

Why Understanding Does Not Always Lead to Change: From Insight to Psychic Transformation

Elena Vladislavovna Lebedeva¹

ECPP Specialist, Moscow, Russia · ORCID: 0009-0003-9932-950X

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Abstract

The article examines the problem of the limited effectiveness of interpretation in psychodynamic psychotherapy. Despite the central place of interpretation in classical psychoanalysis, clinical experience shows that the awareness of unconscious conflicts does not always lead to stable psychic change. Many analysands demonstrate a high level of self-understanding and are able to describe their internal conflicts and mechanisms of functioning with considerable precision, yet they continue to reproduce previous modes of experiencing and behaviour.

The author considers the distinction between intellectual insight and psychic transformation. Particular attention is given to the concepts of containment, alpha function, and the processing of emotional experience, developed by W. R. Bion and further elaborated in contemporary theories of the analytic field. The article proposes that therapeutic change is associated primarily with the transformation of emotional experience that had previously resisted psychic processing, rather than being a direct consequence of becoming aware of previously unconscious aspects of inner life.

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Introduction: The Problem of the Analysand Who Understands but Does Not Change

In recent years, I have increasingly encountered analysands who come to the consulting room already well acquainted with psychological language. They know the history of their traumas, are able to discuss defence mechanisms, attachment patterns, and the influence of early experience on their present life. Some easily connect what is happening in the present with events from the past and at times even anticipate the therapist's interpretations before they are spoken.

From the outside, it may seem that such work is close to completion. Yet clinical reality often looks different. A month passes, a year, sometimes several years, while habitual ways of experiencing and relating remain almost unchanged. Similar conflicts continue to be repeated; familiar states of anxiety, helplessness, or loneliness return again and again.

¹ E-mail: Lebedeva-1@mail.ru

This paradox deserves particular attention. If understanding truly has transformative power, why does deep self-knowledge so often fail to produce visible change? Why does knowledge about one's own suffering not free a person from it?

The most obvious answer is to assume that the analysand has not yet understood himself or herself sufficiently. Perhaps there is a more accurate interpretation, a deeper level of conflict, or an unconscious meaning that has not yet been discovered. Clinical experience, however, forces us to question this explanation.

The ability to speak about an experience does not necessarily imply the ability to live through it. One may describe one's pain in detail while remaining separated from it, understand the causes of anxiety while continuing to be governed by it, or see the destructive nature of one's relationships while repeatedly reproducing the same scenario.

Gradually it becomes evident that there is no direct link between understanding and change.

This question touches on one of the central problems of psychoanalytic theory: what exactly produces psychic change? Awareness? Interpretation? Insight? Or is there something else at work in the therapeutic process that cannot be reduced to the acquisition of new knowledge about oneself?

The history of psychoanalysis is, in many respects, a history of the gradual revision of the role of interpretation. Whereas the classical model focused primarily on uncovering repressed content, later developments increasingly turned to the question of how emotional experience becomes available for psychic processing.

The ideas of Wilfred Bion occupy a particular place in this movement. His work shifted attention from the content of the unconscious to the mind's capacity to process emotional experience. At the centre is no longer the hidden meaning of the symptom, but the conditions under which an experience can be transformed into thought.

This perspective makes it possible to reconsider the problem of the analysand who understands but does not change. Perhaps the source of suffering persists not because of a lack of knowledge, but because a particular emotional experience remains unprocessed.

The task of therapy then moves far beyond explanation. The analyst must create a space in which an experience can acquire form, meaning, and a place in the analysand's inner world.

It is this transition, from understanding to psychic transformation, that will be the focus of the following discussion.

Insight as a Necessary but Insufficient Condition of Therapy

In Freud's early work one can trace a belief in the transformative power of awareness. What had been repressed was to become accessible to consciousness; what had been enacted through the symptom was to become capable of being understood and named. Psychic conflict was assumed to be resolved through its gradual uncovering. Freud linked the therapeutic effect of analysis with the expansion of consciousness and the transformation of the unconscious into the conscious (Freud, 2006).

Clinical practice, however, soon showed that the situation was considerably more complex.

James Strachey was among the first to draw attention to this contradiction. Analysing the nature of the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis, he concluded that change

depends not only on the content of the interpretation, but also on the emotional context in which it emerges. It is in this connection that Strachey introduces the concept of the mutative interpretation. Its therapeutic effect is not determined by the transmission of new knowledge about oneself, but by the fact that the interpretation arises within the living relations of transference and contributes to a change in the way they are experienced (Strachey, 1934).

This idea marked an important step in the development of psychoanalytic thought. Later, Bion shifted the centre of gravity of psychoanalytic work from the disclosure of unconscious meanings to the mind's capacity to process emotional experience (Bion, 2008). Contemporary authors within the field tradition, in turn, regard the analytic situation as a space of shared transformation of experience, where change is linked to the emergence of new forms of symbolisation (Ferro, 2007; Ferro & Civitarese, 2024).

Thus, the question of the limits of interpretation arises within the history of psychoanalysis itself and reflects a gradual transition from a model of uncovering hidden content to a model of transforming emotional experience.

Analysands often agree with the analyst's interpretations, recognise their accuracy, develop the proposed thought further, and find confirmation for it in their own biography. Yet intellectual agreement is not always followed by internal change.

This is especially clear in those whose functioning includes a high capacity for reflection. They are able to construct complex and convincing explanations of their own states, yet careful observation shows that their psychic life may remain almost immobile. In such cases, insight begins to serve a defensive function, maintaining distance from emotional experience.

A person may speak many times about his or her loneliness, describing in detail the circumstances of life and the reasons for distrust of others. But at a certain moment in a session, loneliness itself appears in the room. The pause becomes longer, the voice changes, and a sense of inner emptiness emerges that had previously existed only in the form of a narrative.

Such clinical observations suggest that psychic transformation cannot be reduced to the accumulation of insights and interpretations. Understanding remains important, but in itself it does not yet explain how internal change occurs. This forces us to turn to the fate of emotional experience within the psyche and to the conditions under which experience becomes available for thought.

Unprocessed Emotional Experience

Bion proposed that thinking should be regarded not as an original capacity of the mind, but as the result of the processing of emotional experience. According to his view, not every experience immediately becomes an object of thought. Initially, emotional experience may exist as raw impressions that have not yet acquired psychic representation and therefore remain inaccessible to thinking (Bion, 2008).

To describe such states, Bion introduced the concept of beta-elements. They do not possess psychic representations and therefore cannot be used for thinking, memory, or symbolisation. As a result, the psyche seeks to evacuate them through action, somatisation, or projective identification (Bion, 2008).

This idea allows us to reconsider the place of interpretation in analytic work. Contemporary psychoanalytic culture still tends to regard interpretation as the principal instrument of change. Yet a question arises: what exactly is being interpreted if

emotional experience has not yet acquired psychic form?

In such situations, interpretation may be premature. The analysand may understand its content, agree with it, and even incorporate it into his or her narrative about the self, but this does not yet amount to psychic change. On the contrary, a hasty explanation may sometimes promote intellectualisation of the experience. Instead of an encounter with emotional experience, another form of distance from it is produced. The significance of an interpretation is therefore determined not only by its content, but also by the state of the psyche at the moment of encountering it. The same interpretation may be transformative in one case and practically useless in another. Its therapeutic value depends on whether it can become part of the processing of emotional experience.

One of Bion's central ideas is that not all emotional experience becomes an object of thought. Some experiences are too intense or too early to be processed psychically. They do not receive a name, are not linked with other elements of inner life, and do not become part of meaningful experience. Instead, they continue to exist as emotional impact, manifesting as inexplicable anxiety, sudden rage, a sense of inner emptiness, somatic symptoms, or destructive forms of behaviour.

This is not a matter of thoughts or feelings in the usual sense. Rather, these are fragments of emotional reality that have not yet acquired form and meaning. Such experience cannot be remembered or symbolised, because it has never truly been processed by the psyche.

This perspective allows us to approach many clinical phenomena in a new way. An analysand who repeatedly enters destructive relationships is not always reproducing a familiar scenario as a result of unconscious choice. At times he or she is seized by emotional experience that cannot be represented within the psyche and therefore is constantly enacted externally. Some forms of somatisation and projective identification may be understood in a similar way, when an unprocessed experience is expressed through the body or begins to exist in the mind of another person.

Such observations compel us to move away from the notion of psychotherapy as work exclusively with meanings. Meanings usually do not appear immediately. At the beginning of analytic work, we often encounter emotional experience that has not yet become an object of thought. A person brings into the consulting room not only an account of his or her experiences, but the experiences themselves: anxiety, fear, helplessness, or despair that cannot yet be thought.

For this reason, the analyst faces a task more fundamental than interpretation. It is necessary to help the experience become bearable. Clinical experience shows that the capacity to live through emotional experience and the capacity to think about it do not always develop simultaneously. As long as the experience remains unbearable, the psyche will seek to get rid of it through action, the body, relationships, or the analyst himself or herself.

Only after emotional experience becomes bearable does the possibility of thought emerge. Bion called this process alpha function (Bion, 2008). Its task is to transform emotional experience into material suitable for thinking, memory, fantasy, and symbolisation. Through this process, chaotic impressions gradually acquire psychic form and become part of inner reality.

From this point of view, psychic development is connected with the expansion of the capacity to process emotional experience. In psychotherapy, therefore, what matters is not only what is experienced, but also what becomes available for holding, thinking, and

symbolising. It is precisely this capacity that creates the conditions for psychic transformation.

This perspective leads directly to the concept of containment. If emotional experience cannot yet be held and thought by the analysand, there is a need for a psychic space within which such processing becomes possible.

Containment: The Capacity to Bear

If the source of psychic change is linked to the processing of emotional experience, the question arises as to how this processing becomes possible.

Every analyst encounters situations in which a person brings into the consulting room a state that is difficult to describe in ordinary language. It may be anxiety without an obvious cause, an experience of inner disintegration, a feeling of emptiness, rage, or grief. Such states rarely exist in the form of a coherent narrative. More often they manifest through the atmosphere of the session.

A person may speak about everyday events, while the analyst gradually begins to feel tension, confusion, anxiety, the meaninglessness of what is occurring, or despair. It seems that the most significant content is present in the room outside words.

Faced with an intense emotional state, the analyst often feels the urge to give meaning to what is happening as quickly as possible. The wish to connect the experience with the past or to place it within a theoretical construction is understandable. Yet such a position carries a certain risk. A hasty explanation may perform a defensive function and help the analyst distance himself or herself from the emotional reality of the other person. In this case, interpretation begins to serve not the exploration of experience, but the evacuation of it.

If emotional experience has not yet acquired psychic form, interpretation often remains merely intellectual information. The person may understand and accept it, yet internal change does not occur. Moreover, premature explanation may intensify the distance between the subject and his or her experience, turning understanding into a way of avoiding emotional contact.

Bion proposed a different view of the analyst's task. In his model, the primary function of the mother is not to explain the infant's experiences, but to receive and hold them. The infant brings fear, excitement, hunger, frustration, and terror in an as-yet unformed state. The mother's task is to receive this experience, process it within her own psychic apparatus, and return it to the child in a more bearable form. Bion designated this process with the concept of containment (Bion, 2008).

In analytic work, containment means the capacity to receive an experience without immediately seeking to get rid of it or to give it a final meaning. What is brought into the consulting room is not only the content of thoughts and memories, but also those aspects of experience that cannot yet be held independently. The analyst has to endure periods of uncertainty, maintaining contact with the experience until it becomes available for thought.

In this sense, containment is not so much a technical procedure as a particular internal position of the analyst. Gradually, the analysand begins to use this function as a model for the formation of his or her own psychic capacities. He or she discovers that an experience can be held without destroying it and without being destroyed by it; that anxiety can become an object of reflection, and pain a part of inner experience.

It is under such conditions that internal transformation becomes possible. An experience that previously existed as an unbearable state gradually acquires psychic form and becomes available for thought. Containment creates the conditions for this process.

From this point of view, analytic work is not limited to the transmission of new understanding. Its significance lies in creating the conditions in which emotional experience can be held, processed, and thought. This perspective naturally leads to the next question: where exactly does this transformation take place: inside the analysand, inside the analyst, or in the special space that arises between them in the analytic encounter?

The Analytic Field as a Space of Transformation

The concept of the analytic field has become one of the most significant directions in the development of post-Bionian thought. Ferro regards it as an emotional environment of shared meaning-making, in which the material of the analytic session is created by both participants in the process. In this approach, the analysand's inner world ceases to be viewed as a fixed object of investigation and becomes part of a continuously developing emotional reality (Ferro, 2007).

Developing this line of thought, Ferro and Civitarese emphasise that the analytic field is a space of emotional resonance, where psychic content receives a new form and becomes available for thought (Ferro & Civitarese, 2024).

If containment helps us understand how emotional experience becomes bearable, field theory allows us to see where this work takes place. In the course of the analytic encounter, a special reality emerges that does not belong exclusively to either participant. The material of the session is formed in the space of shared unconscious interaction.

The analysand brings fragments of his or her inner world: feelings, memories, fantasies, bodily sensations. In the process of shared work, these elements gradually become connected with one another, acquire new meanings, and are included in a broader context of psychic life.

Whereas the analyst was once understood primarily as an interpreter of hidden meanings, increasing importance is now given to his or her participation in creating the conditions under which meanings can emerge. The emotional reality that appears in analysis is not a ready-made content waiting to be decoded, but a living process that develops and is transformed in the encounter itself.

Changes do not always become visible at the moment of interpretation. A person may leave a session without the sense of an important discovery or new understanding, yet after some time notice that the very way of living through his or her own experience has changed. States that were previously experienced as unbearable become more tolerable, and affects that had demanded immediate action or discharge gradually acquire the possibility of being thought.

In this sense, the analytic field can be understood as a space of psychic transformation. It is here that the transition becomes possible from immediate emotional impact to its internal processing. What had previously existed as an unbearable state gradually acquires symbolic form and becomes woven into the fabric of inner life.

Clinical Vignette

A thirty-five-year-old analysand sought therapy with complaints of repeated failures in relationships. Each new romance began with intense emotional involvement and an expectation of closeness, but after several months the relationship invariably turned into a source of anxiety, jealousy, and a painful sense of rejection.

By the time our work began, she already had many years of experience in psychotherapy. She was well oriented in psychological literature, used professional terminology freely, and demonstrated a high level of reflection.

In the early stages of therapy, it seemed that her personal history had been understood by her in considerable depth. The analysand spoke in detail about a mother who could alternate periods of warmth with periods of emotional coldness and rejection. She easily linked her present fear of losing relationships with early attachment experience, understood the origins of her jealousy, and spoke about dependence on the object, separation anxiety, and an unconscious expectation of abandonment.

Each new interpretation was quickly incorporated into an already established system of self-understanding. Yet after a year of work it became clear that this understanding had almost no effect on the nature of her emotional reactions. If her partner failed to answer a message or cancelled a meeting, the entire volume of accumulated understanding seemed to disappear. She was once again overwhelmed by panic: nights passed without sleep, the phone was checked endlessly, and waiting for a reply turned into an almost physically experienced pain.

Interpretations concerning the fear of abandonment were received by her with readiness. She agreed, understood, and developed the thought further. Yet internally nothing changed.

Gradually, a sense of impasse began to emerge in the work. Each session appeared meaningful and productive, but behind this impression there was a strange immobility in the process.

My own experiences proved especially important. At a certain point, it began to seem to me that the therapy was moving in circles. I felt a desire to find a new interpretation that would finally allow the work to move forward. Later it became clear that this striving reproduced the same dynamic in which the analysand herself was caught: both of us were trying to avoid an encounter with the experience of emptiness by filling it with the search for explanations. Over time it became evident that this very atmosphere was part of the analytic material.

Behind the endless conversations about relationships, something else was hidden. She spoke about her anxiety, but almost never experienced it in the consulting room. She spoke about pain, yet the pain itself remained outside the analytic encounter. Gradually, words turned into a way of maintaining distance from emotional experience.

The turning point came during one session. The analysand was speaking about a recent conflict with her partner and suddenly fell silent. Usually such pauses were quickly filled with explanations, reflections, or questions. This time something different happened.

After a long silence she said quietly:

“It seems to me that if someone stops loving me, I will simply disappear.”

A feeling of almost physical vulnerability arose in the room. For the first time, the issue was not the history of relationships, not the mother, not attachment, and not the fear of abandonment as a psychological concept. The experience itself had appeared in

the analysis.

Behind the words about jealousy and dependence, a fear of inner non-being was revealed. It became clear that she feared not so much the loss of the object as the loss of her own existence in its absence.

This understanding, however, did not lead to immediate change. On the contrary, over the following weeks the woman seemed to lose interest in the work that was taking place. She began arriving late for sessions more often, brought mostly everyday material, and spoke in detail about work issues and her relationship with her partner. The analytic process increasingly shifted toward intellectualisation.

At a certain point, there was a feeling that we were returning to the starting point. Later it became clear that this movement was itself part of the process. Approaching the experience of inner non-being proved so anxiety-provoking that the psyche sought to restore its habitual distance through conversations, explanations, and the analysis of external events.

This was especially clear in the countertransference. After some sessions, a feeling of boredom and meaninglessness appeared. There was a desire to accelerate the process or to return to interpretations that had previously seemed productive. Gradually it became possible to regard these states as a reflection of the impasse in which the analysand herself was caught.

For many months, this experience was present in the therapy while remaining hidden behind numerous explanations. After the first encounter with the experience of emptiness, she avoided this theme for a long time, returning to discussions of her partner, correspondence, and everyday conflicts. Each time the conversation approached the inner sense of non-being, attention shifted again to external events.

In the following months, the focus of the work gradually moved from the analysis of relationships to the investigation of emptiness itself. There were more pauses, more silence, fewer interpretations, and more attention to what was emerging between us in the present moment.

Over time, she began to notice how quickly she tried to fill any emotional emptiness with speech, fantasies, or anxious thoughts. Gradually, it became possible to distinguish the moments when the fear of abandonment arose even before any real signs of rejection had appeared.

What changed was not so much a set of beliefs as her relation to her own states. The anxiety did not disappear, but it ceased to be experienced as absolute reality. A space for observation appeared. The capacity emerged to remain alongside her state without dissolving into it completely.

Some time later she said a phrase that, in my view, reflected the essence of the change that had taken place:

"Before, it seemed to me that if I felt this emptiness, something truly terrible was happening to me. Now I understand that I can feel it and still remain myself."

In these words, a change became visible that is difficult to reduce to insight or to new knowledge about oneself. The very way of living through an experience that had previously been felt as unbearable had changed.

Such clinical observations compel us to return once again to the question of the nature of psychic change. If therapeutic transformation cannot be reduced to the awareness of unconscious conflicts, what exactly does a person acquire in the course of analytic work?

What Changes in the Course of Analytic Work

Clinical experience shows that psychic transformation affects not only the content of the inner world, but also the modes of psychic functioning. In the course of analytic work, the relation to one's own emotional experience changes.

In the early stages of therapy, many analysands are seized by their experiences. Anxiety is perceived as a threat, loneliness as confirmation of one's own unwantedness, and shame as evidence of inner defectiveness. Experience and the representation of the self are fused together.

As the analytic process develops, this fusion gradually gives way to the capacity for internal observation. Experiences retain their emotional significance, but they cease to determine psychic life completely. The possibility emerges of holding them within a space of thought, reflecting on them, and linking them with other aspects of inner experience.

What is at stake is the development of the capacity to transform emotional experience into an object of inner thinking. Fear can be experienced as fear, pain can become an object of reflection, and loss can retain its significance without destroying the capacity to think about what is happening. This possibility is formed within relationships and is gradually internalised as a stable psychic function.

One result of analytic work is the development of internal functions of containment. The capacity is formed to tolerate uncertainty and frustration, to maintain contact with one's own experiences, and not to resort to immediate discharge through action.

Such changes become visible far beyond the analytic situation. The capacity to tolerate ambivalence increases, dependence on impulsive modes of reaction decreases, and greater freedom appears in relation to one's own emotional experience. From this point of view, psychic transformation is the development of the capacity to be the subject of one's own experience. Experiences cease to be perceived as something that entirely determines inner life and become part of a psychic reality that can be held, thought, and included within the broader context of one's existence.

This is why therapeutic change rarely appears as the result of a single insight or one accurate interpretation. More often it is the result of the gradual formation of internal conditions through which emotional experience acquires form, meaning, and a place in psychic life.

Conclusion: From Knowledge About Oneself to the Capacity to Be with Oneself

The question of what exactly produces psychic change remains one of the central questions of psychoanalysis. For a long time, interpretation and insight were assigned the leading role in explaining therapeutic action. Yet clinical experience shows that understanding one's conflicts does not always lead to stable internal change.

The ideas considered in this article suggest that what is decisive is not knowledge about oneself as such, but the fate of emotional experience within the psyche. It is possible to have a deep understanding of the causes of one's experiences while preserving the same way of living through them. Transformation becomes possible when emotional experience that had previously resisted thought becomes capable of being held, processed, and included in inner life.

From this point of view, containment and the analytic field are not auxiliary elements of therapy, but the conditions within which psychic change takes place. It is within

relationships that the transformation of experience into thought, and of affect into experience that can be thought and appropriated, becomes possible.

The result of analytic work therefore cannot be reduced to the accumulation of insights or to the achievement of fuller self-understanding. Far more significant is the development of the capacity to remain in contact with one's psychic reality without resorting to its immediate denial, evacuation, or enactment.

In this sense, psychoanalysis involves not only the expansion of knowledge about oneself, but also the development of the capacity to remain in contact with one's own emotional experience. Where experience receives form, meaning, and a place in inner life, not merely understanding but psychic transformation becomes possible.

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