THE LANGUAGE OF WINNICOTT

A Dictionary of Winnicott's Use of Words

SECOND EDITION

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Introduction

The writings of Donald Woods Winnicott [1896–1971]

Donald Woods Winnicott was a paediatrician and psychoanalyst, whose writings are made up of theoretical papers, reviews, journal articles, and letters. His first publication was *Clinical Notes on Disorders of Childhood* (1931a) produced as one of a Practitioner's Aid Series for paediatricians. When Winnicott published this volume, he had been working as a paediatrician for seven years and was in the process of training as a psychoanalyst at The Institute of Psycho-Analysis in London. This meant that, as well as his full-time work as a paediatrician, he was undergoing psychoanalysis with James Strachey and was beginning to treat adult patients in psychoanalysis. As a result, although his first publication was written for paediatricians, the reader can discern the impact of psychoanalysis on his work with children and their families. In the Preface to his first publication Winnicott writes: "Indirectly to Professor Sigmund Freud I am grateful for an increasing ability to enjoy investigating emotional factors." Later on, in the Introduction, he writes:

> The child, in its difficult task of finding out how much of instinctual urges can be harnessed without leading to a clash with the ideal, needs friends. The proper friendships are those formed at school and in the immediate environment. Included in the environment is probably a doctor, and much of his work is a specialized form of friendship.
>
> [*Clinical Notes on Disorders of Childhood*, pp. 5–6]

These words convey the essence of Winnicott's communication throughout the whole of his subsequent writings—a sensibility to the human need for reliable relationships. It is this attitude to the individual's need for a reliable m/other/environment that characterizes Winnicott's contribution to the development of psychoanalytic theory, as theory and practice, in child and adult work.

Winnicott qualified as an adult psychoanalyst in 1934 and in the following year as the first male child psychoanalyst with the Institute of Psychoanalysis. From this time until his retirement from paediatrics three decades later, he continued to work both as a paediatrician and a psychoanalyst for children and adults in private practice. Consequently, his major contributions to the development of psychoanalytic theory have been shaped by his involvement with families and their children in his role as paediatrician, in tandem with his clinical work as a psychoanalyst. It must also be borne in mind that his personal experience of psychoanalysis, first with James Strachey and then with Joan Riviere, was central to his developing theories. In the last few years of his life he wrote about how he was affected by these two different analysts (Winnicott, 1965v [1962]; 1989f [1967]).

The next two publications, *Getting to Know your Baby* (Heinemann, 1945) and *The Ordinary Devoted Mother and Her Baby* (a BBC publication), are the transcripts of radio talks for parents given between 1940 and 1950. By 1957 both publications were out of print and were republished in one volume, *The Child and the Family*, by Tavistock Publications. In the same year, a companion volume, *The Child and the Outside World*, was published; in this, the papers were addressed to parents and all professionals working with the older child in the context of society. In 1964, most of the papers from these four volumes were compiled in one volume—*The Child, the Family and the Outside World*—which during

the 1960s became a popular book for all young families, as well as a recommended text on the reading lists for courses in teacher training, social work, and child care.

Winnicott's first significant psychoanalytic paper was "The Manic Defence",[1] which he presented to a scientific meeting of the British Psycho-Analytical Society in 1935. This was to be the first of many papers addressed to his psychoanalytic colleagues, and in 1958 a collection of these papers along with those addressed to professionals working with children—*Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis*—was published by Tavistock Publications. This has become one of the major volumes. The complement to this volume, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, published in 1965, is a collection of papers mostly addressed to psychoanalysts. In the same year another volume of Winnicott's papers (most of which had been published in various journals between 1950–64) was published by Tavistock Publications. *The Family and Individual Development* is a combination of broadcasts and lectures given to practitioners working with families and children.

Meanwhile Winnicott was teaching, supervising, and lecturing at home and abroad, and before his death in 1971 two more volumes of his work were in preparation. In *Playing and Reality*, which has become one of the best known of his volumes, Winnicott explores the themes relating to his concept of transitional phenomena. He had first developed this concept in his 1951 paper, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena" (1953c [1951]). In contrast, *Therapeutic Consultations in Child Psychiatry* is a collection of case studies from Winnicott's work as a child psychiatrist. It illustrates how he applied his psychoanalytic thinking clinically in ways that facilitated a child's or adolescent's development with minimal intervention.[2] Many of the cases illustrate Winnicott's use of the Squiggle Game in the diagnostic interview. (*see* SQUIGGLE GAME)

[1] This was Winnicott's reading-in paper for Full Membership of the British Psycho-Analytical Society.

[2] In this sense Winnicott was one of the early pioneers in making use of psychoanalytic theory and practice to assist those not able to undergo a full analytic treatment.

When Winnicott died, he left many unpublished papers, letters, and clinical notes, and in 1977 his widow Clare Winnicott, a social worker and also a psychoanalyst, founded The Winnicott Publications Committee,[3] with the aim of publishing this large body of work. Over the next 20 years the editors were responsible for publishing another nine volumes of Winnicott's papers (Davis, 1987). In addition to these, a selection of Winnicott's letters was published in 1987. To date there are 22 publications of Winnicott's works (see the Complete List of D. W. Winnicott Publications). The first five are out of print, though most of the papers are reproduced in the 1964 publication, *The Child, the Family and the Outside World* (1964a).

The main aim of Clare Winnicott's project was to publish all the unpublished work, and this has mostly been achieved. But, however many more books on Winnicott are published, including this one, the full realization of Winnicott's contribution to child health and psychoanalysis will not be in evidence until the publication of *The Collected Psychoanalytic Works of D. W. Winnicott*. At least 12 volumes are planned, and the writings will be presented chronologically, from 1919 to 1971. The collection will include a concordance and some unpublished writings (mostly short papers and correspondence) that have recently been discovered in the archives. The principal bibliography will be that of Knud Hjulmand, which will be extended as each new piece of writing is added. The *Collected Works* project, sponsored by The Winnicott Trust, has been developing since 1998, and the work is ongoing.[4]

Winnicott's theoretical matrix

Elsewhere I have suggested that Winnicott's work can be divided into a Foundation period followed by three further phases, each marked by a major theoretical advance (see Abram, 2007):

- Foundations: 1919–1934

[3] In 1984 just before her death, Clare Winnicott drew up a Deed Trust for the committee to become the Winnicott Trust.

[4] A publication date has not yet been set.

- Phase One: 1935–1944 There's No Such Thing as a Baby
- Phase Two: 1945–1960 Transitional Phenomena
- Phase Three: 1960–1971 The Use of an Object

The forthcoming *Collected Psychoanalytic Works of D. W. Winnicott* will illustrate in greater detail how his thinking evolved and the way it can be seen to fall into distinct phases. In this Dictionary, however, the focus is on the key (component) conceptions that structure the theoretical matrix.

Human nature: Winnicott's frame of reference

Running through everything that Winnicott writes is a preoccupation with *the human condition* and *what it means to be a subject.* All his questions, from very early on, are to do with the meaning of life and what it is within that makes life worth living. As his work developed, he placed psychoanalysis firmly in the frame of human nature (see Green, 1996, in Abram, 2000). And much of what inspired Winnicott about Melanie Klein's work, especially her focus on the baby's subjective experience of his body and her observations of an early oedipal constellation, made sense from his observations in his daily paediatric work. Early on, however, he emphasized that the individual's emotional development was always in relation to the m/other. Thus, crucially, the key to the success of failure of the baby's development lay in the m/other's contribution, in the way she negotiated the infant's passage through the stages of dependency. It is this emphasis on subject/object relations that distinguishes Winnicott's work. Building on Freud, and in discourse, and often disagreement, with Klein, he introduces a genuine paradigm shift in psychoanalytic thinking.

The matrix of Winnicott's work pivots around one major notion: the centrality of the *sense of self*. This notion is intrinsic to all the others, and central to it is the interpersonal (intersubjective) environment. The three principal concepts that structure this matrix are—*the parent–infant relationship, transitional phenomena,* and *primary psychic creativity.* Each underpins a major phase of his theoretical development.

Parent–infant relationship

Winnicott's realization that "*there's no such thing as a baby*"[5] meant that he never again conceptualized without recognizing the infant's *dependency* on the object; he always insisted that because of the baby's dependent state, the m/other's attitude would colour her baby's internal world and impact on his emotional development. While his work with Melanie Klein may have helped him to focus on the internal world of the newborn infant and the developing child, he came to feel that her development of Freud's work took insufficient account of the m/other and her subjective states of mind in her approach to her infant (Winnicott, 1965v [1962]). He could not ignore the daily experience of his paediatric practice, which seemed to reveal the interrelationship between the baby's emotional development and the mother's emotional care. As he forged his own theories, in discourse with Klein and the Kleinians, he increasingly emphasized the crucial nature of the environment and how its psychical as well as its physical qualities influenced and shaped the subject's psyche.[6]

In the early 1950s Winnicott began to refer to the "environment–individual set-up" to emphasize the power and responsibility of the real object (the m/other) in the world and how her subjective states of mind impacted on the emotional development of the newborn infant. Developing this theme in his paper "Providing for the Child in Health and Crisis" (1965x [1962]), he draws a clear correlation between the baby's age and the failure of the environment and shows how the earlier the failure, the more severe the mental illness. The subject's sense of self is thus shaped by the adaptation of the environment/object to the baby's needs/state of dependency.

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[5] See "Anxiety Associated with Insecurity" (Winnicott, 1958d [1952]).

[6] When Winnicott refers to "environment" in his theorizing, he is really focusing on how the mother feels about her baby, which includes her approach and in particular her identity with her newborn baby's predicament (*see* PRIMARY MATERNAL PREOCCUPATION).

Primary psychic creativity

Primary psychic creativity is Winnicott's concept that emphasizes how the biological needs in the baby are attended to by the mother/environment. It is this *attending to* the infant's biological need (which at the very early stage of life is not separable from emotional need), through the mother's emotional response, that will constitute what Winnicott describes in *Human Nature* (1988 [1954]) as the theoretical first feed.

> The theoretical first feed is represented in real life by the summation of the early experiences of many feeds. After the theoretical first feed the baby begins to have material with which to create.
>
> [*Human Nature*, p. 106]

For Winnicott the baby is born into the world equipped with a creative potential. This inherited tendency (innate predisposition based on bodily needs and the impulse to grow) is bound up with the sensations in the body and the baby's state of absolute dependence. The mother's ability to recognize her baby's predicament helps her to respond to his needs—that is, offer her breast.[7] This very first contact between mother and infant is the beginning of a gradual building up of the baby's illusion of omnipotence. The illusion of omnipotence is the baby's experience that his need (hunger) creates the breast (food). Winnicott sees this as the crucial moment that constitutes the foundations for all further development. The mother's ability to adapt to her baby's needs facilitates the illusion of omnipotence. This is the theoretical first feed.

> At least until we know more I must assume that there is creative potential, and that at the theoretical first feed the baby has a personal contribution to make. If the mother adapts well enough the baby assumes that the nipple and the milk are the results of a gesture that arose out of need, the result of an idea that rode in on the crest of a wave of instinctual tension.
>
> [*Human Nature*, p. 110]

[7] But, as Winnicott stresses, the offering has to involve the mother's *desire* to provide what is needed through a deep identification with her baby's predicament of absolute dependence.

The wave of instinctual tension—that is, hunger—has to be met by the mother's adaptation (deep identification) to her baby's needs and IF the timing is good enough, then the baby's instinct tension is released, and as a consequence he starts to realize that his hunger can be satiated by something that he does: "I cry, and the food comes". His action does not just satisfy hunger in the way Freud wrote about the instinct, but, and critically, it provides the baby with an illusion that he has created the object: "I cry, and the food comes, because I made it arrive by my need/crying." It is this illusion of omnipotence that contributes to the baby's ability to distinguish between Me and Not-me. To illustrate the sequence relating to the development of a sense of self arising out of the illusion of omnipotence, Winnicott (1967c) wrote the following:

> When I look I am seen, so I exist.
> I can now afford to look and see.
> I now look creatively and what I apperceive I also perceive.
> In fact I take care not to see what is not there to be seen (unless I am tired).
>
> ["Mirror role of mother and family in child development", p. 114]

The potential to create the object,[8] therefore, exists in the newborn baby, and for this potential to develop into a capacity, the mother must be able to identify with her baby's state of absolute dependence. Winnicott named this particular quality of identification "primary maternal preoccupation". The not-good-enough mother forces the baby into finding a way of protecting his illusion of omnipotence (which will have occurred only fleetingly), and the subject's way of protecting the self is to become compliant to the (inappropriate) demands of the environment. In his 1960 paper, "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self", Winnicott shows how the development of a false compliant self is based on

[8]Winnicott makes a point of saying that he "puts great stress on this part of the study of human nature"(*Human Nature,* p. 111). It is an alternative to seeing only projection and introjection in the newborn infant. Winnicott states that he wants to assume that, in each infant, at the beginning there is "creative potential"—that the baby at the theoretical first feed has a personal contribution to make.

the baby's need to protect his primary psychic creativity that is lodged in the true self.

For the mother to be able to provide the theoretical first feed, she will have to be able to *survive* her newborn baby's ruthless need for her. This *ruthlessness* is what Winnicott earlier named *primary aggression,* but later in his work he described as the necessary *destruction* of the object and he explores *how* the good-enough external object *survives* the baby's primitive attack/need. This is another aspect of what occurs at the theoretical first feed and is associated with the baby's excited states and the mother's capacity to identify with her baby's communications. The good-enough mother survives by not becoming overwhelmed by the baby's expression of intense instinct tension, and she is able to tolerate her baby's agitated states in her effort to find out and understand through her empathic attention. The mother who is not able to tolerate this ordinary demand but, instead, tends to feel attacked by the baby and even persecuted by the overwhelming feelings she projects on to the baby is the mother who does not survive.[9] However much she wants to do well by her infant, she will in fact fail her baby and compromise his developing sense of self.

Transitional phenomena

Through his observation and understanding of the infant's early predicament, Winnicott offers a theory that accounts for the baby's changing inner experience and journey towards the capacity to symbolize.[10] This is where he builds on Freud's theory of erotogenic zones and stages by elaborating the relationship between early autoerotic impulses (e.g. thumb-sucking) and the emergence of a special object, like a doll or a teddy. Winnicott named this

[9] This aspect of primary psychic creativity was developed especially in Winnicott's later work, particularly in one of his last papers, "The Use of an Object and Relating through Identifications" (1969i [1968]).

[10] The spatula game, as described in one of Winnicott's early papers, "The Observation of Infants in a Set Situation" (1941b), shows the beginnings of the notions he develops in the early 1950s of transitional phenomena.

special object a *transitional object*. He saw it as a salient marker of an intermediate stage of *transitional phenomena* and functioning, during which the baby is helped through good-enough maternal care to separate inner and outer worlds. He will only achieve this adequately if the actual object/environment/mother can adapt to his real needs in such a way that he builds up a sense of what the real world can provide. In essence, the process of separating inner from outer, Me from Not-me, is a journey from sensory immediacy to symbolic awareness. Winnicott details the stages of this process and describes how it culminates in the baby's ability to play.

The capacity for creative play comes about through the successful negotiation of this intermediate area that is neither inside nor outside and lies between union and separateness. Later, in *Playing and Reality* (1971a), Winnicott elaborates further how transitional experiences persist into adult life and contribute to cultural experience (e.g. the enjoyment of music and/or football). His theory thus offers both a new understanding of human development and a richer, less pathological account of later mental life. In this *potential space* transitional states of mind can be experienced between and within the dyadic relationship. (*see* ILLUSION)

From a clinical perspective, the theory also offers a new approach to the analytic relationship as a realm of illusion. Therefore it is not enough to analyse the patient's free associations and interpret the unconscious content. What matters is the patient's capacity for illusion (play), for only through play can the patient discover a sense of self and personal experience. If this is lacking, analysis will be a false activity, an exercise in compliance with the analyst. The analyst in this case needs to facilitate the patient's capacity for play: he must wait and allow room (potential space) for the capacity to develop, and this requires a different kind of technique.[11] This is a further example of how Winnicott draws into the domain of psychoanalysis activities that were first ob-

[11] As discussed by Winnicott in "The Use of an Object and Relating through Identifications" (1969i [1968]).

served in his work as a paediatrician alongside his experience as a patient in psychoanalysis.

The sense of self

As stated above, Winnicott's explicit study of human nature and emotional development constitutes an overarching conception *the sense of self,* making Winnicott's work essentially a theory of the self. His questions are concerned with what constitutes the *sense of self* and how it comes into being. In the last decade of his life he explores the complexities of this process and how it gave meaning to individual experience.

Developmentally, the *sense of self* begins at the theoretical first feed, when the baby's innate *primary psychic creativity* begins to be realized. But the self does not come fully into being until the third or fourth month of life, when the baby begins to be able to distinguish between Me and Not-me. The environment/m/other is entirely responsible for whether or not this stage will be reached. The more the environment fails, the more the baby will have to enlist techniques to protect the true self; a compliant false self will then develop. Such environmental failure is associated with the notion of gross impingements that interrupt the infant's continuity of being. What appears to be a good environment may not necessarily be good enough for that particular baby.

While not denying the importance of *inherited tendencies*—the innately biological—in all newborn babies, Winnicott's focus lies on the m/other's function in identifying with the baby's dependent state. Her combination of physiological and emotional nurturing is the only way in which the baby's nature and inherited tendencies can be realized. In this respect, his notion of the environment, influenced by Darwin, and in line with the work of Freud and Anna Freud, is essentially of a psychic environment where the baby's well-being depends on the mother's feelings about her baby and the way these affect her response to him. This theory necessarily takes into account how the mother herself felt as a baby and the quality of holding she received from her own mother.

Winnicott's work on true and false self is an important contribution to psychoanalytic theory not only in its own right, but also because, clinically, it alerts the analyst to the varying shades of true and false experience within the transference–countertransference matrix.[12]

THE ENTRIES AND HOW TO READ THE REFERENCES

Each entry has its own numbered contents list to indicate the pertinent themes of the concept. This list is followed by a brief definition of the word or phrase.

The entries contain selected quotations from Winnicott's papers, spanning almost forty years, to track the evolution of his theories. At the end of each block quotation the title of the paper and date of writing are referenced in square brackets. All the papers quoted in each entry are listed in chronological order in the reference list at the end of the entry. This reference list shows three dates: the first date denotes the historical date of writing; the second date (in bold) indicates the Winnicott publication in which the reader will find the paper (see the D. W. Winnicott Publications); and the third date is the code assigned to the paper in the D. W. Winnicott Bibliography. For example:

After a block quotation in the text:

["Ego distortion", 1960, p. 141]

In the end-of-entry reference list:

1960 Ego distortion in terms of true and false self. In: **1965b**. 1965m

In the D. W. Winnicott Publications:

1965b *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment.* London: Hogarth.

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[12] A false self can often hide serious disturbance as Winnicott points out in "Classification: Is There a Psychoanalytic Contribution to Psychiatric Classification?" (1965h [1959]). The theory of true and false self also relates to Winnicott's work on regression (1955d [1954]). (*see* REGRESSION)

In the D. W. Winnicott Bibliography:

1965m [1960] Ego distortion in terms of true and false self. In: *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (1965b). London: Hogarth, 1965 (140–152).

NOTE

In principle, the female individual pronoun has been used, but when referring to the mother and baby the latter often becomes "he", simply for ease of distinction between mother and baby.