



Beating an undead horse: Toward a conceptualization of nuisance in the analytic process

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ABSTRACT

Winnicott (1945a) suggested that some types of aggressive behaviour of the child returning from sustained separation from their parents may be regarded as an expression of hope, one in which they can yield their forms of defensive self-sufficiency to trust a parent again. The author parses Winnicott's later various approaches to understanding both instinctual and reactive aggression and how applying his later views can obfuscate the meaning of aggression in nuisance-making behaviour. The author offers a specific definition of nuisance in the analysis of adults and how it manifests itself in the analytic context. In the adult patients he describes, anger and hostility have become featured as expressions of grievance or greed regarding earlier ruptures in an experience of the parent's or analyst's registration of the patient's needs for attention. He considers two clinical contexts involving the conscious reluctance to agree with the analyst's interpretations as well as making demands on the analyst outside the setting as forms of nuisance. He explores how the analyst needs to hold two psychic realities – the patient's hope that is expressed in their nuisance-making as well as the analyst's limits in absorbing the patient's own self-destructive hatred of dependency. Holding these two realities helps to transform these self-destructive bids for attention into an opportunity for mourning. The analyst is required to work with his or her own subtle experiences of disturbance including hostility, helplessness and the pull to act out roles in the patient's earlier life.

KEYWORDS

Nuisance; aggression; object; transference; countertransference

Introduction

Among the most important of Winnicott's contributions was his ability to expand psychoanalytic focus from a more exclusive consideration of an individual's pathology to include an individual's capacities. He was in some sense always interested in our adaptive afflictions as attempts to express complex feelings and needs, including aggressive ones such as antisocial tendencies (Winnicott 1975) or being a nuisance (Winnicott 1945a), as potential capacities.

Winnicott (1945a, 354) wrote about the capacity to be a nuisance in an essay and talk that he gave called "Home Again". Here he wrote of children who had been evacuated

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during the war returning home. He directed his comments to the parents of these returning children:

The child begins to be cheeky, to lose his temper, to waste your food, to try to worry you and to interfere with your other interests. He may very likely try out a little thieving, testing how true it is that you are really his mother, and so in a sense what yours is his. These can all be signs of step forward in development – the first stage of a sense of security, although maddening from your point of view.

Winnicott went on to say that, in a sense, the child had learned to become his own mother and father in the absence of his parents, and now the child was able to “take a holiday from self-control”. He was suggesting that in allowing the mother to take care of him again and to take some of the control back, that “once more, they are going to be a bit of a nuisance from time to time”.

Winnicott (1945a, 356) also alludes to some elements of the parent’s responsiveness to nuisance-making that involves the parent’s ability to bear the child’s aggression and to set limits as well as to understand the nature of the child’s aggression as a communication:

There will be few immediate rewards. At times you will wish all of them back again in the billets ... You will have to be able to be strong in your attitude toward the children as well as understanding and loving; and if you are going to be strong eventually you may as well start strong. It is rather unfair suddenly to develop strength when it is late, when the child has already begun to test you and try you for reliability.

For Winnicott, a developmental necessity of childhood involves the freedom to make demands upon their caretaker (Winnicott 1950; 1965). For the child returning from the war separation, he described the requisite freedom to be a nuisance to find “again” or re-create a psychic home to return to. An essential element here for Winnicott, as is true in many of his papers on development, is an intersubjective component involving an exchange of hatred. He stated that the child needs to resume a capacity to give to the environment “the full blast of hatred”. Winnicott also emphasises less the parents’ unconditional love than the parents taking in the child as a nuisance and often hating the child for it in order that the child will be able to become loveable for it.

Winnicott’s notion that nuisance is an expression of hope and a reach for recognition is embedded within a matrix of disturbance in the caretaker. Intrinsic to the child’s capacity to reclaim a home is an environmental response in which the object experiences the nuisance and can either experience or interpret it as an act of hope. Winnicott’s use of the term recognition refers to the parent’s emotional grasp that hostile behaviour is the result of disappointment in relation to loss (Winnicott 1945a, 356–357).

Part of what this paper contends with is whether we can extend Winnicott’s definition of nuisance to include some aggressive behaviours that have become enduring features in the psyche. Winnicott’s original notion involved the child’s actual separation from their parents as a context for nuisance making. Here I suggest that psychic loss related to the accommodations made to the demands of siblings and parental anxieties sometimes engenders similar forms of aggression that Winnicott suggested in relation to nuisance-making. Since we know nothing about the pre-separation psychic lives of the children discussed in Winnicott’s original formulation of nuisance, it is also quite possible that

some of Winnicott's focus on the external reality events related to their trauma may have disguised some of the children's underlying neurotic conditions such as the kind I will describe here.

Some of Winnicott's later elaboration of his theory on the nature of and varieties of aggression in a series of papers are useful to consider in connection with his views on nuisance and some are obfuscating. Papers such as "Aggression in Relation to Emotional Development" (Winnicott 1950), "Hate in the Countertransference" (Winnicott 1945b) and "The Primary Maternal Preoccupation" (Winnicott 1958) elaborate the subjective experience of the parent or analyst who absorbs the child or patient's aggression.

In contrast, "The Use of an Object" (Winnicott 1969), his most creative contribution to the theory of aggression and one that was additive to his belief in instinctual aggression, deals with an entirely different level of clinical and theoretical discourse than his paper on nuisance. Winnicott (1969) outlined how one form of aggression, the destruction of the object, contributes to the ability to appraise the object outside the area of omnipotent control. Later, I will focus on how problematic it is to apply that paper to this twenty-five-year earlier writing on nuisance-making.

Here, I begin by briefly addressing the challenges of applying a term from everyday parlance such as the nuisances of everyday life to more specific elaboration in both clinical and theoretical contexts. Then I will briefly review Winnicott's evolving theory of aggression written after his paper on nuisance, some of which helps to elaborate some of his ideas initial ideas about aggression in "Home Again". Others though highlight the fault lines in applying his later work related to aggression as explanatory for his earlier concept of nuisance value. I do so to specifically define the concept of nuisance in a clinical context with adults patients which Winnicott did not offer. I will try to illustrate how nuisance-making in childhood may become an enduring feature with the adult patient.

Through two clinical examples, I will focus on the patient's expression of conscious and unconscious wishes for more accompanied by either overt or disguised expressions of hostility. Sometimes this includes elements of the patient's greed for greater recognition of their wish for more attention than what they had experienced earlier in life and in the current transference situation. It may also involve a form of holding on to grievance regarding the matter of attention, one that is expressed in the transference as a wish to adjudicate the patient's sense of deserving more, both then and now. I view the creation of nuisance as inextricably linked to elements of role-responsiveness in the analyst, invitations to emotionally respond or enact earlier patterns that mark places of loss or psychic rupture.

The analyst's experience of the patient's nuisance-making often involves accompanying feelings of frustration and hostility along with the sense of being pulled into earlier patterns from the patient's childhood with their parents. The analyst is required to hold two divergent experiences: the sense of hostility or annoyance with the patient along with the capacity to see the patient's bids for attention as a renewal of hope that the analyst's unique forms of listening will redress some of their psychic pain.

Toward a definition of nuisance

The concept of nuisance applied in clinical work can be quite vague in certain respects, raising the important question of whether a term borrowed from everyday language can be meaningfully defined and applied to psychoanalytic discourse.

To be sure, there are perils in incorporating a term borrowed from everyday language into psychoanalytic discourse. For example, the term can be so vague as to incorporate too many elements of negative countertransference. One notable example was Freud's (1926, p. 193) statement in *The Question of Lay Analysis*: "the fact that neurotics are a nuisance and an embarrassment for all concerned – including the analyst" suggests a use of the term nuisance to refer to elements of the analyst's frustration. He seems to be suggesting that the patient's resistance or refractoriness to treatment is experienced as a nuisance which is obviously a quite different use than that which Winnicott (1945a) provided. Implied in Freud's comment are also the general frustrations for both the analyst and patient regarding our tendencies to repeat (Cooper 2015; Reis 2024).

A second peril involves employing the analyst's subjective experience of annoyance as a reliable guide to what is happening in the transference. There are many reasons for an analyst to be annoyed in clinical work and while it is always important to reflect on its relevance to the transference, it is not necessarily reflective of the particular psychic context that I suggest regarding nuisance.

The essential element that Winnicott was underlining related to nuisance was the patient's often hostile and aggressive attempt to "start again" or resume a developmental process that was thwarted. He also captured the way that this attempt creates a disturbance in the other that might involve the other's "hatred", which might translate to annoyance, impatience or hostility.

I suggest here a very particular definition of nuisance that is organised in relation to the quality, quantity and psychic context of how aggression is experienced and expressed by the patient. Returning to the title of Winnicott's paper, "Home Again", the word "again" is crucial. He is describing patients who once had a home, a home that was disrupted or interrupted.

The patients I will discuss, and for whom I wish to elaborate a specific context for the term nuisance, have had elements of the attention they sought that have been interrupted or compromised. They are seeking to redress this loss through particular forms of anger or grievance that may collide with the analyst's efforts to understand the patient. In so doing, the patient often rejects what is on offer that the patient is seeking to find.

Patients who find ways to become a nuisance during their childhoods and as adults in their analysis may do so for a few different reasons. On the surface, some of these patients are angry about not receiving the attention that they want and are afraid to ask more directly. They remain stuck in patterns which involve marking the place where they believe they cannot receive what they wish for, but act in ways that ensure that it will be difficult to do so.

Others may be trying to get away with something in receiving parental attention as a test to find the limits of how they are loved. These patients are often expressing greed in their relationships with others, holding on to grievance about these matters through their behaviour. Analysis is often useful in transforming their grievance into a capacity to mourn what they wished for.

Locating Winnicott's concept of nuisance within his theory of aggression

In parsing Winnicott's very minimally explicated theory of nuisance, I place emphasis on the difference between his explication of both instinctual and environmentally reactive aggression that tests the environmental response when the object has already psychically established (e.g. Winnicott 1945a, 1945b, 1949), versus instinctual aggression that arises before the establishment of the object's separate existence (Winnicott 1969). In "Home Again", he is describing a setting in which the aliveness of the object with its potential for gratification as well as frustration and loss has been well established.

Winnicott (1945a) was still twenty years away from putting forward his new theory of aggression in "The Use of the Object" and the ways that the object's survival in response to expression of id impulses is essential to the child's ability to recognise the other (Winnicott 1969). It is in the "Use of an Object" paper that he describes how collision helps to establish a not-me reality and is essential to being recognised as a separate object. In "Home Again", we can see the seeds of his developing theory of a type of aggression that is "creative" (Winnicott 1969) insofar as it serves movement toward a greater capacity to accept external reality that is outside the individual's omnipotent control. Importantly though, "Home Again" details how the child has had to resort to defensive self-sufficiency in the context of loss rather than an undeveloped ability to perceive the object as separate from the self.

In "Aggression in Relation to Emotional Development", Winnicott (1950) elaborates the object's response that is implied in "Home Again". Winnicott (1950, 337) argues that "aggressive impulses do not give any satisfactory experience unless there is opposition". In some sense, Winnicott is developing here his similar idea in "Home Again" that the child needs to be met by the parents' limits. In his earlier discussion of nuisance (Winnicott 1945a), while he is explicitly describing an opposition response to the child's aggression and parents' awareness of limit, it is implied that the object needs to be able to set limits along with wanting an empathic stance toward the child's dilemma of trying to trust anew the object's availability. In each paper, Winnicott is elaborating a developmental context in which the child has an already established experience of the object that has been thrown into crisis.

Similarly, in his paper "Hate in the Countertransference" (Winnicott 1949), he emphasises both the mother's and analyst's ability to express hatred in the form of limits. In this paper, written at roughly the same time as "Home Again", Winnicott gives us a window into the object's experience of nuisance. Winnicott is stating in both papers that the object is established in the other's psyche and is hated. The analyst feels an accompanying level of hatred.

Winnicott (1956, 184), in his paper on the maternal preoccupation, refers in subtle ways to the importance of limits in his paper on the maternal preoccupation that was most specific about the mother's devotion and dedication to the child. He described the mother's dedicated attention to the infant, "for the time being". This fascinating phrase implies that there is a different kind of time that is also necessary for the mother and implicitly refers to her limits even in the context of elaborating the concept of maternal preoccupation.

In his paper "Psycho-Analysis and the Sense of Guilt", Winnicott (1965, 23) charts how the child moves from a sense of not taking the object into account to his or her capacity

for guilt. He states, “In analysis one could say ‘couldn’t care less’ gives way to guilt feeling” (23). Winnicott is here describing a sense of “ruthlessness” or lack of concern, and he is partly discussing ruthlessness in relation to instinctual aggression that continues even after the establishment of concern. Once again though, he is describing developments after the object has been established. It is different to say “couldn’t care less” than to not be aware at all of the object’s separate existence.

In “Home Again” Winnicott is elaborating how the child, after experiencing loss, can only find love through expressing the requisite hatred toward the object and can only feel love through the object’s hatred toward him or her. As Phillips (2004, 23) put it, “nuisance is a nice word for the hateful exchange that a relationship can survive, and by surviving can become resilient rather than merely wishful”,

However, Phillip’s use of the term “survival” in the context of Winnicott’s (1969) later use of the term survival is a potentially confusing one. The context for the description of nuisance is one of a return of the child to a home in which presumably some degree of ability to appraise and trust the external object has developed. In Winnicott’s (1969) description of object usage, the child has not yet developed the capacity to perceive the object as separate from their omnipotent control. In the clearest terms possible, survival in nuisance-making involves bearing the child’s instinctual or reactive hostility to having lost something and trying to test the waters of whether what has been lost can be reclaimed.

In “The Use of an Object”, survival means enduring the infant’s instinctual aggression prior to the object’s existence as a separate object. For Winnicott, that survival occurs in a process moving toward the attainment of the ability to integrate the object as separate. Put another way, “Home Again” describes a regressive context in which the object’s reliability has been challenged through separation versus a process in “The Use of an Object” in which it has not yet developed.

I now turn to two clinical examples which attempt to highlight an element of Winnicott’s (1945) insight into the developmental meaning of aggression against the environment as a sign of hope in exploring the object as trustworthy and capable of registering what the child is communicating in a way that the child can experience. My examples try to go further to explore the intersubjective mechanisms related to improvement when nuisance is featured, I suggest that the most crucial response by the analyst is an inner attitude that holds a paradoxical reality, namely an understanding of the aggressive behaviour as a renewed developmental turn (expression of hope) with an awareness of both the patient’s attachment to their hostility and their often subtle attacks on the setting.

Clinical vignette: L

A patient L describes having an arrangement with her husband regarding who will take the dog out at specific times of day. At times, when she does not want to take the dog out at her allotted time, L asks if he will take her turn. He reluctantly agrees to do so, at which point she invariably declines the offer. L has expressed curiosity about this tendency to ask and decline, usually annoying her husband.

In one analytic session L describes a feeling of wanting to know whether she can “fall into not having to do anything”.

- L: I want to be taken care of. When he [the husband] says that he is willing to walk the dog for me, I suddenly feel better and even energised. He is often kind of aggravated by the entire exchange and has now asked me not to ask him if he would take the dog out at my appointed time unless I really want him to do it. It is something about aggravating him that feels as important as the feeling of being able to depend on him. I almost feel like I am most loved at that moment. I haven't said to you yet, something I've had a fantasy about: "What if I stop associating, like not walking the dog. Would you get rid of me?"
- Analyst: You want to know whether I value you only if you comply and you imagine testing me.
- L: Yes, I don't know really whether someone cares without aggravating them.

In response to many of my interpretations, L often had a way of agreeing but she would announce the words slowly, "I think so", as if she was taking in my comments and coming to an agreement but expressing a reluctance to do so. Sometimes L would then elaborate and potentially add a different way of putting things together which made sense to us both, while at other times I felt that she was quite reluctant to say that she agreed. Over time her reluctance became a source of mild annoyance in me as though she resented or agreed with me, but she was holding something back. I began trying to pay more attention to that quality of her responsiveness and wondered whether what she was withholding was linked to a sense or a fantasy of what had been withheld from her regarding more individualised attention.

As her analysis progressed, L began associating to how much she did not want to agree with me, even when she did agree and even when she felt consciously pleased that I might have understood something about her. L described a feeling of wanting to irritate me and withhold something from me. She said that she felt that if she agreed with me, she would cease to occupy a place in my mind. As L began exploring this more deeply, I noticed that my sense of annoyance with L subsided. I could feel how much she was trying to work with her pain about not registering in my mind and the costs to her of trying to seek it in these indirect ways.

This led to much analytic activity exploring some of her relationship to the process of interpretation, including how she experienced, engaged with and held back from my interpretations. We began to develop a vocabulary for talking about when she was agreeing or disagreeing with me or doing something to ensure that I might listen given her conscious and unconscious fear that I would not.

The ranges and tone of her responses contained various registers of anxiety about whether she could trust my attention. There was a slow and reluctant yes that occurred when she agreed with me but was afraid to do so for fear that in agreeing, she would not be regarded as a separate person with needs for attention and would only be valued for her ability to acclimate to her brother's and parent's needs. When there was less at stake about agreeing or disagreeing, L could come right out with it. As L felt more trusting she could note in advance when she felt the impulse to disagree with me just to be defiant. L began to make links between when she was feeling neglected by me and her husband and how this would cause her "to want to make trouble".

L had always known that she was angry at her parents' tendency to accommodate her two-years-younger brother. He struggled both academically and socially and she felt that he received a disproportionate amount of attention to help him. In contrast to her

brother, L excelled in school and sports. She harboured resentment that her teachers acknowledged her talents more than her parents did, and that her parents' attention toward her schooling and talents shifted when her brother began school.

At one point, L began to link her way of slowly and reluctantly responding to me as a way of holding back from agreeing in order to ensure my attention. At various times, L said, "I can feel how angry I am when I am listening to you say something that seems right. I always feel like it's about time I was understood. I know this is crazy because you are trying to understand me and my husband is always trying to understand me."

As we analyzed more of L's need to do things that annoyed her husband and me in order to feel attended to, she gained conscious access to a sense of being gratified less by my trying to understand her than her need to mark how she had always felt a frustrated wish to be regarded as a separate person by her parents. This had been enacted repeatedly with her husband in asking things of him and when he agreed, refusing to take in his kindness.

L was holding on to grievance rather than integrate what her husband gave her or her analyst. I regard this as a form of nuisance because L was trying to experience and take in a home in analysis and her actual home but held on to expressing her anger about what she had experienced as not being appreciated for the child she was (e.g. Winnicott 1945a). My internal associations often landed on thoughts such as "how long will you hold on to this anger?"

L began spending more time in her analysis with her conscious awareness of the pull "to start trouble", and the part of her that still found it "funny". L became better about holding the paradoxical psychic reality that she felt hostility toward her parents, husband and me and that she wanted to let go of this hostility. She also began trusting the words we were expressing to each other about her anxiety about not being attended to as an alternative to acting this out in the ways that she had been doing with her husband and me. She was finding a home in which she could ask for attention without having to stir up trouble (Winnicott 1945a).

Initially my internal work with L involved finding ways to contain my mild annoyance with her hostility that was being expressed through her need to reject interpretations that she seemed to agree with. I was aware that L had "sulked" as a child when she felt angry about her parents' attention toward her brother. In her analysis, I felt that I was being recruited to feel as L had felt, namely that something was being withheld from me that L could give me.

As I tried to contain this annoyance that accompanied rejection, it yielded to my own curiosity about the rhythms and musicality of her rejections. I would liken this to Winnicott's (1945) suggestion to the parents of returning children that their child's hostile and annoying behaviour sometimes expressed renewed hope. In some ways, the analyst is required to hold the interpretation of this behaviour as a sign of hope while knowing that the behaviours also express what Rosenfeld (1971) described as the patient's hatred of dependency. There is an attack on the person on whom they are dependent, behaving in a way that they often know is annoying.

The particular kind of analytic holding that I am describing is a version of a complex form of holding, one that the patient has never been able to contain on their own. Not surprisingly, over time L's ability to gain curiosity about the incongruousness of her current behaviour with her husband and me led to far less annoyance in my

countertransference. My sense was that this also helped her to be able to put her hostility into words rather than destroy as much as she had what was actually being offered.

Eventually, our focus turned to experiencing and integrating more feelings of aloneness when she felt not registered by her parents. L gained access to sadness that these hostile behaviours had been her most reliable way to ask of things with each of us. What began as an expression of hope in the form of an indirect question for help from her husband and rejection of that help had become important as an expression of her anger about having to ask for help or not being noticed in advance of asking for help. She could gradually integrate that the help she wanted was already available to her now in her marriage and in her analysis. In some sense, she was “home again” (Winnicott 1945a).

Clinical vignette: B – becoming a nuisance in response to experiences of greed and aloneness

While B at times experienced his mother as caring and sometimes quite attuned to him, the youngest of three children and the only boy, he also struggled with feelings that it was sometimes difficult to get her attention. He regarded his mother as anxious about pleasing everyone, including her children. This meant to B that the child most actively asking for her attention was most likely to get it and he learned mechanisms for getting her attention.

When B began analysis, he described his wife’s annoyance with him when he would purposely ask her a question that he already knew the answer to. He said that when he did so he was often in a kind of dreamlike state that sounded vaguely dissociated. When she became irritated though, he had a familiar feeling of being “strangely pleased” by her irritation and then guilty. He wanted to understand this behaviour and his wife was extremely adamant about wanting him to begin an analysis.

B also behaved in this way at times with his son and daughter, who were now ten and fourteen years old, respectively. He would make “jokes” by asking about things that were already well-established pieces of information. His wife and children had begun a regular discourse about how annoying he was, and his wife had asked him to stop engaging in this with their children. B “joked” with them about the legitimacy of humour that uses repetition, and he cited comedians who had perfected this kind of humour such as Albert Brooks. They were not interested in this elaboration and in fact felt that his interest in the history of this type of humour was as annoying as the repetitive requests themselves.

From the years between when B was eight to ten years old, his father did some evening consulting, and B was alone with his mother and two older sisters for dinner. He recalled then that when he could not get his mother’s attention because she was distracted or involved with one of his sisters, he became purposely repetitive and sought humour through repetition. He said, “my mother seemed to know that I was desperate for her attention”.

Listening to B, I would sometimes associate to the comedian Albert Brooks, who would wear down the listener through repetition to the point that exhaustion through repetition and humour conjoin in an experience of laughter. It is a form of sadism and self-degradation cloaked as humour. In the context in which both my associations and B’s linked Albert Brooks to B, we could also say that B was seeking to receive attention with me and his family through hostile expressions in the face of feeling unseen and neglected.

B was also treating his family as the ignored child he had felt himself to be by not listening to their requests for him to stop. He felt though that he could communicate his wish for attention by beating a hoped-for not-dead horse, itself a self-hating activity that he knew would inevitably cause derision on the part of his sisters and now his wife and children. Paradoxically, B begged attention by becoming obnoxious and challenging in highly repetitive forms, seeking to find his mother or, more accurately, to express his hostility related to the wish for her to find and recognise him.

I think about B's obnoxious behaviour as to some extent being in line with Winnicott's notion of the child's capacity to become a nuisance. The child who experiences his parent as too depressed cannot ask of the parent something that will cause them to withdraw more or, maybe even worse, not respond at all. B's mother was not a dead mother. She was available to receive the annoyances of her son and often available to him, but B went about getting her attention in a sadistic and self-destructive way.

B also began analysis because of similar patterns at work. He had considerable success in his academic work but often felt a kind of compulsion to do something to put himself down in front of students or colleagues. Over time, we identified that if he did not do something self-effacing, he would have to accept their appreciation as "enough".

With me, he enacted some of these patterns a few months into his analysis by asking about his times for analysis when he knew that his three-times-weekly timings were consistent from week to week. Occasionally, after the weekend break, he would ask a question through email such as, "Are we meeting today?" When I asked him why he was unclear, he said something along the lines that he had ADHD, but he said so without conviction. Nor did I see this as a difficulty with object constancy. Instead, I could see no reason other than that he was needing to create a nuisance, likely seeking me to be aware of him outside our setting in a way that was not unlike what he did with his mother through repetitive and bad jokes. His sense of anger about not having the attention he wished for was enacted through these behaviours.

I realised a gradual countertransference annoyance with B, particularly his way of contacting me outside the session time and in doing so unconsciously communicating that what we had established as our setting was not enough. After a month or so of these requests, I stopped responding to his emails asking me to remind him of the time of his sessions. He was always on time for them, so the fact that I did not respond did not get in the way of him recalling when his actual sessions occurred. One day, he asked, "Why aren't you responding to my emails anymore about times?" I said, "I've come to feel that I'm not sure what you are asking me when you ask me questions about our schedule. I remember our times and I'm pretty sure you remember our times, so I think that you are communicating something to me other than the question you are asking." B started laughing and then grew quieter and sad and said that this was the kind of feeling that he could not get purchase on at home when he was annoying with his wife and children.

B: It's like if I don't check in with you before the session sometimes, it feels like I might really have it wrong. It's a lot going on. I think I'm trying to get away with something. I guess I do sort of want to irritate you too. I used to feel a sense of rising irritation in my mother that made me feel alive and excited. I think it was exciting to get my mother kind of bothered in this way and my oldest sister too. My youngest sister wasn't very interested, and I didn't care

about getting her riled up. Even though I felt my mother's irritation, I also felt that she loved me. I just wanted more.

There's more too. Maybe I'm pissed that it's all on your schedule. I don't even know what that means because we figured out times together. But I have to see you at these times. It's not always when I want to see you.

Analyst: You don't know what to do with feelings of wanting more. You recreate the same circumstance again and again by starting a small fire to have your wife's attention, your children's or mine.

B: I don't know what else to do. Is it annoying to you?

Analyst: Sometimes it is mildly annoying, but as I said to you, it feels like you are communicating to me something in these exchanges when you stir up the pot. I think that you want my attention before we begin the hour, before when you know, you are scheduled to have my attention.

B: I do feel that way. I think at these times I feel alone with my family and with you even before we meet and I think that I often feel alone when I do these things. It's fun in this perverse way because I don't feel so alone. Then I also feel ashamed.

Analyst: And you don't trust that you aren't alone with your wife, your children and with me. You want more proof.

B: I wish that I could hold on to that idea that I have enough. I'm trying to.

Discussion of session

B and I worked on the dense set of issues expressed in this session for years. In the repetitive enactment of his anger and greedy feelings of wanting more, B had become a nuisance in his analysis as a type of compromise formation between expressing hope for my more explicit attention, greedy wishes to get away with something and his anger about not getting the attention he wished for. His nuisance-making acts as a "double agent", not unlike the way Schafer (1968) described defences which express and conceal impulses. B moved back and forth between feeling aggrieved and being able to observe his greed regarding the attention that he craved.

I made repeated efforts to reach beneath B's reflexive behaviour to the sadness that he could sometimes express and that needed to be mourned. He hated having to compete with his sisters for his mother's attention. Eventually, we discovered that a part of him had always wanted to be a girl because, in his fantasy, he felt that he would have been the prettiest and smartest girl and that he would not have felt so angry and aggressive about not having as much of her attention as he wished for.

It is noteworthy that in my responsiveness to him in the session in which we discussed my decision to not respond any longer to his requests about starting time, I did something akin to what Ogden (1994, p. 225) referred to as interpretive action. Ogden defined interpretive action:

as the analyst's use of action (other than verbally symbolic speech) to convey to the analysand specific aspects of the analyst's understanding of the transference-countertransference which cannot at that juncture in the analysis be conveyed by the semantic content of words alone.

Ogden further suggested that for an interpretive action to accrue its specific symbolic and affective meaning the analyst must try to understand and silently formulate the transference-countertransference that is conveyed by the analyst's interpretive action.

Indeed, here, I had been examining my sense that B was expressing a great deal of hostility even as he was indirectly asking to bid for attention. I realised that the question beneath B's question might be more akin to the following unformulated words: "Do you remember and recognize me? What does a guy have to do around here to be remembered? Do I have to be a nuisance to be seen?" Eventually, I conveyed this interpretation to B. I was also aware that in repeating this behaviour with me, B was acting the role of a parent who does not remember or listen, and I was left with B's sense of a lack of registration. In line with what Winnicott (1945a) described as a self-sufficiency in the wake of mistrust and disappointment with the parent, including a sense of abandonment, B could not trust that I would be at his appointment at our agreed-upon time.

The more that B and I discussed his experiences of childhood and his experience of being in analysis, it became clear to us both that he could feel his mother's love and that he wished for more. B began speaking more and more about just wanting all the attention from his mother on these evenings and at other times. He was not so convinced that he was unseen as much as wanting to experience his mother as registering his wish to get her attention.

B also began relaying stories to me about how his sisters in various versions of these events relayed that they felt that, if anything, his mother was more likely to give him attention as a boy than they would receive as one of the girls in the family. It was also not lost on B that these specific memories involved the actual absence of his father, which may have stimulated even more the wish to gain more access to his mother. His wishes for more maternal attention had a distinctively Oedipal slant in this regard even as his greed suggested earlier longings as well.

We spent considerable time examining how B's bids for attention also enacted a kind of degradation and self-loathing. He degraded himself by saying something not funny and repetitive, resulting in those around him becoming annoyed with him. So, in some sense, his bid for attention contained the density of his own self-loathing about whether he deserved to be seen (e.g. Ogden 2024) and guilt about wanting more.

As B began to grow in his analysis, he could feel elements of his own wishes toward me for "more than is possible in analysis". He wanted to spend time with me outside analysis, especially in discussing music, even as he had some close friendships that revolved around shared musical tastes. The emergence of these wishes precipitated a lengthy period in analysis of various stages of mourning some of these unmet fantasies with me and his mother. He could make psychically felt distinctions between wanting more attention than he had had versus feeling aggrieved and deprived. In this sense, he could go "home again" (Winnicott 1945a), experiencing a psychic opening for sadness where there had been only anger and activities meant to stir others up.

A concluding thought

I have emphasised a particular use of the term nuisance to describe a form of characterological compromise in which the patient's hostile behaviour simultaneously veils and expresses both their hope for a greater sense of registration by parent or analyst and grievance. For one patient a wish for the kind of attention I have described was catalysed by

envy toward a sibling for the attention he received. For another, the patient could feel a sense of greed and a wish to not settle for what he could receive by way of my attention as analyst. In each instance, the analytic process facilitated these patients' ability to hold a paradox in which they experience more fully their hope as well as their angry feelings and self-destructive behaviour.

The analyst must guard against being too insulated from the noxious effects of the ways that patients create a nuisance. Thus, the insulation that we as analysts sometimes seek out to metabolise our frustrations with the patient's hostility may become its own form of resistance to analytic progress. It is important to realise that our commitment to metabolizing our patient's experience, albeit sometimes an uneven one, is intrinsic to the best kinds of attentiveness and understanding that analysis provides.

In this context of experiencing the patient's expression of nuisance as a compromise formation, it is important for the analyst to internally experience both the hope that the patient is communicating through their behaviour and the miserable retreat from such hope through what can feel like their nihilistic and hostile activity. In my experience, the patient needs to experience the analyst's internal holding of both sides of a paradoxical reality that they cannot yet hold and the internal work they do on the patient's behalf (Cooper 2019, 2024, 2025).

It is interesting to think about whether Winnicott's expression of nuisance as a form of hope is aimed at the level of the patient's experience, the patient's unconscious motivation or the listening position of the analyst. Rosenfeld's (1971) discussion of the patient's hatred of dependency elaborated the patient's conscious and unconscious experience of hatred toward the object whom we depend on. I have argued that nuisance as differentiated from other kinds of anger in narcissistic phenomena such as omnipotent object relations, devaluation and envy, and denial of separation includes a quality of both unconsciously expressed hope toward the object and a conscious and unconscious hatred of dependency.

For L, I became attuned over time to the particular tone of her response to many interpretations in which she felt recognised but simultaneously reluctant to agree. I became aware of this response as a kind of condensed demonstration of her requests of her husband and her hostile refusal to accept his willingness to help her.

With B, I worked over a period with my annoyance with his requests to remind him of appointment times so that I could become curious about what he was expressing and asking for. Through a kind of "interpretive action" (Ogden 1994), B was able to reflect on what he was asking for and communicate to me about his simultaneous wish for more time with me (and time he controlled) as well as his hostility that was enacted in his requests. Working with both sides of the patient's expression of hope and hostility involves a deep form of metabolizing their communication in what I regard as nuisance-making behaviour.

A matter that I only briefly touched in relation to B's way of becoming a nuisance relates to what I would call a kind of "comedy" of exclusion, one that is often Oedipally based. This activity involves a form of projective identification in which the ways that a child might have felt left out of the Oedipal couple are put into a current partner, evacuating feelings of being excluded into the other. Feelings of exclusion are defended against through these forms of nuisance and enacted by recruiting the partner to feel as the partner did as a child.

For B, in his fantasy he was always being excluded even if he came to realise that what he regarded as exclusion was the reality of being one of three children whom his mother could not attend to in the ways he wished for at any given moment. The forms of nuisance that he engaged in and that I emphasised involved forms of projective identification in which elements of uncontained anger and sadness were put into his children, his wife and me in his current life, the modern-day traces of a behaviour he clung to in childhood. He made them and me feel as the one who was not seen.

In many ways, Winnicott grasped nuisance-making as a bid for assurances of the parents' reliability. I have tried to detail the work that the analyst does on behalf of his patient to transform countertransference experience into meaningful interpretive responsiveness. The main volume of this analytic work involves the analyst's metabolisation of the affects being expressed that are challenging for the patient to contain (e.g. 1963, 1967, 1970).

I greatly appreciate Winnicott's deep understanding and initial effort to capture the complexity of nuisance as communication both in child development and in mature relationships alike. There is no relationship with another or the self that does not require tolerance of the compromises or limitations that we have internalised and which we seek, sometimes in futile ways, to redress, no matter how veiled.

Translations of summary

Frapper un cheval mort-vivant : vers une conceptualisation de l'agressivité dans le processus analytique. Winnicott (1945) a suggéré que certains types de comportement agressif chez un enfant qui retrouve ses parents après une longue période de séparation d'avec eux, peuvent être considérés comme l'expression d'un espoir lui permettant de se défaire des formes d'auto-suffisance défensives qu'il nourrissait, au profit d'une confiance renouvelée envers eux. L'auteur analyse les différentes conceptions développées postérieurement par Winnicott pour comprendre l'agressivité pulsionnelle et réactionnelle et la façon dont l'application de ses points de vue ultérieurs peut obscurcir le sens de l'agressivité dans les comportements agressifs. L'auteur propose une définition spécifique de l'agressivité dans l'analyse des adultes et ses manifestations dans la situation analytique. Chez les patients adultes qu'il décrit, la colère et l'hostilité s'expriment sous la forme de plaintes ou d'avidité se rapportant à des ruptures antérieures et se traduisant par une expérience d'inscription, chez les parents ou l'analyste, du besoin d'attention du patient. Deux situations cliniques impliquant soit une réticence consciente à accepter les interprétations de l'analyste, soit la formulation de demandes à l'analyste en dehors du cadre, sont considérées par l'auteur comme des formes d'agressivité. Il explore la façon dont l'analyste doit tenir compte de deux réalités psychiques – l'espoir du patient qu'exprime son agressivité et les limites de l'analyste à absorber la haine auto-destructrice du patient envers la dépendance (Rosenfeld, 1971). La prise en considération de ces deux réalités aide à transformer ces demandes auto-destructrices d'attention en une porte d'entrée au processus de deuil. L'analyste se doit de travailler de concert avec ses propres et subtiles expériences de perturbation, y compris l'hostilité, la détresse et la tentation de rejouer les rôles de la vie antérieure du patient.

Picchiare un cavallo nonmorto. Per una concettualizzazione del fastidio nel processo analitico. Winnicott (1945) ha suggerito che alcune tipologie di comportamento aggressivo del bambino che fa ritorno dopo una separazione prolungata dai genitori possono essere considerate come un'espressione di speranza, nella misura in cui egli abbandonerebbe in tal modo le proprie forme di autosufficienza difensiva per tornare a fidarsi nuovamente di un genitore. L'autore analizza i successivi e variegati approcci di Winnicott alla comprensione tanto dell'aggressività istintuale quanto di quella reattiva, esaminando inoltre come l'applicazione delle sue concezioni più tarde possa offuscare il significato dell'aggressività nel quadro dei comportamenti atti a provocare

fastidio. L'autore offre una definizione specifica di fastidio nell'analisi degli adulti, e anche del modo in cui esso si manifesta nel contesto analitico. Nei pazienti adulti da lui descritti, rabbia e ostilità sono la forma assunta dal risentimento o dall'avidità dovuti a precedenti rotture nell'esperienza della registrazione, da parte del genitore o dell'analista, dei bisogni di attenzione del paziente. L'autore considera due contesti clinici in cui la riluttanza consapevole ad accettare le interpretazioni dell'analista e l'avanzare richieste extrasetting nei suoi confronti sono intesi come modi per indurre del fastidio. Egli esamina inoltre come l'analista debba contemporaneamente sostenere due realtà psichiche— da un lato la speranza del paziente espressa nel suo dare fastidio, dall'altro i limiti dell'analista nell'assorbire l'odio autodistruttivo del paziente nei confronti della dipendenza (Rosenfeld, 1971). Tenere insieme queste due realtà aiuta a trasformare tali tentativi autodistruttivi di attirare l'attenzione in un'opportunità di elaborazione del lutto. All'analista è richiesto di elaborare le proprie sottili esperienze di disturbo, che possono andare dall'ostilità e dal senso di impotenza al sentirsi spinto a mettere in atto ruoli che appartengono alla vita passata del paziente.

Ein untaugliches Pferd schlagen: Auf dem Weg zu einer Konzeptualisierung von störendem Verhalten im analytischen Prozess. Winnicott (1945) schlug vor, dass bestimmte Arten aggressiven Verhaltens von Kindern, die nach einer längeren Trennung von ihren Eltern zurückkehren, als Ausdruck von Hoffnung betrachtet werden können, in der sie ihre Formen der defensiven Selbstgenügsamkeit aufgeben können, um wieder auf die Ergänzung durch einen Elternteil zu vertrauen. Der Autor analysiert Winnicotts spätere verschiedene Ansätze zum Verständnis sowohl instinktiver als auch reaktiver Aggression und wie die Anwendung seiner späteren Ansichten die Bedeutung von Aggression in störendem Verhalten verschleiern kann. Der Autor bietet eine spezifische Definition von „störendem Verhalten“ in der Analyse von Erwachsenen und wie es sich im analytischen Kontext manifestiert. Bei den von ihm beschriebenen erwachsenen Patienten treten Wut und Feindseligkeit als Ausdruck von Unmut oder Gier in Bezug auf frühere Brüche in der Wahrnehmung der Bedürfnisse des Patienten nach Aufmerksamkeit durch die Eltern oder den Analytiker auf. Er betrachtet zwei klinische Kontexte, in denen die bewusste Weigerung, den Interpretationen des Analytikers zuzustimmen, sowie das Stellen von Forderungen an den Analytiker außerhalb der Sitzung als Formen von Störverhalten. Er untersucht, wie der Analytiker zwei psychische Realitäten aushalten muss – die Hoffnung des Patienten, die sich in seinem störenden Verhalten äußert, sowie die Grenzen des Analytikers, den selbstzerstörerischen Hass des Patienten auf Abhängigkeit zu absorbieren (Rosenfeld, 1971). Das Bewusstsein für diese beiden Realitäten hilft dabei, diese selbstzerstörerischen Versuche, Aufmerksamkeit zu erlangen, in eine Chance zum Trauern zu verwandeln. Der Analytiker muss sich mit seinen eigenen subtilen Erfahrungen von Verstörung auseinandersetzen, darunter Feindseligkeit, Hilflosigkeit und der Drang, Rollen aus dem früheren Leben des Patienten auszuagieren.

Azotar un caballo no muerto: hacia una conceptualización de la molestia en el proceso analítico. Winnicott (1945) sugirió que ciertos tipos de conducta agresiva del niño que vuelve de una separación sostenida respecto de los padres pueden considerarse como una expresión de esperanza, en la que pueden ceder sus formas de autosuficiencia defensiva para confiar otra vez en el suplemento de los padres. El autor analiza diversos enfoques posteriores de Winnicott para comprender la agresión instintiva y la reactiva y cómo la aplicación de sus opiniones posteriores puede ofuscar el significado de la agresión en el comportamiento molesto. Asimismo, ofrece una definición específica de molestia en el análisis de adultos y cómo ella se manifiesta en el contexto analítico. En los pacientes adultos que describe, la rabia y la hostilidad se presentan como expresión del agravio o codicia respecto a rupturas más tempranas en la experiencia de registro del padre/madre o analista de las necesidades de atención del paciente. El autor analiza dos contextos clínicos en los que participa la reticencia consciente a estar de acuerdo con las interpretaciones del analista, así como el planteamiento de reclamos fuera del encuadre como formas de comportamiento molesto. Explora cómo el analista requiere mantener dos realidades psíquicas a la vez: la esperanza del paciente que es expresada en su comportamiento molesto, como también los límites del analista en absorber el propio odio autodestructivo del paciente a la dependencia (Rosenfeld, 1971). El mantener estas dos realidades ayuda a transformar esta búsqueda autodestructiva de atención en una oportunidad de duelo. Se requiere que el analista elabore sus propias experiencias sutiles de perturbación, entre ellas la hostilidad, la impotencia y el impulso a actuar roles de la vida más temprana del paciente.

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Patient Anonymisation Statement

Potentially personally identifying information presented in this article that relates directly or indirectly to an individual, or individuals, has been changed to disguise and safeguard the confidentiality, privacy and data protection rights of those concerned.

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