

**Performance
Blocks/Inhibitions:
a psychodynamic perspective**

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Performance Blocks/Inhibitions

Some definitions

- Performance
 - preparatory performance: playing in front of teacher, or practising 'alone'
 - performance proper: in front of a traditional audience
- Performance blocks
 - obstructions to development of performance potential:
 - performance anxiety/stage fright
 - lack of projection/ limitations in communication
 - difficulties with particular styles/genres
 - somatic symptoms e.g. RSI, chronic fatigue, shakes

Performance Blocks/Inhibitions

Some definitions (cont)

Psychodynamic

- psyche
 - Mind
- dynamic
 - past >> present
 - Unconscious >> conscious
 - within the unconscious
 - one unconscious >> another unconscious

Performance Blocks/Inhibitions

Some definitions (cont)

- a source of problematic dynamics
 - survival requires us to secure and maintain attachments (to belong)
 - development requires us to separate, to individuate, to develop our unique identity (to come into our own)
 - an experience of early secure attachments promotes ‘healthy’ separation/individuation/exploration
 - an experience of insecure attachments promotes *inhibited* separation/individuation/exploration

(Source: Bowlby 1988)

Performance Blocks/Inhibitions

Some definitions (cont)

- Attachment

- What promotes **secure** attachment?

- *experience* of having physical and emotional needs responded to with high degree of attuned empathy by a reliable and consistent figure(s) – ‘holding environment’

(Source: Winnicott 1965; Stern 1985)

- *experience* of the dependable presence of an interested ‘other’ mind willing and able, without undue anxiety, to help us make sense of our own minds and of what we experience – ‘containment’

(Source: Bion 1967)

Performance Blocks/Inhibitions

Some definitions (cont)

- Attachment (cont)
 - What promotes **insecure** attachment?
 - *experience* of varying degrees of physical and/or emotional neglect
 - *experience* of varying degrees of physical and/or emotional abuse
 - *experience* of an **absence** (of another *patient* mind able to contain our anxieties)
 - *experience* of the **presence** of another *impatient* mind:
 - » making meaning of the child's experience by means of imposition rather than empathic attunement
 - » indicating (consciously and unconsciously) that some feelings are acceptable while others are not

Performance Blocks/Inhibitions

Some definitions (cont)

- Inhibitions (versus Blocks)
 - *in + habere* – ‘i.e. to hold in’
 - ‘holding on’ to an attachment by ‘holding in’ unacceptable aspects of self
 - an unconscious process
 - gives rise to symptoms (behavioural, affective & somatic):
 - Performance anxiety
 - Manner of performance
 - Method of preparation for performance
 - Tensions in the body

Performance Inhibitions

Research Methods

- Method I
 - Participants
 - Music (10) and Drama (4) Students (Guildhall School of Music & Drama)
 - Self-selecting
 - Data collection
 - Each participant produced:
 - 1 x 7 page initial questionnaire
 - 4 x 45-50 minute semi-structured interviews
 - » Recorded
 - » Transcribed
 - 1 x 45-50 minute exit interview (unstructured neither recorded nor transcribed)
 - Additional written submissions received from some participants

Performance Inhibitions

Research Methods (cont)

- Method 1(cont)
 - Analysis
 - Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn 2003)
 - Phenomenological
 - » Explores personal experience of object/event (of preparatory performance and performance proper)
 - Interpretative
 - » 2 stage interpretative process
 - » The participant tries to make sense of their experience
 - » The researcher tries to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their experience

Performance Inhibitions

Research Method

- Method II
 - Participants
 - Guildhall School students seen in the context of the Counselling Service
 - Selected by researcher
 - Data collection
 - Relevant material taken from counselling sessions
 - Recorded in process notes following sessions
 - Counter-transference responses also noted
 - unsolicited written submissions
 - Analysis
 - Psychoanalytic interpretation
 - Verification
 - With participant in the counselling session
 - With colleagues in clinical supervision

Performance Inhibitions

Findings: some general points

- Performance as Individuating Process (by means of Exhibition)
 - Performance carries at its psychological heart the notion of *exhibiting*
 - *ex + habere* = 'to hold out'
 - Exhibition is about 'holding out' to others (the audience) aspects of emerging identity (in this the personal and professional are entwined).
 - The process of identity emergence is called individuation (i.e. separating out while retaining an essential sense of attachment)
 - Individuation in performance brings with it echoes of the experience of individuation of the past
 - Past individuating experiences are linked to experiences of attachment. (secure/insecure)
 - secure attachments >> individuation process is less anxiety ridden
 - insecure attachments, individuation is more anxiety ridden

Performance Inhibitions

Findings: some general points (cont)

- Performance as Exhibition (continued)
 - The **individuating performance** requires a **basic trust** (Erikson 1953) in the audience that what is exhibited:
 - will be empathically received/valued
 - will not be ignored/neglected
 - will not lead to abuse
 - will not lead to 'possession'
 - will not result in abandonment
 - will not lead to retaliation
 - will not damage the receiver

i.e. will not threaten an essential sense of attachment
 - If there is insufficient basic trust (because of insecure attachments), psychological defences will be employed to *inhibit* the *exhibition* in order to hold onto the attachment

Performance Inhibitions

Findings: some general points (cont)

- The Nature of the Audience
 - Real audiences can cause real problems
 - More problems are caused by phantasy audiences
 - The performer's phantasy audience (experienced in the present) is constructed on the basis of:
 - Past experiences (including the experience of being listened to/observed/responded to within the family: by mother, father/third, siblings)
 - The performer is never without an audience – even when 'alone' i.e. we listen to/respond to/observe ourselves

Performance Inhibitions

Findings: some general points (cont)

- The Nature of the Audience (cont)
 - The quality of the internal audience/observer also depends on past experience and how we have internalised audience/observer interactions:
 - Were they patient or impatient (containing or uncontaining?)
 - Were they overly (and prematurely) critical or tactfully evaluative?
 - » Each creative step has to emerge out of omnipotence (Winnicott 1971)
 - » Objective reality has to be offered in 'manageable doses' (Winnicott 1960; 1971)

Performance Inhibitions

Findings

- **Major Themes evident in Case Studies**

What kind of anxieties were stirred up during the individuating process of performance in front of an audience?

- Fear of Failure >> anxieties:
 - Disintegration
 - Loss of Control
 - Humiliation
 - Abandonment (of self by other)

*These anxieties tend to give rise to feelings of **shame**.*

- Fear of Success >> anxieties:
 - Aggression
 - Greed
 - Pleasure
 - Abandonment (of other by self; of self by self)

*These anxieties tend to give rise to feelings of **guilt***

*.... And the place of **ENVY**?*

Performance Inhibitions

Conclusions

1. Performance 'difficulties' have **personal meaning**
2. Under psychodynamic scrutiny these meanings can become accessible; that is a **narrative shape** emerges in which present experience can be seen to grow out of the past.
3. The narrative that emerges is about **the process of individuation** against a background of **secure and insecure attachments**. The more insecure the attachments, the more the self unconsciously utilises **performance inhibitions** to manage competing needs (i.e. to **attach** and to **separate**)
4. The emergence of narrative shape enables students to feel less the victims of 'outrageous fortune' and to have more **a sense of agency**
5. Gaining a sense of agency can lead to two essential outcomes:
 - reduction in performance difficulties (i.e. of symptoms) (**remedial**)
 - revitalisation of the link between the personal and professional (**developmental**)

Performance Inhibitions

Implications

- A performer's capacity for uninhibited curiosity and honest self-reflection – that is, a capacity to allow experience (no matter how unsettling) to be processed by thinking - is crucial to the integrated development of the person and the performer. The psychodynamic term for this is 'containment'.
- Performance difficulties indicate a disturbance in the student's containing capacity, originating in the past through their experience of inadequate containment, sustained at an unconscious level and erupting in the present.
- Where performance difficulties are persistent, students will need additional support in developing their containing (that is self-reflective) capacity.
- Such support needs to be available in a multiplicity of ways and at various levels, including:
 - Education (of students and teachers)
 - Modelling (by teachers for students)
 - Opportunities for teachers to reflect on the complex psychological processes inherent in the teaching-learning relationship
 - Therapeutic Consultations for Students wishing to focus on professional/performance issues
 - Counselling/Therapy for those students needing/wishing to take the opportunity to explore in greater depth the interplay of personal and professional development