmitter and the receiver?

If separation between self and other is tolerated, then it is not associated with the loss of distinction between symbol and referent. The model has lost a significant degree of explanation.

Segal conveyed that the communicative, containing form of projective identification is a move towards the depressive position and the greater respect for reality. Yet, she continued in the later paper to stick to the view that denial of separateness is the key, still maintaining: “The symbolic equation is used to deny the separateness between the subject and the object” (Segal, 1978, p. 316). This appears to go against the view that such problems occur in non-psychotic patients.

Fragmentation, Containing and Psychosis

Segal in fact does not say that containment following communicative projective identification results in symbolic equation; rather it is the effect of failed containment:

“ I have recently had the disturbances of symbol formation due to a bad relation between the container and the contained forced on to my attention by a patient who is not psychotic, but who has an extreme difficulty in communicating. (Segal, 1978, p. 317)

Segal emphasized the failure of non-psychotic containing; the inability to get the words to contain meanings as they should:

“ I can observe how she empties my words of all meaning, like listening to an interpretation and immediately translating it into some philosophical or psychoanalytical abstract term, often distorting its meaning completely. The underlying phantasy is that she enters me and empties me of all contents and she feels equally emptied by me. (Ibid., pp. 317-18)

And elsewhere she wrote: ‘I had a woman patient, an author, who couldn’t write because she felt that the words were coming out of the page at her and biting her’ (Segal, 2008, p. 63).

Segal could now exemplify the problem of verbal symbols. To do so she had moved away from the psychotic projective identification typically found in schizophrenic breakdown. Disordered symbol-formation derives from the various forms of failure of the non-psychotic container-contained relationship. She illuminated this with case material of the patient with the serious disturbance in linking words: Her verbal communications particularly early in her analysis were very difficult to understand. I often had difficulty in following the conscious meaning. She tends to misuse words, mix languages, etc’ (Segal, 1978, p. 317). The problem illustrated was the inadequate connections/relationships made between words and the meaning they should contain, Segal continued:

“ Often there is little connexion between what she says, what she means to say and what she actually thinks. The unconscious meaning is often even more confused ... [the tone of her voice or her facial expression often bear no relation to her state of mind ... (Ibid.)]
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It is possible to see in this the abnormal containing relations, though they are not necessarily linked with the denial of separation of ego from object. It is not clear at this stage what such abnormal containing is linked to, or why it occurs. It is not caused by psychotic projective identification as Segal has moved her theory away to adopt communicative projective identification.

**Role of Aggression (Attacks on Linking)**

There is a possibility that a failure of containing will alter the form of projective identification, so that the subject reverts to the paranoid-schizoid use of psychotic projective identification. But is this actually the case? Segal did not give clinical illustration of that reversion. And moreover, Bion appeared to rule it out. In describing failed containing he said:

"The material showed an increasing intensity of emotions in the patient. This originated in what he felt was my refusal to accept parts of his personality. Consequently he strove to force them into me with increased desperation and violence. His behavior, isolated from the context of the analysis, might have appeared to be an expression of primary aggression. The more violent his fantasies of projective identification, the more frightened he became of me. There were sessions in which such behavior expressed unprovoked aggression, but I quote this series because it shows the patient in a different light, his violence a reaction to what he felt was my hostile defensiveness. (Bion, 1959, p. 312)

In other words, the aggression arising from the failed containing only appears to be a primary aggression - he probably meant Kleinian envy and the denial of separateness from the needed resources of the object.

Both Bion and Segal indicate that potentially there may be powerful aggression in the process of container-contained. However, it is not entirely clear what that aggression is. In fact, Segal seems to take a different stance from Bion here. The point is that there are two potential sequences: (1) a violent primary aggression that is associated with psychotic projective identification aimed at destroying the object as separate, and conforming to Klein's original description; and (2) a process of containing which has failed, leading to ever greater efforts to project into the resistant maternal object. This latter process can appear similar to the primary aggressive form of psychotic projective identification, although it is not similar. Its motivation is quite different.

Segal's descriptions seem to imply that her theory is of a primary aggression which is the cause of the failure of the container, and leads to abnormal fragmented states of sentences, etc., typical of the psychotic fragmenting kind of splitting into a stream of particles. On the other hand, Bion seemed to specifically say the aggression only appears like primary aggression, and is secondary; it is the result (not the cause) of the failed containing.

**Words and the Internal Object**

We noted the unclear position of words, verbal symbols, in the early 1958 theory. In 1978, Segal gave a number of examples of the problematic use of words to contain experiences and of the results of failing at the containing function.

This problem focused around the link, or its lack, between words and the meaning they are supossed to contain. Such containing links can be profoundly abnormal in the way described, and the example of the disjoined speech. This disruption of the use of words seems to conform to the problem of containing meaning in them. This may in turn conform to the problem of the ego, with a particular meaning to manage, confining in a problematic way with the external object. The symbol, failure to conjoin and contain will exhibit the features Segal described of a failed containing: mutually emptying one another; or when she is fragmented and produces 'bizarre objects' type of associations, the ego's projection splits the container into fragments. Then the words represent objects assaulted by the ego, so that as one of her patients, an author, said, the words threatened to come off the page physically to attack her.

So, a word is first and foremost an element of a language that exists within a community outside of the ego. For instance, the word 'duck' may be an important representation internally of the idea of a bird, yet the word comes from a language and is as external as the bird. The word can then become an external agent such as an attacker.

At the same time, as Segal emphasized, words are internal to the ego and they can and do represent internal objects. For one of the patients referred to, in a quote above, words are experienced as concrete lumps in the body difficult indeed to handle. 'She often responds to interpretations by physical sensation. Words are experienced as concrete things.' She often felt as a lump inside her. This may be accompanied by fears of cancer' (Segal, 1928, p. 317). Words function inside the person as well as outside. Segal strongly emphasized how important words are to represent internal states as well as externally. Words allow considerable thought about oneself:
The capacity to communicate with oneself by using symbols is, I think, the basis of verbal thinking - which is the capacity to communicate with oneself by means of words. Not all internal communication is verbal thinking, but all verbal thinking is an internal communication by means of symbols - words. (Segal, 1957, p. 396)

Thus, internal representations derive from the external community as they are representing an internal 'object'.

Part of the problem to be unravelled seems to be whether words are internal to the self, created like other symbols by the ego, or whether they are essentially external 'objects' given by the language community in which the person exists. Words are also ambiguous as they refer to both external objects and can frequently refer to internal objects. As representations of internal objects they greatly assist in self-representation, not just mental objects but physical parts of the self, such as a penis or faeces.

Moreover, words are not just related to as external objects. They may be internalized as formed or malformed symbols, from someone else's mind. In the case of the women who felt words as cancerous lumps: "One can often see that she feels she has invaded my speech and made it into a physical possession of hers" (Segal, 1957, p. 396). A complex relation exists between ideas and actualities, mediated by verbal symbols. Thus words are far from simple symbols. They have complex relations with the self, with internal entities/objects, with external things to be symbolized, and with the external language community. This cannot be investigated further here. It has to be left to further empirical research.

And so, Segal's theoretical model, despite its heuristic value, cannot be regarded as finally settled.

CONCLUSIONS

As these clinical manifestations convey, psychoanalytic work amply confirms the observations of psychiatrists that during a psychotic episode patients may lose the capacity to form proper symbols, or to use words as representations. Segal's intention was to show that psychoanalysis can provide a detailed explanatory theory, based on the problems that projective identification attempts to solve - the problem of separation of the self from the object.

Her work on this psychodynamic explanation had two phases: first the work on Edward who had a schizophrenic breakdown and was hospitalized, culminating in the paper in 1957; and second, the acceptance of problems of containment, which resulted in disturbance of symbol formation in people with a non-psychotic condition, in 1978. In both theories there were problems at the level of theoretical explanation. In the first phase, there was an assumed correlation between a loss of the differentiation of the self, the ego-boundary, with a similar loss of the differentiation between a symbol and the thing symbolized. And this assumption was not critically examined or defended by Segal.

Then in the second phase, there was a change in the form of projective identification that underlies symbolic equation. Denying separation through a psychotic form of projective identification was changed to a communicative form, although this acknowledged a more realistic separateness of the object and its resources that can create meaning and verbal expression; communication implies a recognition of separateness. This change undermined the central core of the original thesis that projective identification causes confusion between self and object, thereby confusing the symbol and the thing symbolized.

We need to acknowledge that there are problems to consider with either form of projective identification as the origin of the symbolic equation. These unaddressed questions need more attention. They may be difficult to answer at present, but the theory requires modifications to iron out the issues that currently flaw this powerful clinical tool.

Biography

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