

The X Factor: Reflections on Containment

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The X factor (Oxforddictionaries.com, n.d.)

noun

1. a noteworthy special talent or quality:

‘There are plenty of luxury cars around, but the S-Type has that special X factor.’

2. a variable in a given situation that could have the most significant impact on the outcome:

‘The young vote may turn out to be the X factor.’

Around a year ago I began an academic learning journey when I undertook to study for an MSc in residential child care. My initial goal when undertaking this was to be more effective in improving outcomes for the young people I worked with. Up until this point in my career, my practice development and understanding of my role as a residential worker had been shaped by a combination of observing experienced practitioners, short training courses, and trial and error. I observed individuals whose practice resonated with my own thoughts on positive practice and I tried to emulate them. Throughout my six years in residential care I have been lucky enough to work alongside a small number of individuals who seemed to have a magical ‘X factor’ within their practice that resonated calm, understanding and at the same time professionalism. This X factor was almost tangible and was obvious, not only to myself but also to the staff teams and the young people that they shared the life-space with. Those staff members seemed to be able to calm stormy waters just by being present; they radiated calm and understanding which positively affected everybody within the life-space they were present in. When working with them I felt inexplicably safe and able to deal positively with situations which historically I found extremely challenging and anxiety-provoking. I believe I am not alone in my observations; I suspect my experiences with the X factor are replicated in residential homes and units all over the world and for the most part are not fully understood. Throughout those six years in practice I strived to understand and replicate this X factor but it seemed that, for the most part, I could never put my finger on exactly what the magical ingredient within their practice was. My belief was that if only I could understand this magical ingredient, I could communicate this understanding to my whole staff team. After all, if one staff member with the X factor made me feel safe then imagine the impact of a whole team with the same ability.

Around six months ago in the course of my studies I was introduced to the concept of containment. This concept was first introduced by Wilfred Bion (1962). Bion’s concept of containment focuses on the emotional containment provided by the ‘container’ to the ‘contained’ (Ruch, 2007). An example of this is a mother soothing her child’s anxiety by understanding their communication and meeting their physical or emotional need. Over time the child learns to contain their own anxieties through repeated, sensitive, relational interaction. For those familiar with attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) or the stress/relaxation cycle, this process should resonate strongly as the relationship between the individuals involved facilitates the potential for emotional regulation.

Unfortunately lots of our young people in residential care may not have had enough of these soothing or containing experiences and, as such, have not fully developed an internal ability to regulate the feelings they experience. This can result in what is often interpreted as challenging behaviour. I began to consider that if I tried to view negative behaviour/communication as a cry for help instead of an act of aggression, that it would be

possible to open a window into other possibilities for supporting the young people I work with. I view containment as a lens to use when understanding the impact of our young people's uncontained feelings and emotional states, but also my own reactions to challenging situations and those of my co-workers. Critically, a lack of containment resulting from complex situations can lead to cognitive disruption, or a pickled head, as it was once described to me. Without the ability to think clearly most situations result in anxiety, which in turn leads to further feelings of being uncontained.

For my own part I have been lucky to receive containing experiences throughout my childhood and as a result I have developed my own coping mechanisms for dealing with the challenges of everyday life. However I can still reflect on times when the unknown has created very real uncontained moments despite my own coping mechanisms. One example is a cold and icy night when I was waiting for my wife to return home from her drama practice in a town some 25 miles away. Despite the fact I knew that she had driven that road hundreds of times before, I became more and more anxious as the time I expected her home came and went. I managed my feelings of anxiety for half an hour before deciding first to phone her, then when I got no answer, to phone her mother who was also at drama practice with her. When I was told by her mother that she should be back by now I could genuinely feel my stomach turning and my mind racing. I am sure you can appreciate all of the thoughts that rushed through my head at 100 miles an hour, causing me to become more and more distressed. This went on for what seemed an eternity until after what was actually a further ten minutes my wife walked in the door with a smile on her face and my anxiety melted away like the snow on the road outside. It turned out that she had followed a road gritter all the way back so the journey took twice as long as usual. That forty minutes and the sensation of being in an emotional whirlpool is something I often reflect on when working with a young person who seems to be coming apart at the seams. After all, if I have had all of my positive containing experiences and can still be subject to such anxiety what must our young people feel with their experiences of trauma on a daily basis? I can honestly say that having somebody with me during those forty minutes would have made them easier to cope with and given me the opportunity to reflect on some of my thinking during that time.

From the first time I read about containment it struck me that this process of making unmanageable feelings manageable is something that every residential worker carries out to some extent in the course of their day's work, even if it is as simple as making sure the right breakfast cereal is available. Then I had my light bulb moment. The practitioners that I had observed with what I perceived as an X factor were extremely skilled at containing anxiety for both staff and young people. Their body language, tone of voice, facial expressions and general approach resonated personal, emotional understanding. They seamlessly absorbed uncontained feelings and gave them back in a manageable form. This emotional awareness and containment allowed these practitioners to see the true communication in the behaviour and actions of our young people and staff, and they were able to use their skills to take the anxiety of the staff and young people and magically make it feel more bearable. What a skill! On reflection, I strongly suspect that they are able to do this as a result of feeling contained themselves, which means they are able to think clearly at the point when others are experiencing their own pickled head moments.

I strongly believe that the concept of containment can be applied to so many areas of our practice because we should be emotionally available in all aspects of our role as residential care workers. As a consequence of allowing ourselves to be emotionally available we cannot help but be in some way emotionally affected by the daily challenges we experience while living in the life-space with our young people who have had experiences with trauma and neglect. The upside to allowing ourselves to be emotionally available is that we then have the potential to enter into genuine relationships with our young people. We can share their

highs, lows and everything else in between, not as an instructor, but as an equal, walking alongside them and experiencing their journey.

I have found that applying containment theory to my practice in an effort to consistently understand my emotional baseline has given me the ability to refrain from entering into a mirroring of the emotional distress and negative communication, and instead supported me to help to soothe the distressing emotions present. Putting on the containment lens allows me to see the behaviour and communication and gives me the opportunity to stop and think before I take action. This process has been profound in its impact on my ability to support young people who are exhibiting both physical manifestations of a lack of containment and emotional ones. It has also helped me to provide clarity and reflection for my colleagues who have experienced a challenging situation and are trying to understand why and what else they could have done.

I have also made a personal link between containment and Thom Garfat's work on meaning-making (Garfat, 2004). Garfat speaks not only about what we intend to communicate but what meaning is made of it by the recipient in the context of their culture and their previous experience. To me it makes perfect sense that the young person who seems to be so uncontained that they appear to be permanently hyper-aroused will find great difficulty in understanding our seemingly obvious attempts to be supportive. By viewing their behaviour and actions through the lens of containment and meaning-making we can give ourselves the focus to be aware of our own emotional state and are able to think clearly to understand the issues present and the meaning that the young person is making from our communications. Applying the lenses of containment and meaning making can therefore be equated with a visit to the opticians that improves our sight, or in this case, our insight.

The process of understanding containment and subsequently linking it to meaning-making has had a massive impact on my practice. I feel better equipped to support both my colleagues and young people with whom I share the life-space. My anxiety resulting from my role feels greatly reduced and I have gained confidence within myself. I truly believe that the X factor I have observed is within my grasp and is within the grasp of every residential worker who takes the time to understand containment theory and apply it to their practice. And while it may be a terrible TV programme, for me the X factor is also a magical ingredient in understanding the emotional journey we share with our young people.

References

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