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Winnicott and the (un)integrated self

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ABSTRACT

The capacity to relax and letting one's mind wander is one of the cornerstones of psychoanalysis. In cases where this capacity seems hindered, the reasons are characteristically sought from particular and specific inhibitions: what is thereby taken to be interfered is not the *capacity* of relaxation but only the *activation of this capacity* in a particular regard. In contrast to this mainstream way of thinking, Winnicott argues that the capacity for mental relaxation is a developmental achievement and presupposes a safe sense of integration. The present article investigates this dynamism. It clarifies how an integral sense of self arises out of primary unintegration, explains how a well-established sense of self grounds the ability to relax, and underlines the centrality of relaxed unintegration in everyday life as well as in the analytic situation.



KEYWORDS

Relaxation; integration; unintegration; unit status; holding; impingement

Introduction: Letting one's mind wander

The psychoanalytic tradition has put a lot of effort in clarifying how *a coherent sense of self* gradually emerges out of something with less clear boundaries (e.g. Freud 1930; Mahler, Pine, and Bergman 1975; Stern 1985). The contrary direction – namely, direction from coherence to incoherence – has received much less interest. To be sure, pathological breakdown and experiences of mystical self-dissolution have been rather extensively studied, but what is lacking is an analysis of *everyday experiences in this reverse order*: casual experiences in which the individual temporarily loosens their alert mode, becomes absent-minded and withdraws into a relaxed mode of being.

This omission is somewhat surprising, given that the capacity to relax and letting one's mind wander in a relaxed manner are not just crucial for wellbeing in general, but are also an indispensable cornerstone of psychoanalysis – after all, a certain degree of mental relaxation is undoubtedly required for free association and reverie. As such, the capacity is important for both the analysand and the analyst. Yet, in its potentiality, the capacity for relaxation is mostly taken for granted. Symptomatically, when mental relaxation appears difficult for the analysand, the grounds for this tend to be sought from *particular* defences against *specific* experiential contents and associations – that is to say, it is not the capacity

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itself but merely the *actualization* of the capacity in such and such circumstances that is considered to be hindered.

Winnicott's account is a notable exception to this way of thinking. In his view, the capacity for mental relaxation is a developmental achievement, which presupposes a safe sense of integration and hence cannot be taken for granted. According to Winnicott, difficulties in occupying a relaxed state of mind are not necessarily owing to defensive measures against *specific* experiential contents and associations, but may also indicate a more global deficiency in the very *capacity* to relax – one that *consequently* hampers free association as well. In this article, I will focus on the conditions of relaxation from the viewpoint of Winnicott's concept of "unintegration". I will distinguish between "relaxed unintegration" and "primary unintegration", clarify the dynamic relation between integration and unintegration, and investigate how the capacity to relax is enabled and how it may be disturbed.

Given its relatively central role in Winnicott's work, "relaxed unintegration" has received surprisingly little attention in the literature. The concept is indeed more or less familiar to all who have engaged with Winnicott, but the specific meaning has remained largely unexamined. While "unintegration" has been widely discussed both in reference to "primary unintegration" and in reference to pathological "disintegration" (e.g. Reeves 1993; Abram 1996, 162–163, 298–300; Killick 1996; Mann 1998; Alvarez 2006; Urban 2006; Urwin 2006), much less has been said of "relaxed unintegration". Put differently, while unintegration as a *developmental starting point* (i.e. primary unintegration) has been assessed, unintegration as a *gained ability* (i.e. relaxed unintegration) has been largely neglected, only touched upon or conflated with the former notion.

To be sure, Winnicott himself was not always clear about the distinction between these two concepts. For one, he occasionally characterizes primary unintegration (adultomorphically) in reference to the developmentally later state of relaxed unintegration (e.g. Winnicott 1965, 34), while at times speaking of relaxed unintegration in terms of "regressing" back to the earlier state of primary unintegration (e.g. Winnicott 1965, 43; Winnicott 1988, 116; Winnicott 1958, 149). As I will argue here, despite the similarities, the two concepts are in fact remarkably different: I will illustrate, from various perspectives, the importance of distinguishing between them. As will become clear in what follows, primary unintegration *precedes* those forms of integration that are already *presupposed* by relaxed unintegration.

My research question is threefold: *What does Winnicott mean by relaxed unintegration, how is it enabled, and how can it be disturbed?* My approach here will be conceptual and theoretical. While I shall primarily focus on Winnicott's thinking and unveil hitherto unrecognized ambiguities and potentialities therein, this conceptual analysis may also be expected to open new avenues to theoretical and clinical psychoanalytic research more generally. Yet building such links will be left for studies to come. As for research material, Winnicott's remarks on integration and unintegration are scattered widely, and a relatively broad perspective on his work is in order. On the other hand, given the relative uniformity of Winnicott's remarks, a detailed exegesis will not be pursued. My aim is more systematic: I will focus on the phenomenon of unintegration itself and *use and develop* Winnicott's varying conceptualizations for this purpose.

The structure of the article is as follows. I will first clarify the notion of "primary unintegration", and then show how an integral sense of self comes about. As I will argue, in

Winnicott's theory, integration is a *twofold* process in that the individual is *diachronically held together* by the caregiving environment on the one hand, while being *momentarily forced into a unit* by various impingements on the other. The analysis of these two axes of integration enables both a detailed clarification of the concept of "relaxed unintegration" and a novel assessment of problems of "disintegration".

Primary unintegration

Winnicott used the concepts of integration and unintegration throughout his career. While his notes on the issue are scattered widely, the following line of development is outlined rather consistently: the individual begins from a state of (a) "primary unintegration" (Winnicott 1989, 32; Winnicott 1958, 149); out of this, (b) "integration" is gradually established (Winnicott 1965, 43; Winnicott 1958, 149); and this, in turn, enables experiences of (c) relaxed unintegration (Winnicott 1965, 34; Winnicott 1988, 120). To clarify the last-mentioned concept, the two other notions must be assessed first. For one, we need to explain what Winnicott means by "primary unintegration".

Bits and pieces

Winnicott locates the onset of development in the "primary unintegrated state, with a tendency towards integration" (Winnicott 1989, 112; see also Winnicott 1988, 117; Winnicott 1958, 149). This can be seen as his idiosyncratic conceptualization of certain developmental insights made already by Freud:

Normally, there is nothing of which we are more certain than the feeling of our self, of our own ego. *This ego appears to us as something autonomous and unitary, marked off distinctly from everything else.* ... Further reflection tells us that the adult's ego-feeling cannot have been the same from the beginning. It must have gone through a process of development ... *An infant does not as yet distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him. He gradually learns to do so, in response to various promptings.* (Freud 1930, 64–65, emphasis added)

The concept of "primary unintegration" can be seen as an attempt to characterize the infant's alleged experience before the emergence of a clearly outlined sense of self. Winnicott initially introduces the concept in reference to Edward Glover's ideas on what he calls "ego-nuclei" and the "synthetic function of the psyche" (e.g. Winnicott 1996, 24; Winnicott 1989, 31; Winnicott 1958, 298; Winnicott 1988, 116; Glover 2017, 314–320).

In a nutshell, Glover argues that the various "primitive urges" (Glover 2017, 315) that dominate the infant's experience at the outset of development have a "partial autonomy" (Glover 2017, 317): each such urge is considered as a "psychic nucleus" (Glover 2017, 316) oriented towards satisfaction *regardless of the inherent aim of other urges*. Glover thus argues that, while a clearly bounded ego is still pending, the infant's "primitive ego-structure is multi-nuclear" (Glover 2017, 316). And quite concretely so: the simultaneous urges are localized in different and partly overlapping "body zones and organ centres" (Glover 2017, 315), and hence the initial "body-ego" remains a "loosely organized whole" (Glover 2017, 277). Gradually, as the initially fragmentary and inconsistent ego is "synthesized" into a coherent unit (Glover 2017, 318), the formerly autonomous "ego nuclei" assume their position as the diverse aims within one and the same unitary individual. Along

with this synthesis, the heterogeneous urges with mutually contradictory aims come to appear as *internal tensions* within the increasingly united ego. And so, as a kind of side effect, ego-integration gives birth to mental dynamics.

Winnicott extends Glover's idea to include all experiential contents, instead of exclusively keeping with primitive urges and impulses. Instead of "nuclei", he talks of experiential "bits and pieces" that make up the emerging individual (e.g. Winnicott 1996, 24), and argues that this elementary "material" ultimately consists of "motor and sensory elements" (Winnicott 1965, 60), such as "a toe seen, a finger moving, a hungry impulse, or the feeling of warmth from a hot-water bottle" and so on (Winnicott 1996, 24). Winnicott sides with Glover in thinking that the infant's experience initially renders itself as a *heterogeneous field* (see Winnicott 1965, 99), where *internal* sensations are not clearly distinguished from *external* sensations, and where *different varieties* of internal urges and impressions are not distinguished from each other (see Winnicott 1996, 24). In effect, experiential contents referring to *present actuality* (e.g. sensations and perceptions conveying information on one's current sensory situation) are not clearly distinguished from contents referring to what is not currently "there" (e.g. memory traces, fantasies and expectations). Therefore, importantly, the infant's experience cannot be described in terms of confusing such categories – either by mistaking "fantasies" for "reality", or vice versa. The healthy infant dwells "in absolute isolation" from what adults call reality (Winnicott 1988, 127).

The concept of primary unintegration harbours an interesting ambiguity that Winnicott touches upon here and there. For one, he characterizes primary unintegration in terms of a "lack of wholeness both in space and time" (e.g. Winnicott 1958, 149). He also introduces a developmental order between the two, suggesting that "integration in time becomes *added to* (what might be called) integration in space" (Winnicott 1965, 58; emphasis added; see also Winnicott 1988, 117). Yet Winnicott himself seems unhappy with these terms: in a later text, he renounces the term "integration in space" and instead speaks of "the more static integration of the earlier stages" (Winnicott 1965, 77). In his last works, he has altogether dispensed with his initial contrast between space and time, and instead favours a distinction between "integration for moments or brief periods" on the one hand, and "general state of integration" on the other (Winnicott 1988, 117).

Accordingly, Winnicott seems to have been sensitive to an ambiguity in the concept of integration (and hence in the concept of unintegration as well), but he struggled to conceptualize and locate this ambiguity throughout his career. Neither has the respective ambiguity been articulated by Winnicott's commentaries. In the following, I will take a stand on this issue by distinguishing between what I will call "horizontal" and "vertical" aspects in primary unintegration.

Horizontal unintegration: The sketchy present

By "horizon", I here refer to the *overall field that currently makes up the individual's experiential situation*. "Horizontal unintegration", accordingly, refers to the unorganized state of the *presently* appearing experiential contents. Winnicott's descriptions of such states are scarce and sketchy. In one of his early texts, he gives the following illustration of infantile experience: "In the quiet moments, there is no line between inner or outer but just lots of

things separated out, sky seen through the trees, something to do with mother's eyes all going in and out, wandering around" (Winnicott 1996, 25).¹ As said, the "bits and pieces" making up the unintegrated field of experience equally include internal and external sensations, motor impressions, felt urges, recollective images, fantasies and so on – and such contents are differentiated from one another neither categorically (e.g. "inner" vs "outer") nor ontologically (e.g. "actually perceived" vs "merely recollected"). Two things are worth underlining in this connection.

On the one hand, the simultaneously present "bits and pieces" are not initially present as clearly outlined experiential ingredients. We would miss Winnicott's point if we interpreted him as suggesting here that the absorbed infant, for example, recalls *one experiential content* (e.g. the "mother's eyes") while being aware of *another content* (e.g. "sky through the trees"). Presumably, such misinterpretations are owing to the nature of verbal expression that singles out ingredients from the given experiential situation and thus leads us to assume that these ingredients already stood apart from one another before reflection and verbalization.

However, the prereflective infant is not aware of *two* interrelated impressions, no more than being separately aware of the *shape* of an object and the *colour* of that object. As Winnicott puts it: "As soon as we talk of a collection of impulses and sensations we have gone further forward than the beginning, when the centre of gravity (so to speak) of the self shifts from one impulse or sensation to another" (Winnicott 1988, 116). Rather than a well-organized set of distinct experiential contents, the infant is initially presented with a field of intermingling and interpenetrating experiential contents that, for the time being, are mere *potential* targets of attention. A comparison with blurry vision is perhaps helpful: while it might be possible to pick out something by focusing one's gaze, for the time being there are "lots of things going in and out" without anything gaining prominence as such. This dynamic overall field serves as the foundation out of which various focal experiences, as sort of secondary phenomena, can emerge (see Winnicott 1987, 31–32; McDougall 1993, 215–216).

On the other hand, while one might be here reminded of William James' famous claim about infantile experience as "one great blooming, buzzing confusion" (James 1981, 462), the fact that Winnicott writes that "lots of things" are "separated out" readily rules out the interpretation that he is referring to a meaningless flur of sense data. His point is rather that none of the experiential contents enter the foreground of awareness, thereby dialectically pushing "the rest" into the background. What is at issue here is this precisely this "rest". Whereas in the well-documented moments of "alert inactivity" (e.g. Stern 1985, 39; see also Taipale 2017, 156), the infant displays cognitive interest and curiosity towards something in their experiential field, Winnicott's notion can be said to concern periods of "inalert inactivity". Rather than shifting from *one* content to *another*, the child exclusively dwells in something comparable to background awareness.² As soon as an attentive focus awakens, the state of unintegration is interrupted and the infant's

¹The description is vague in content and syntax, as if reflecting the unintegrated and inarticulate nature of the described experience (on Winnicott's use of language, see Ogden 2001, 205–235; Taipale 2021; Pihlaja 2022).

²This idea might allow development toward neuroscientific theorization concerning the so-called "default mode network": a set of neural pathways that is allegedly revealed when the mind is not busied with a task. Considerations of such "task-negative network" seem relevant from the viewpoint of the current topic, but they will not be developed within the confines of this article. I want to thank one of my anonymous referees for making me aware of this possible point of intersection between psychoanalytic theory and contemporary neuroscience.

awareness no longer evenly spreads over their experiential field. For horizontal unintegration to be possible, *all* kinds of need and interest must be absent. What remains is an over-determined experiential field, abundant with *potential* distinctions that are not presently actualized.

Vertical unintegration: Confinement into the present

Thus far, we have been exclusively thinking of *momentary* experiential situations and the sketchy present introduced therein: horizontal unintegration. Yet primary unintegration also concerns the *diachronical* or “vertical” axis. To be sure, much of what will gain a temporal significance for the child is already there. For instance, past experiences are not left behind without a trace: they begin piling up from the start. However, as said, such contents are not yet modally differentiated *as* experiential contents referring to the past. That is to say, what is initially lacking is also the *continuity* of experience, or a sense of “going-on-being” (e.g. Winnicott 1965, 38):

I think an infant cannot be said to be aware at the start that while feeling this and that in his cot or enjoying the skin stimulations of bathing, he is the same as himself screaming for immediate satisfaction, possessed by an urge to get at and destroy something unless satisfied by milk. This means that he does not know at first that the mother he is building up through his quiet experiences is the same as the power behind the breasts that he has in his mind to destroy. ... Also I think there is not necessarily an integration between a child asleep and a child awake. This integration comes in the course of time. (Winnicott 1958, 151)³

The striking conclusion to be drawn here is that, for the vertically unintegrated infant, there *is* nothing else than the present experiential horizon. Namely, if the current experiential situation is not placed into a succession of experiential situations, the present experiential situation cannot appear as *this particular* experiential situation among others.

Vertical unintegration accordingly implies that the individual is *confined to the present*. Indeed, as we know from experience, pleased infants seem to be pleased with their every cell, and distressed infants act as if their plight was the end of the world. For better or worse, what for the caregiver is a passing situation, is for the infant *all there is, all there ever has been* and *all there will be* – the current experience is all-encompassing, there is no outside to it. To illustrate this, Winnicott compares the infant’s experience of dissatisfaction with the feeling of being “possessed by wolves” or “gobbled up by wild beasts” (Winnicott 1964, 23, 81; Taipale 2017), and argues that it involves an “unthinkable anxiety” (Winnicott 1989, 90; cf. Mitrani 1993): being caught in “a gap between the past and the future” (Winnicott 1989, 118) or a “time-warp” (Tustin 1990, 43), where the concept of “waiting” makes no sense, the infant is facing “an infinite delay” (Winnicott 1988, 145) where there is nothing but a horrible and all-encompassing sense of dissatisfaction. For the vertically unintegrated infant, the present moment seems to be without an end.

³In traditional psychoanalytic terms, Winnicott is here suggesting that “self-constancy” and “object-constancy” are not congenital properties, but developmental achievements not to be taken for granted. However, self-object differentiation being still pending (horizontal unintegration), it makes no sense to distinguish between “self-constancy” and “object-constancy” either. I prefer the term “vertical unintegration”.

Winnicott distinguishes *primary unintegration* from the sense of *disintegration* (e.g. Winnicott 1965, 60). Primary unintegration amounts to an experience where there is simply “no need to integrate” (Winnicott 1965, 61; Winnicott 1958, 98), whereas disintegration, by contrast, is an experience where integration is compromised, endangered or undone (Winnicott 1965, 61). Accordingly, disintegration is possible only after integration has already been sufficiently established (Winnicott 1965, 43; cf. Abram 1996, 163). Besides such *structural* and *constitutional* differences, the two experiences are also *substantially* different. For one, experiences of disintegration are accompanied by a sense of chaos and a loss of control, whereas our previous example of primary unintegration – with “lots of things going in and out” – does not depict such an experience. Relatedly, the two experiences differ in their *affective* quality: “disintegration is frightening, whereas unintegration is not” (Winnicott 1958, 149). Vertical unintegration is not in itself accompanied by negative or positive feelings: the affective valence of the present moment, to which one is confined, exclusively depends on the nature of the situation – as said, happy infants seem comprehensively happy, and unhappy infants comprehensively distressed. Disintegration, by contrast, is troubling, no matter what the content. I will come back to the topic of disintegration later.

To sum up, “primary unintegration” refers to *the unorganized state of the current field of experience* (horizontal unintegration) on the one hand, and to *the sense of confinement to what is currently given* (vertical unintegration) on the other. The present field of experience is indeed composed of, say, sensorimotor impressions, memory traces, expectations and fantasies, that all differ in their temporal mode, but these contents are not categorized *as* impressions of the present, *as* recollections tying us with a past, or *as* expectations and fantasies referring to something merely futural or potential. In effect, instead of a clearly outlined and intelligible present, there is a sketchy field of experience “with lots of things going in and out”. Likewise, instead of a reliable “sense of going-on-being”, there is confinement into an infinite ‘here and now’. As can be already anticipated here, conflating the two axes of unintegration is prone to give rise to perplexity and imprecision. As I will argue in the following, the distinction between horizontal and vertical also carries over to the concept of *integration*.

Impingement-based and impulse-based integration

Having argued for primary unintegration, Winnicott nonetheless notes that “Integration starts right away at the beginning of life” (Winnicott 1958, 149). To be sure, once this process is set into motion, the state of unintegration does not simply come to an end – just as fixing one’s gaze to something does not eradicate that which henceforth figures on the fringes of one’s vision. States of unintegration and integration are neither consecutive developmental stretches nor mutually exclusive experiential modes; the two overlap, run in parallel and complement each other much like focal and marginal perception. Winnicott argues that integration is promoted by two factors: *impingements* and *creative impulses* (e.g. Winnicott 1988, 117–120). To underline the difference between these two and their outcome, I will speak of *impingement-based integration* and *impulse-based integration*. Let us consider these in turn.

Impingements: Forced momentary integration

The integration-promoting role of impingements was underlined already by Freud who, in the passage quoted above, argued that self-object differentiation is gained gradually in response to various “promptings” (*Anregungen*). Promptings or impingements can be characterized as experiences that discord with the “script” authored *ad hoc* by the individual’s omnipotent mind. To illustrate, if the child is *fed when not hungry* – and hence “subjected to instinctual gratification” without “ego-participation” (Winnicott 1965, 59) – the feeding situation is not created out of need, and in this sense not part of the script; if, on the other hand, the child is *not fed when hungry*, the given experiential situation outright contradicts the script.

In more detail, impingements can be defined as uncalled-for endogenic or exogenic interruptions that entail a reorganization of the current experiential field. Examples range from suddenly emerging sensations (e.g. a loud crash, local pain or being fed when not hungry) to gradually emerging disturbances (e.g. an intensifying sense of hunger, the sound of an approaching ambulance or a dawning headache). The common factor is that the individual is momentarily *seized* or *bound* by something – this is in line with the Latin root of the verb “impingere” (“in” + “pangere”), which refers to the event of becoming firmly fastened or fixed to something. For instance, a loud crash startles the individual and momentarily defines them. It takes hold of the individual: their body reactively stiffens, they flinch back, and their whole being is momentarily condensed into this reaction. Likewise, the growing sense of hunger increasingly enwraps and collects the individual, until nothing but the sense of hunger is in sight. In effect, rather than experiential contents “wandering around” with “no line between inner or outer”, the sense of hunger now *binds* the individual and *narrows down* their field of experience. Quite concretely, whenever we are startled or feel hungry, focusing on something else is difficult if not impossible: impingements are like centres of gravity that organize and orient the individual’s current experiential situation without consulting the individual on this first.

By introducing order into the hitherto sketchy field of experience, impingements *promote horizontal integration*. On the other hand, while confining the individual to the present, they *impede vertical integration*. As said, when you are startled by the loud crash, you at once lose temporal orientation, so that, for a moment, what is experientially in sight is nothing but the current sense of shock with no past or future. The alterity of impingements is worth underlining: it is not your personal impulse but the crash or shock reaction that momentarily determines your manner of being, and this entails a break in your sense of “personal continuity” (Winnicott 1989, 196). This sense of continuity is rooted in impulse-based integration that is consolidated by care. Let us now turn to this issue.

Creative impulses and care: Establishing a sense of going-on-being

Impulse-based integration notably differs from impingement-based integration. Whereas reacting to impingements *forces* a particular momentary unity upon the individual, creative impulses likewise momentarily gather the individual into a whole but do so in an ego-syntonic manner. As will be seen, the caregiving environment plays an indispensable role

of *consolidating and affirming* the infant's impulse-based sense of self. Nonetheless, I prefer speaking of "impulse-based integration", instead of something like "care-based integration", because, as Winnicott puts it, care only "produces a state of affairs in which integration begins to become a fact" (Winnicott 1958, 98). In other words, care does not simply *cause* or *inflict* integration, but only "promotes" (Winnicott 1988, 117) or "sets the stage" (Winnicott 1965, 34) for it. Instead of assigning a particular kind of temporary and reactive unity to the infant from the outside, care supports, confirms and maintains *the individual's own impulse-based integration*, and thus allows the individual to creatively discover themselves at their own pace.

The interplay between creative impulses and environmental facilitation is a well-known topic to all Winnicott scholars, but the issue has not been considered and elaborated from the viewpoint of integration. When a need begins to make itself felt in the infant, this amounts in Winnicott's vocabulary to a "creative impulse". If the caregiver fulfils the child's need (say, their impulse to create a feeding situation), for the infant this marks a realization of their impulse. For our purposes, however, it is important to emphasize that the creative impulse *itself* is already accompanied by "a gathering together of the whole self" (Winnicott 1988, 117). Quite concretely, a hungry infant is increasingly sucking their cheeks, vocalizing, reaching towards the caregiver and thus *increasingly acting as a whole* (Winnicott 1996, 25): they are tentatively united by the need. As the "bits and pieces" (or "ego nuclei") are thus gathered together, there is, for a brief moment, "a self to be aware" (Winnicott 1988, 117; cf. Winnicott 1958, 98).

Moreover, as with libidinal impulses and instinctual urges, so too with aggression "things gather up into the anger and no doubt the bits come together" (Winnicott 1996, 25). Again, quite concretely, the hungry infant cries with their whole body, the angry teenager invests their whole body to the aggressive movement of slamming the door, and so on: the child is "all out in the attack" (cf. Winnicott 1988, 25); they act as a whole and make themselves known as such. Echoing the words of Freud, who argued that the initial sense of self derives "from bodily sensations" (Freud 1923, 25), Winnicott thus specifies that what collects these sensations – or "bits and pieces" – to a unitary body-ego is the hungry or angry impulse. The very first self, accordingly, is a wanting self. In this light, it is not surprising that, in the older child, the word "I" commonly emerges in sentences like "I want!" before emerging in sentences like "I am": after all, it is out of the former that the child learns the latter.

To say that such tentative integration occurs *before* the caregiver responds to the child's urge or anger is not to downplay the role of care. As a matter of fact, nascent integration is a "precarious state" (Winnicott 1988, 117; Winnicott 1965, 145) and a lot depends on the caregiver's response. If the caregiver realizes the child's creative impulse, this not only fulfils the child's need, but also confirms *the child's impulse-based self-experience*, and thus consolidates or strengthens their ego (see Winnicott 1965, 63). Quite concretely: it renders the nascent or emergent self with a *feeling of reality*. Differently put, the child who is momentarily united by need or aggression ("I want") can be viewed as *insisting upon*, or *suggesting*, a form of existence ("I am") that the caregiver can then grant or decline. While the impulse itself is the ultimate source of this unity, Winnicott emphasizes that "cohesion of the various sensorimotor elements belongs to the fact that the mother holds the infant, sometimes physically, and all the time figuratively" (Winnicott 1965, 145).

In this connection it is also worth noting that, while not impinging in themselves, creative impulses can be transformed into impingements if they are not realized by the caregiver. For instance, if the hungry child is not fed soon enough, the unsatisfied need increasingly takes hold of the individual and ego-dystonically gathers them into a unit over and against the disappointing environment. Likewise, if the feeding situation is forced upon the individual when they are not yet hungry, this equally underlines the child's separateness. In all stages of development, care is a matter of *timing* – a matter of balancing between “too early” and “too late”. In cases where the caregiver mainly manages to manoeuvre between these two ends, *vertical integration* is increasingly enabled for the infant, whereby their initially narrow and fragile sense of presence is gradually extended into a reliable sense of “going-on-being” (e.g. Winnicott 1989, 565).

This vital establishment can be elaborated in more detail by considering the three basic functions of care vis-à-vis impingements: (a) it prevents certain impingements beforehand, (b) it undoes current impingements, and (c) it puts impingements into proportion. These three functions are worth clarifying one by one.

- (a) *The preparatory function.* For one, by modifying the infant's sensory and affective environment, the caregiver both prevents some impingements in advance and prepares the child for particular experiences that otherwise would be impinging (Winnicott 1958, 98; Taipale 2016): “in a thousand ways parents protect their children from traumatization” (Winnicott 1989, 139). For instance, by adjusting the temperature of the water before bathing the child and by clothing them appropriately before taking them outside, the caregiver precludes many impinging experiences beforehand. With such preventive acts, of which the child is utterly unaware, the caregiver minimizes experiences of forced horizontal integration and facilitates a continuous sense of being in the child (Winnicott 1965, 47, 56). Moreover, the caregiver prepares the child for certain forthcoming experiences that might otherwise be impinging. For instance, when lifting the baby, the sensitive caregiver “does not take her by the toe” (Winnicott 1996, 25). In this case, the infant would be forced to react to something that is already happening to her. Instead, the caregiver offers “cues” that allow the infant to *anticipate* being picked up before this actually happens and thus “give him time” (Winnicott 1996, 25): “The mother knows by empathy that when a baby is picked up time must be taken over the process. The baby must receive warning; the parts of the body are gathered together; eventually, at the right point in time, the child is airborne” (Winnicott 1988, 117; see also Reddy 2008). By such cues the caregiver at once makes room for the child's creative impulses. Namely, while being picked up was not what the child initially hoped for, they can now anticipate and hence also subjectively participate in the creation of the event: by seeing their mother's arms approach, the child on the bed stiffens their back and neck, extends their arms, and so on, before their mother reaches them, thus actively preparing for the event of being picked up. Instead of an impingement instantiated from the outside, the event now feels self-created. To be sure, anticipation is not a guarantee for creative impulses on behalf of the child, but the point is precisely that picking up a baby who does not participate in the creation of this event is a notably different kind of experience for both parties.

- (b) *The mending function.* Besides preventing various impingements before they occur and preparing the child for what otherwise would be an impingement, the caregiver also does away with particular impingements once they have already started to make themselves felt, and thus retrospectively “mends the hurt” (Winnicott 1996, 278). By specific exaggerated expressions and emphasized adaptation (Winnicott 1996, 278), the caregiver “marks” and “revises” the child’s extended experience of dissatisfaction and shows how *that very experience* turns into an experience of satisfaction. In effect, the need *felt a moment ago* is not cut off from the *presently felt* need-satisfaction: what threatened to introduce a traumatic “break in life’s continuity” (Winnicott 1971, 131; Winnicott 1965, 60, 97, 104; see also Abram 2021) is thus successfully integrated into the flow of experience. The significance of such experiences can hardly be overemphasized: by showing how dissatisfaction *comes to an end*, the caregiver enables the child to insert the felt plight into a *temporal continuum* from *past dissatisfaction* to *present satisfaction*. And so, while the abovementioned “cues” allow the child to anticipate and prepare for what is to come, acts of mending allow a retrospective modification of impingements which thereby come to appear *as something past* – as something that, unlike how it seemed at the time, *came to an end* after all. Such retrospective modifications are a rather frequent phenomenon: given the unavailability of occasional delays and minor disappointments, babies are “constantly being cured by the mother’s localized spoiling that mends the ego structure” (Winnicott 1971, 131–132). In this manner, the caregiver in a specific sense “lends her [vertical] unity to the child” (Winnicott 1989, 565; cf. Winnicott 1958, 153, 188). As Winnicott also puts it: “Time is kept going by the mother” (Winnicott 1965, 76).
- (c) *The proportioning function.* By enabling a sense of continuity across an affective shift, care alters the affective value of the past impingement. In retrospect, the felt need is now presented as something that *started to* impinge on oneself but was *soon* satisfied – unlike how it seemed at the time, it was only a *passing* nuisance. In this manner, care puts past impingements into proportion. Moreover, via repetition and internalization, the child’s experiences increasingly carry over to their expectations, which is to say that they increasingly learn to rely on the *availability* of care (e.g. Winnicott 1965, 34, 61). In effect, what is put into proportion is not just *past* impingements but also *those to come*. To illustrate, if the child’s sense of hunger has been repeatedly satisfied, the nascent feeling of hunger emerges as something that one expects to be satisfied: it is increasingly associated with the outset of a familiar process that *soon* leads to satisfaction. This readily dilutes its affective force, and makes it less and less troubling, binding and captivating: even if the expected satisfaction is *not yet felt*, the child is *already* soothed by it. In this manner, confidence in the availability of care not only adds to the child’s resilience (Winnicott 1958, 304), but quite concretely enables them to safely orient themselves towards that which is not yet present. For one, being able to expect, they also learn to wait.⁴

To sum up, impingements force a particular kind of unity upon the self and hence momentarily determine the child’s being. By contrast, creative impulses promote a

⁴It might be interesting to examine how these various functions appear in the analytic setting, by considering the latter in terms of the caregiving environment. Such developments, however, will be left for further studies.

form of integration, where the sense of self arises “out of need”. The thereby suggested unity, however, is weak and absolutely dependent on the facilitating environment, which must confirm and temporally consolidate the impulse-based unity suggested therein: “By various means the unity of the individual becomes a fact, at first at moments, and later over long and variable periods of time” (Winnicott 1958, 225). And while the former (i.e. moments of integration) may arise from the infant themselves, care enables the latter (i.e. lasting sense of being).

In this sense, impingements exclusively promote *horizontal integration*, while impulses realized by care promote *vertical integration*. By satisfying the child’s needs and mending their occasional disappointments, care invests impingements with increasingly realistic proportions, presents them as something momentary, and releases the child from the confinement to the present and to the actual. Such a child can not only *increasingly tolerate* (see Winnicott 1989, 127, 139, 199), but also *increasingly enjoy* their creative impulses *in their yet-to-be realized form*. And likewise, it is ultimately owing to the abovementioned trust that the developing individual can “afford to be in pieces” (Winnicott 1996, 25) and relax amid the everyday turmoil.

Relaxed unintegration

We have now ventured through individual development from primary unintegration to a unitary sense of self, while underlining the dual nature of both. From the basis of our analysis of horizontal and vertical aspects of integration, we can now investigate the conditions of “relaxed unintegration” and apply this novel conceptualization to questions of “disintegration”.

Terms of peace

Winnicott hardly gives any descriptions of relaxed unintegration, thus inviting his readers to come up with their own examples (see Winnicott 1971, xvi–xvii). Consider the experience of sitting in the garden swing on a peaceful summer afternoon, just enjoying the moment, focusing on nothing in particular. Despite the overall tranquility of the moment, various affective, sensory and motor impressions constantly come and go, and the amount of experiential content and detail is in fact overabundant and verbally inexhaustible – there is, for instance, the sound of reeds rustling in the gentle summer breeze, the rich mixture of scents from the surrounding nature, a sense of warmth on the skin, the bright sunlight flickering on the surface of the water, the vague buzz of a bee nearby, the feeling of rocking movement, the rhythmic sense of one’s breathing, a proprioceptive sense of posture, vague memories of childhood summers, and so on. And yet, despite the overabundant content, the experiential situation is not stressful and chaotic but relaxing and invigorating. *Why is this so?* In examining the conditions of relaxed unintegration, it is helpful to distinguish between *contingent* and *structural* factors.

On the one hand, like the state of primary unintegration, relaxed unintegration also necessitates the absence of impingements and impulses. Whereas impingements momentarily force a particular kind of unity upon the self, creative impulses, too, gather the cathexis of the individual and introduce order into the hitherto diffuse

experiential field – even if an ego-syntonic one. To illustrate, while sitting on the swing, your relaxed absorption into doing nothing will be interrupted as soon as your partner asks whether you want a cup of coffee, but also if you are simply starting to feel like coffee. In the former case, you are invited to react and momentarily direct your attention to your partner, whereas in the latter case, the impulse itself wakens you from your oblivion.

Winnicott describes relaxed unintegration as a “nonpurposive state”, as a “state in which there is no orientation” and as a mode of being, where the self is neither “a reactor to an external impingement” (i.e. compliant) nor “an active person with a direction of interest or movement” (i.e. creative) (Winnicott 1965, 34, 61). Differently put, relaxed unintegration necessitates the absence of impingements and creative impulses. As I read it, the latter half of this requirement implies that relaxed unintegration in itself is *not* a creative mode of experience.⁵ For sure, it is not a compliant mode either. Rather, as I see it, relaxed unintegration lies beyond such duality. Namely, it is a mode of being that only “sets the stage” for creative impulses (see Winnicott 1965, 34): it may *lead to* or *end up* with creative impulses (see Winnicott 1971, 75; Winnicott 1965, 34; Khan 1983, 185), but it is not a creative or “productive” state in itself.

On the other hand, to attain such a mode of being, something more is required. That is to say, the absence of impingements and creative impulses is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for relaxation. What is also required is a structure called *trust*. For one, to relax and safely immerse oneself into doing nothing, as it were, disturbances (i.e. urging needs and impingements) must not only be *presently* absent, but also must not be expected to be *on the way*. To illustrate, when one is lying on the sofa at home, it is hard to shake off an alert mode and immerse in doing nothing if one is haunted by the feeling that, in a short while, there will be an interruption of some sort. Even if the disturbance in question is *not yet* present, one may be *already* bothered by it. To be sure, there might be local and contingent reasons for such expectations, in which case changing the scene would dilute the problem. However, given the factual uncertainty of the future and the unavoidability of occasional impingements, one may ask how it is possible to *ever* reach a state where one does not feel the need to remain alert over, worry about or brace for all the potential troubles and possible disturbances.

This connects with our earlier discussion concerning the *availability of care*. As said, good-enough care increasingly enables a tacit expectation that one’s needs and troubles *will be taken care of* (Winnicott 1996, 155). The passive form in the end of this sentence serves to underline the “invisible” (Ogden 2001, 209) nature of early parental care. Namely, as taken for granted, care is not assigned to *someone in particular* – in this sense, “there is no such thing as a mother” (Pedder 1996, xxvi). Winnicott distinguished

⁵In this regard, my interpretation differs from that of Abram, who associates unintegration with creativity (Abram 1996, 163) and from that of Eigen, who discusses unintegration in terms of “creative formlessness” (Eigen 2004, 334). Relatedly, Khan uses the metaphor of “lying fallow” in describing a “benignly languid passive mood” that serves as a “proof of the fact that a person can be with himself unpurposefully” (Khan 1983, 185–186). Khan’s notion of “lying fallow” comes close to the notion of relaxed unintegration. Yet, while Khan uses the term “unintegration” in his brief analysis (184), and while he describes the state of “lying fallow” as “a nutrient of the ego and a preparatory state” – an “energetic substratum for most of our creative efforts” (185), rather than creative *per se* – the fact that he characterizes this mode of being in terms of “alerted quietude” or “alert wakeful mood” (183, 186), and considers it as a “transitional state of experience” or “transitional mood” (183, 186), seems to prompt a distinction between these two concepts. As I see it, unintegration is rather a matter of “inert inactivity” which, as such, serves as a foundation for both creative and compliant alertness.

between “environment-mother” and “object-mother”, claiming that the emergence of the latter is motivated by disappointments (e.g. Winnicott 1965, 75, 181). What is primarily internalized in fortunate cases is the feeling of “being taken care of”, without assigning the task to a particular object (oneself or someone else). As Winnicott also puts it: “The child begins to collect evidence that when things are awful, they *can* be put right” (Winnicott 1996, 155; see also Winnicott 1958, 225). For sure, along with the unavoidable disappointments, the child learns that, for things to end up being taken care of, they themselves may sometimes have to be active *as well*, but the primal trust in its passive guise is usually retained as a kind of support: if there will be a disturbance of some sort, *I* might have to do something about it but eventually things *will be taken care of*. If there is a feeling that *life goes on no matter what*, one can “fall trustingly” (Ryavec 1998, 186) and letting go of an alert mode does not appear risky.

By contrast, if this underlying trust and hence vertical integration is insufficient, *expecting* the disturbance is not that different from *perceiving* it. That is to say, if confined to the present, then rather than being a passing nuisance located in a particular point of space and time (“out there” and “in the future”) the disturbance seems to inhabit all space and all time. If one is not able to expect being cared for, and if the continuity of life hence seems to be solely up to oneself, relaxation is hindered – for the sole guard, it is not safe to sleep. In other words, there must be something that one falls into when letting go, and this ground is trust. If this trust is missing, there is the threat of “falling forever” (e.g. Winnicott 1989, 128, 139, 187, 572). The idea of loosening control, which otherwise would lead to a relaxed state of mind, becomes associated with anxieties of a most terrifying nature, and must hence be avoided at all cost (Mitrani 1993, 320).

Besides a *safe landing*, the capacity of relaxed unintegration also necessitates a *safe return*. As Winnicott puts it, the possibility of a “comeback” is essential if the child is to feel secure about resting and relaxing (Winnicott 1965, 208). To illustrate, going to sleep feels safe only if one expects to wake up after a while; when being lost in a foreign city one may feel calm and confident only if one expects that one will not be lost forever; and taking a break from thinking is an option only if one is able to trust that one’s gained insights will not be lost for good. Uncertainty regarding holding tends to be compensated by compulsory self-holding. In all cases, the respective act – i.e. falling asleep, getting lost or letting go of an idea – must appear as a temporary and reversible operation. Without a “return ticket” one hardly dares to take the ride. Likewise, if letting one’s mind wander in a relaxed and uncontrolled manner is accompanied by a sense of *irreversibly leaking off, falling to pieces*, or – literally – *losing one’s mind*, such a mode of being will be hindered. That is, one can “afford to be in pieces”, and feel safe about it, only if one can trust that one’s self is retained as a potentiality, and hence that there is a unitary self to return to.

In these two senses, relaxed unintegration presupposes and builds on vertical integration.⁶ Moreover, it is the vertical axis that also endows relaxed unintegration with a

⁶The analysis delivered here thus serves to clarify the following note by Abram: “The ability to unintegrate and relax is paradoxically a sign of integration and maturity” (Abram 1996, 70). Along with the specifications delivered by the present article, this claim can be reintroduced as follows: “The ability to unintegrate *in the horizontal sense*, and thus relax, *necessitates trust and is hence* a sign of *vertical* integration and maturity”. As I see it, these specifications allow us to remove the term “paradox” in this connection – which by no means is meant to downplay the important role of paradoxes in Winnicott’s thinking.

sense of *vitality*. Whereas trust opens the individual towards the *future*, orients the present moment in the light of what may be expected, and renders the present moment as full of possibilities, the past provides the present moment with a sense of familiarity and vertical depth. Relaxed unintegration can be an invigorating mode of experience because in and through it the individual is, here and now, in contact with their whole diachronic self. As Winnicott puts it, being unintegrated while being held is the “richest type of experience” (Winnicott 1988, 119).

As “relaxed unintegration” has thus been specified as *horizontal unintegration backed by vertical integration*, this establishes a clear contrast with “primary unintegration”, which involves *unintegration both in the horizontal and in the vertical sense*. Whereas in the state of primary unintegration, there is vertical unintegration and hence *confinement to the present moment*, in relaxed unintegration there is a *temporal depth and a sense of possibility opening from the momentary experiential situation*.

On not being able to relax: Self-inflicted impingements and active self-disintegration

We have seen above how relaxed unintegration builds on vertical integration: the sense of trust, gained by good-enough care, opens the present moment towards the future, enables a sense of continuity over actual and potential impingements, and thus enables relaxed unintegration. By contrast, when “safe landing” and “safe return” cannot be taken for granted, relaxation is not an option (see Winnicott 1988, 120; Winnicott 1989, 237). In cases where vertical integration is insufficient, the individual may use various *strategies to compensate for or defend against this lack*.

Winnicott offers a threefold classification of insufficient vertical integration (e.g. Winnicott 1989, 198, 435). At one end, vertical integration is “retained”, at the other end, it is “not retained at all”, and between these “neurotic” and “psychotic” extremes, there is a rich variety of “borderline” cases where vertical integration is “partially retained” (see Winnicott 1989, 198; cf. 196). While the first group might include occasional and merely relative feelings of environmental “unpredictability” (Winnicott 1989, 198), to illustrate the centrality of vertical integration, we should direct our attention to the more severe cases. Here I will accordingly discuss two possible defensive strategies, distinguished by the degree of fragility in vertical integration: *self-inflicted impingements* and *active self-disintegration*.

Self-inflicted impingements

In the first case, vertical integration is “partially retained”, but *fragile* and *unreliable*. To compensate for this fragility, the individual desperately resorts to particular repeated actions that *each entail momentary integration*. That is to say, when impulse-based integration is not possible, there is a temptation to actively making use of impingement-based integration. To illustrate this, let us consider three cases: *crying*, *restlessness* and *self-harm*.

1. *Crying*. As said, the child’s momentary impulse-based integration can build into a vertical continuum if the caregiver repeatedly realizes the child’s impulses. Conversely, if the impulse is not satisfied soon enough, and there is no one to mend the threatening

break in the continuity of life, the child may unconsciously try to do this themself. Namely, by starting to cry, they concretely create a highly *impinging* sensory environment: screaming at the top of their lungs in a way that resonates in their every cell, and over-straightening their body thus giving birth to a rather intensive kinaesthetic-interceptive bodily feel, the infant ends up *forcing* a momentary unity upon themself. Viewed from the perspective of integration, therefore, we can see the following continuum: the need initially collects the bits and pieces together, in waiting for environmental realization aggression temporarily reinforces the impulse-based unitary feeling, but the impulse-based sense of self begins to obliterate and turn to something unreal; and, as a kind of last resort before despair, or “the last scream just before hope was abandoned” (Winnicott 1989, 117), the child starts to cry, thus creating an impinging environment that holds them together (Winnicott 1988, 117; Winnicott 1989, 117). In this manner, the child’s inconsolable crying may be seen (among other things)⁷ as an attempt to avoid the “unthinkable anxiety” accompanying the sense of annihilation of their impulse-based sense of self. The self-inflicted impingement is accordingly a lesser evil. However, while it patches the “break in life’s continuity” only momentarily, it does not provide a lasting solution.

2. *Restlessness*. Motor restlessness and the inability to concentrate (see Winnicott 1965, 61) can likewise be a guise for the need to maintain one’s unity by self-inflicted impingements. Again, what we can see here is an attempt to compensate for the fragility of vertical integration by *forcing* an order into the field of experience – this time by directing one’s attention. What is somewhat misleadingly called “inattentiveness” is in fact a matter of *frequently shifting* and in this sense *heightened attentiveness* (cf. Meltzer et al. 1975, 11): what is lacking is not attentiveness *per se* but a *temporal continuity* of the latter. The restless individual unconsciously keeps themself busy, by repeatedly searching for new experiential contents that, in their novelty, momentarily bind their attention and thus impose a structure on their sense of self. The problem, of course, is that getting used to an attended content rapidly decreases its binding force, and hence a new focal object must soon be found to regain the fleeting sense of integration. From the viewpoint of integration, we can thus note that, here too, the individual unconsciously compensates for the fragility of vertical integration and defends themself against unthinkable anxieties. In the absence of a “safe landing”, the unintegrated state looming in the absence of an attentive object feels threatening, and the individual hence resorts to self-inflicted horizontal integration. Yet, again, it patches up the fragile sense of self only momentarily, and hence calls for constant repetition.
3. *Self-harm*. A further compensatory strategy lies in self-inflicted pain. By actively making use of impingements, such as skin irritation (see Winnicott 1989, 111), the individual conjures up momentary integration in compensation for their fragile sense of self (see Winnicott 1989, 115). As we can see here, processes that are easily considered to be aiming at *self-destruction* may on the contrary be aiming at *restoring and maintaining the self* and thus *promoting life*. To avoid the looming unbound “unthinkable anxiety”, there is now local pain which binds the self and puts the child together: it is not only more comprehensible, but also something self-inflicted, and hence something that affords a sense of control. Again, out of two poor options, it may appear as

⁷Of course, this is not to challenge the possible other functions of the child’s crying.

the lesser evil. One of the commonly shared assumptions in the respective research literature is that “cutting” makes the individual feel real (e.g. Peterson et al. 2008). This assumption suits well with the picture drawn here. Namely, self-harm may be considered as an unconscious attempt to substitute for a lack of vertical integration, the lack in a lasting sense of being, by *forcing* a sense of unity and reality on oneself. Yet, again, the solution is only a temporary one: the individual easily finds themselves in a loop where they must repeat the act of self-inflicted impingement over and over.

What is common to all these cases is the attempt to avoid the sense of annihilation by creating an impinging situation that holds the self together. Such self-inflicted impingements are indeed a lesser evil in that they avoid the looming unthinkable anxiety. They momentarily patch up the sense of continuity while also investing the fragile self with a sense of control. Yet they only serve as momentary solutions that insist on being repeated over and over again. As a consequence, the individual becomes a hostage of their own need to integrate.

Active self-disintegration and organization towards invulnerability

Thus far, we have been thinking of cases where vertical integration has been partially retained. To compensate for their fragility – to patch up the holes, as it were – the individual can resort to what I called *self-inflicted impingements*. By contrast, if environmental failure “recurs persistently”, Winnicott argues, it sets going “a fragmentation of being” (Winnicott 1965, 61) or entails “fractures of personal continuity” (Winnicott 1989, 196). In effect, the sense of self is not only fragile but fragmentary, invested with a more comprehensive sense of unreality. In such cases, there is nothing, or almost nothing, to patch up, as it were, and different defensive measures will have to be employed to evade the threat of unthinkable anxiety. In this connection, Winnicott discusses “disintegration” as a defence:

The term disintegration is used to describe a sophisticated defence, a defence that is *an active production of chaos* in defence against unintegration in the absence of maternal ego-support, that is, against the unthinkable or archaic anxiety that results from failure of holding in the stage of absolute dependence. The chaos of disintegration may be as ‘bad’ as the unreliability of the environment, but it has the advantage of being produced by the baby and therefore of being non-environmental. It is within the area of the baby’s omnipotence. (Winnicott 1965, 61, emphasis added; see also Winnicott 1989, 32)

As with the earlier cases, here too the solution appears as a lesser evil, in that it provides a sense of control (Winnicott 1958, 149). Yet the solution is an extremely desperate one, in that it does not prevent the self from falling to pieces. It is just that the self does this by itself.

To clarify this, let us briefly return to the claim of impulses themselves gathering the self together: when in need, the individual momentarily acts as a whole, and by repeatedly satisfying the need, care temporally consolidates this impulse-based sense of self. Conversely, when the child’s need is *not* realized, what is left without realization is not only *the momentary need*, but also *the momentary sense of self* established by that need. Instead of a feeling of “I am”, entailing the fulfilment of “I want”, there is a sense of *annihilation*: the need tentatively brings the bits and pieces together so that “there

is self to be aware” (Winnicott 1988, 117), but instead of being realized, this tentative unity remains unreal or ghostlike (see Winnicott 1988, 60). The ensuing experience differs from experiences of unintegration, since there is now a sense of *dispersal* and *undoing* – a sense of a tentative impulse-based self falling *back* to bits and pieces, thus allowing to the latter to be experienced *as* such:

Good care produces a state of affairs in which integration begins to become a fact, and a person starts to be there. In so far as this is true, so far does failure of care lead to disintegration instead of to a return to unintegration. Disintegration is felt to be a threat because (by definition) there is someone there to feel the threat. (Winnicott 1958, 98)

If environmental failure is not an exception but the rule, as in cases of severe neglect or abuse, the individual’s sense of being has not been established. Rather than a coherent vertically integral individual “whose instinctual drives may be met or frustrated” (regardless of which the individual goes on being), we are instead dealing with an immature and unintegrated being who is “all the time on the brink of unthinkable anxiety” (Winnicott 1965, 56). Without such environmental holding – or “mother’s eyes” (Winnicott 1996, 25) – the individual falls to pieces (Winnicott 1988, 117; Winnicott 1989, 565; Winnicott 1958, 188): it is as if they are in a picture without a frame, in that there is “nothing to contain the interweaving of forces in the inner psychic reality” (Winnicott 1989, 115). In the absence of such foothold or vertical backing, the “individual *falls forever*, and the affect belonging to this is anxiety of psychotic intensity” (Winnicott 1989, 32, 127; see also Winnicott 1965, 58).

Whereas aggression and anger imply the “survival of the ego and a retention of the idea of an alternative experience in which the ‘let-down’ did not occur” (Winnicott 1989, 199), here it is not just the *current* experience of feeling real but the *hope* of feeling real that is lost (Winnicott 1989, 435, 226). And if the sense of going on being is not just fragile or fragmentary, but more comprehensibly absent, the unthinkable anxiety is even more primal. Instead of crying, restlessness and self-harm, there is silent horror, inarticulable panic or active self-destruction or disintegration – either in the form of going mad or in the form of a suicide (see, e.g. Winnicott 1989, 93, 126, 193, 199). Whereas the first-mentioned amounts to compensatory acts of *restoring* a fragile sense of self, and hence also counts as expressions of hope and trust, in the last-mentioned cases, hope is gone: instead of an *unreliable* sense of being to be patched up, there almost is no sense of self to be repaired. And so, once the other defences (i.e. self-inflicted impingements) fail, as the last resort the individual’s cathexis “withers up” (Winnicott 1989, 226) and there emerges an “organization towards invulnerability” (Winnicott 1989, 197). With the expense of what other people call reality, the individual tames the threatening otherness of reality by defensively withdrawing to a subjective world that cannot disappoint and impinge on them – a world that is hardwired to their “script”, as it were:

What we observe in children and in infants who become ill in a way that forces us to use the word “schizophrenia,” although this word originally applied to adolescents and adults, what we see very clearly is an *organisation towards invulnerability*. ... What is common to all cases is this, that the baby, child, adolescent or adult must never again experience the unthinkable anxiety that is at the root of schizoid illness. This unthinkable anxiety was experienced initially in a moment of failure of reliability on the part of the environmental provision when the

immature personality was at the stage of absolute dependence. The autistic child who has travelled almost all the way to mental defect is not suffering any longer; invulnerability has almost been reached. (Winnicott 1989, 197–198; cf. Tustin 1984)

Again, what one easily views as *the problem itself* may rather be *a defence against* the problem. As Winnicott puts it, referring to psychoses and autism, “the illness is a complex mental structure insuring against recurrence of the conditions of the unthinkable anxiety” (Winnicott 1996, 125; cf. Winnicott 1971, 131). Although extreme, the reaction is intelligible – as Tustin puts it while introducing autistic encapsulation as a last resort against unthinkable anxiety: “Losing the sense of existence is far worse than dying. In dying, at least a body is felt to be left behind. In losing the sense of being, nothing is left” (Tustin 1990, 39). Anything that makes one invulnerable to such horror is bound to appear as a lesser evil.⁸

Conclusion: Beyond association

We have now ventured through Winnicott’s account, assessing the nature and conditions of relaxation. We started off by dividing the concept of “primary unintegration” into “horizontal” and “vertical” aspects. Horizontal unintegration was described in terms of an unorganized state of the present momentary situation. Vertical unintegration, in turn, was introduced in terms of a state where past, present and future (e.g. recollections, sensations and wishes) are not clearly differentiated from one another, whereby the individual is confined to an all-embracing and hence never-ending present.

This conceptual distinction enabled us to shed new light on the process of integration and to cash out the concept of “relaxed unintegration” in terms of *horizontal unintegration backed by vertical integration*. As argued, the individual can relax only if they are able to trust that their gained sense of unity does not thereby disperse or evaporate into nothingness (“unthinkable anxiety”) but is constantly maintained (“a safe landing”) despite their momentary horizontal unintegration, and can hence also be restored (“a safe return”). In a clear contrast to “primary unintegration”, therefore, “relaxed unintegration” presupposes vertical integration. Namely, it is the vertical sense of going-on-being, which is supported by the internalized environment-mother, that affords the individual to be in pieces and let their mind wander, without feeling troubled by this momentary inorganization. In the end, cases were discussed where vertical backing is insufficient and the capacity for relaxation therefore hindered.

There are certain important consequences of what has been suggested here. Namely, if, on the one hand, the human mind is fundamentally a heterogenous field that is repeatedly – either compliantly or creatively – wakened into an alert mode, and if, on the other hand, associative processes are a matter of particular experiential contents giving rise to nascent representations of particular other contents, it follows that assigning a fundamental role to tracking associations may lead one to assume that one knows more of the other than one actually does. As has been said, in their prereflective mode,

⁸The concept of self-inflicted impingements could also be developed toward Bick’s theory of “second skin formation” and Meltzer’s and Tustin’s thoughts on autistic encapsulation, which all underline the autistic individual’s hypersensitivity to what could be called ego-dystonic impingements (see Bick 1968; Bick 1986; Meltzer 1975; Meltzer et al. 1975; Tustin 1986; Tustin 1990; Mitrani 1993; Mitrani 2011, 25–26). A related task would be to spell out the similarities and differences between Winnicott’s concept of “holding” and Bion’s notion of “containing” (for this see Ogden 2004). Developing these connections further, however, will be left for further studies.

experiential contents are not distinct islands floating separately in the mental scenery, as it were, but they are singled out only in and through reflection and verbal expression – as we saw Winnicott phrasing it, once we speak of associations and distinct mental contents, we have already “gone further than the beginning”.

If experiences are initially, in their prereflective guise, unintegrated, we are invited to conclude that, despite all the associations conveyed to us by the other’s verbal expression, the core of the other’s subjectivity is nonetheless left untouched. For to concisely understand the other person, it is not enough to remain sensitive to the experiential contents that we are delivered by speech while tracking the hidden associative threads beneath the latter; in addition, we would also have to know how the other “makes their pick” out of their verbally inexhaustible unintegrated experience. Yet, apparently, this we cannot do even in our own case – and neither can the other.

Winnicott busied himself a lot with such insights and their consequences: he argued that the core of subjectivity necessarily remains *incommunicado* (Winnicott 1965, 187), and assigned an *illusory* character to all human contact – no matter how intimate and reciprocal (see Taipale 2021). This idea of the essential privacy of the self, so dear to Winnicott (e.g. Winnicott 1988, 114), which is fundamentally owing to the unintegrated nature of our subjective core, is reflected widely in his clinical insights:

In the relaxation that belongs to trust and to acceptance of the professional reliability of the therapeutic setting (be it analytic, psychotherapeutic, social work, architectural, etc.) there is room for the idea of unrelated thought sequences which the analyst will do well to accept as such, not assuming the existence of a significant thread. (Winnicott 1971, 124)

If one assumes that, in the other person’s overall being, there is always a significant thread to be unveiled and interpreted, one is inclined to interpret the silences and the excessive chatter of the analysand as forms of resistance, unconsciously aiming to prevent the expression of specific associations and thoughts. Yet, if Winnicott is right, what is to be found besides order is also the peace and madness of being that, in the case of others, we can only respect and cherish – without “assuming the existence of a significant thread”. In our own case, again, this unintegrated core serves as a constant reservoir where we can retreat for relaxation – whether when we are alone or in the company of others. What applies to the garden swing, indeed applies to the analytic couch as well: what is required for relaxation and creative self-discovery is time, trust, and the absence of impingements.

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Translations of summary

Winnicott et le self (non)intégré. La capacité de se relaxer et de laisser son esprit vagabonder est l’une des pierres angulaires de la psychanalyse. Dans les cas où cette capacité semble être entravée, on en attribue typiquement les raisons à des inhibitions particulières et spécifiques : on suppose alors que

ce qui vient interférer dans ce processus, ce n'est non pas la capacité de relaxation mais uniquement l'activation à certains égards de cette capacité. Par opposition à ce courant de pensée dominant, Winnicott soutient que la capacité de relaxation mentale est le fruit du développement et présuppose un sentiment d'intégration solide. L'auteure de cet article étudie cette dynamique. Elle éclaire et explique la façon dont le sentiment d'intégration du self émane de la non intégration primaire, la façon dont un solide établissement du sentiment du self est au fondement de la capacité de relaxation, et enfin, elle souligne l'importance d'une forme de non intégration sereine dans la vie de tous les jours comme dans la situation analytique.

Winnicott und das (un)integrierte Selbst. Die Fähigkeit, sich zu entspannen und seine Gedanken schweifen zu lassen, ist einer der Eckpfeiler der Psychoanalyse. In Fällen, in denen diese Fähigkeit behindert zu sein scheint, werden die Gründe üblicherweise in bestimmten und spezifischen Hemmungen gesucht: Dabei wird nicht die Fähigkeit zur Entspannung als gestört angesehen, sondern nur die Aktivierung dieser Fähigkeit in einer bestimmten Hinsicht. Im Gegensatz zu dieser Mainstream-Denkweise argumentiert Winnicott, dass die Fähigkeit zur mentalen Entspannung eine Entwicklungsleistung ist, die ein sicheres Gefühl der Integration voraussetzt. Der vorliegende Artikel geht dieser Dynamik nach. Er verdeutlicht, wie ein integriertes Selbstgefühl aus einer primären Desintegration entsteht und erklärt, wie ein gut etabliertes Selbstgefühl die Fähigkeit zur Entspannung begründet. Er unterstreicht die zentrale Bedeutung entspannter Desintegration sowohl im Alltag als auch in der analytischen Situation.

Winnicott e il Sé (non-)integrato. La capacità di rilassarsi e lasciare che la mente possa vagare costituisce uno dei capisaldi della psicoanalisi. Nei casi in cui questa capacità sembra essere compromessa, le cause del problema sono solitamente ricercate in specifiche inibizioni: in quest'ottica, a essere ritenuta danneggiata non sarebbe perciò la *capacità* di rilassamento ma soltanto l'*attivazione di questa capacità* in relazione a un particolare contesto. Diversamente da questo diffuso modo di pensare, Winnicott sostiene che la capacità di rilassare la mente si possa raggiungere soltanto a un certo punto dello sviluppo, nella misura in cui essa presuppone nel soggetto un sicuro senso di integrazione. Il presente articolo si propone di esaminare la dinamica appena menzionata, chiarendo innanzitutto come un senso complessivo e integrato del Sé emerga dalla non-integrazione primaria, procedendo poi a spiegare come un solido senso di sé stia alla base della capacità di rilassarsi, e sottolineando infine l'importanza del rilassamento non-integrato tanto nella vita quotidiana quanto nella situazione analitica.

Winnicott y el self (no) integrado. La capacidad de relajarse y dejar que la mente vague es uno de los pilares del psicoanálisis. Cuando esta capacidad parece estar obstaculizada, se suele atribuir la situación a inhibiciones particulares y específicas: se considera que lo que se encuentra interferido no es la *capacidad* de relajación sino solo la *activación de esta capacidad* en un aspecto determinado. A diferencia de esta corriente dominante, Winnicott sostiene que la capacidad de relajación mental es un logro del desarrollo y presupone un sentido seguro de integración. El presente artículo investiga este dinamismo. Aclara cómo surge un sentido integral de self a partir de la no integración primaria, explica cómo un sentido sólido de self sirve de base a la capacidad de relajarse, y subraya la centralidad de una no integración relajada tanto en la vida cotidiana como en la situación analítica.

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