

The Second AOTP Conference on Teaching Dynamic Psychotherapy—A Wilde Analysis of ‘Hamlet’

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The second AOTP conference took place at University College, Oxford from 12 to 14 April 1984. The themes were the theory and teaching of psychotherapy, and the place of personal experience in training. In addition to the plenary meetings the conference divided into small discussion groups; in this report I deal only with the former, of which I had a complete record.*

On the first day of the conference, which coincided with the arrival of Spring, Mark Aveline opened the proceedings by reminding us of the continuing winter of discontent towards psychotherapy, signalled in two recent leading articles in the medical press.^{1,2} The membership seemed to be as little moved by external threats as by internal controversies, although some radically opposed views were presented. However, tensions and conflicts at a more hidden level became evident during the course of the conference. By looking more closely at some of these conflicts in those two days in Oxford, I want to make some personal observations on the current state of psychotherapy theory and training.

Some tensions in the psychoanalytic view

Before looking at some of the differences between speakers, I will note some fundamental tensions in the views of a single speaker, and consider what in psychoanalytical psychotherapy makes it so difficult to be consistent about theory. In the session on the ‘Relation of theory to clinical practice’, John Steiner, a psychoanalyst and chairman of the Association of Analytical Psychotherapists in the NHS, stated that the growing point of psychoanalysis is in post-Kleinian object relations—in his view ‘a truly interpersonal and intersubjective theory’. But despite his confidence that full-blown psychoanalytical theory is the only one that ‘does justice to the situation’, he was equivocal about the nature and status of such theory. In describing his view of what kind of theory informs psychoanalysis, he mentioned that it is ‘more like a theory of history or art appreciation than a scientific theory’. He claimed that its function is ‘to create order, give aesthetic satisfaction, reduce anxiety’, and he even went so far as to assert that only ‘bad psychologists’ treat their theories as ‘literally true’. However, despite such strictures, the fact that Steiner does believe what is understood in terms of his theory to be literally true is brought out by such a remark as ‘the theory brings sex into it because the patients bring sex into it.’ We are being told that this is simply the way the world is: the theory becomes a fact, its truth so taken for granted that the theory, as theory (and most certainly as ‘a way of reducing anxiety, creating order’, etc) disappears.

Why such equivocation? Firstly, of course, it reflects the perennial dilemma of the social sciences between ‘under-

standing’ (*Verstehen*) and ‘explanation’ (*Erklären*), but in a particularly acute form: this ‘human science’ cannot stop at understanding, it has to influence people. That is its rationale. It is a theory of therapy. Secondly, in order to influence people it chooses to build a shared world which has implications (such as beliefs concerning the nature of man, the good life, etc) well beyond the alleviation of distress for which the patient seeks help. Thirdly, the psychoanalytical therapist has to inhabit this world fully; it must be, as it were, transparent, in order for him to see the patient as also belonging to it in all his subtle, recalcitrant individuality. There, surely, is the rub: the demands of living such a theory mean that it must become an ideology, defining the way the world is. It cannot be merely a system of hypotheses to be validated or refuted by the methods of science. And yet, being a technology of change, psychoanalytical theory is properly called on to justify itself in action—the ghost of Professor Shepherd stalks the battlements. The uncomfortable truth in the ‘old definition of psychotherapy’ quoted at the beginning of Shepherd’s *BMJ* leader is ignored at our peril: ‘An undefined technique applied to unspecified cases with unpredictable results. For this technique rigorous training is required’¹. The irony is that the definition, despite itself, also recognizes what is necessary and legitimate in dynamic psychotherapy. It may be precisely because Steiner, too, does not adequately acknowledge the ideological aspect of psychoanalysis that he is constrained to overemphasize a philosophical idealism when characterizing it, while seemingly being toppled into naive realism when expounding it. Both of Steiner’s distortions reflect perhaps a preconscious attempt to justify his theory while avoiding the sea of troubles that exposure to scientific validation entails.

A serious misconception by another analyst is relevant here: Sheilagh Davies claimed that psychoanalytical theory is ‘unlike others in having a self-reflective quality, a unique potential for looking critically and personally at itself.’ It does not, of course. It is no more able to look at itself as theory, in terms of itself, than is any other theory, and for the familiar reason of disappearing up its own analysis.

When we turn to Steiner’s views on training they are, as expected, appropriate to the induction of the trainee into a way of seeing the world, and though Steiner’s rationale seems the usual psychoanalytic one, it too, I think, shows traces of the return of the suppressed ideological aspect.

Personal analysis is believed by most analysts to be the most important part of training, followed by supervised clinical experience with theory a poor third. John Steiner’s justification for granting personal psychoanalysis such priority was ‘not simply based on the idea that one becomes a better person or is less neurotic after analysis . . . but because the chief instrument we use in psychotherapy is the person of the therapist, his perceptions of the patient certainly, but also the

*I would like to thank Dr Gwyn Davies for letting me use his tapes of the whole conference proceedings.

perception of his [the therapist's] own mind and body as they react to clinical experience.' Steiner goes on to describe how personal analysis 'allows us to make use of our feelings in the process of understanding' and enables us to see what is going on in ourselves as well as in our patients in analytic terms.

Even when, with Steiner, the psychoanalytic therapist trainee is seen as having his definition of the situation changed rather than his neurosis cured, something fundamental to the whole person is still at issue and training requires a powerful change-inducing set-up.³ This is provided by the personal analysis. By means of it the trainee acquires a different set of attitudes and beliefs about himself and important others. This is done through relating to a single person, the analyst, with trust and intimacy over a long period, during which the trainee experiences internal struggle and intense emotion. In this approach the source of learning (of information) is more salient than the content. (At the Institute of Psychoanalysis one's 'group' is defined by who one's analyst was.)

The pragmatic approach

In marked contrast, in a non-analytic but still psychodynamic training which has what I will call the pragmatic approach to change-induction, the trainee is encouraged to make information-seeking primary. The content is salient rather than the source, which has an impersonal quality. The trainee learns from any source—personal contacts, books, varied forms of teaching—and is primarily concerned with utility, being receptive to any information in so far as it is useful. At the Oxford conference Bernie Rosen, with his 'no-nonsense' problem-solving orientation and introduction of a varied array of teaching methods, was representative of this approach. In his view: 'It doesn't matter what colour the cat is as long as it catches the mouse.'

A further contrast between the analytic and pragmatic approaches is neatly contained in another of Rosen's quips—'Our attitude to analysis is rather like that of tramps to the Salvation Army, to accept the soup and reject the religion.' This surely reflects the difference between an analytic trainee's induction into an ideology that comes to define for him the nature of reality on one hand, and on the other the eclectic's more pragmatic world of hypotheses relatively lightly held. The real differences between the two approaches, as revealed in the above remark, were apparent at the conference but not addressed.

Yet another aspect of the difference between the assumption of the analytic stance and the more pragmatic approach is seen in the divergent attitudes to a *prima facie* similar form of teaching. Steiner mentioned that in his clinical seminar, at the Tavistock Clinic, which is immediately followed by a theory seminar, often a patient 'who didn't know anything about the theory seminar provides just the right material to illustrate the bit of theory being studied that day.' Implied here is the 'lo and behold' of theory being confirmed by evidence. At Guy's, on the other hand, Rosen told us that the same taped interview of a patient is used by a succession of differently orientated therapists to illustrate how the same material can be construed in a different way by each therapist. Not so much what is 'true' now, as what might be useful. The tension between these two

views of evidence and the nature of truth in each case was again elided at the conference.

Sources of power in the therapeutic relationship

What makes these differences so hard to address? I suggest the answer lies partly in the essentially different source of legitimation and power on which each approach relies. Both approaches share the power of 'the healer' as such, but thereafter their sources of power diverge. The key question in the Saturday morning session was 'What makes the therapist more able?' In answer, Sheilagh Davies claimed that the psychoanalytic psychotherapist (who is usually a specialist) has 'a new form of knowledge' and uses 'a different kind of evidence'. What this means from the change-induction point of view is that the principal source of therapeutic power lies in the stance—taking a metaposition to the material, including the therapist's own thought processes and bodily feelings ('counter transference')—and treating it all as performance or text with the therapist as audience and the patient as performer or writer. The therapist has thus, as it were, cornered the market in understanding and disappeared from the field of action. Under the cover of an epistemological shift or a further step in understanding unconscious communication, the therapist's power is further augmented beyond even that which derives from treating everything as transference. The counter-transference oriented therapist has become an inversion of the Aristotelian 'unmoved mover': what might be called an 'unmoving moved'. Is this just a more sophisticated version of the 'blank screen' myth?

On the other hand the power of the pragmatic eclectic therapist (who is more likely to be a non-specialist) does not reside in the claim to help the patient fulfil himself, or, in Steiner's words, 'get back parts of the self he had lost'. The pragmatic therapist defines the problem in concrete terms, defines the specific changes to be achieved, and formulates a plan to implement the change. Lying behind him, of course, is the power of 'Science', of the possible or actual empirical support for the connection between intervention and outcome. Furthermore, the surrounding culture, that of psychiatry as a whole in which NHS psychotherapy is embedded, also has Science as its underlying philosophy. This may provide one answer to John Cobb's query (from the floor) as to why, in contrast to their pragmatic colleagues, psychoanalytic therapists are reluctant to make supervision reciprocal. Part of the psychoanalytically-oriented therapist's resistance to self-exposure as trainer (or therapist) can be understood to be not just because it would 'confuse the transference and counter-transference issues' (the rationale given by Colin James), but also because it threatens a needed source of power, since what such therapists do not have (or want, according to Steiner) is the back-up of Science.

Is there evidence here of a new fundamentalism within the analytic wing of current British psychotherapy? If so, it can only provoke the attacks of those 'without the law'. As Winnicott said: 'What a pity to spoil a valuable concept by making it difficult to believe in.'⁴

We have then a web of interlocking reasons for the difficulty that the two approaches had in really talking to each other

about the nature of theory and its implications for training. Both are 'psychodynamic' in the general sense of using the notions of conflict and defence, but beyond that they have made different choices. On the one hand, the analysts are 'believers' and have committed themselves to the inner world (the unconscious), and, as Polanyi says: 'It is in the nature of all commitments that at the moment of its being held it cannot be fully justified.'³ It may be, as I have suggested, that in the dialectic of psychotherapy the 'moment' tends towards absolutism; and most analysts are incapable of being in the 'uncertainties, mysteries, doubts' of the unconscious without an irritable pushing away of fact or reason. On the other hand, the pragmatists are 'agnostics' and do reach for fact and reason, thereby having to do without the negative capability of their analytic brothers. Each, in his choice, knows the price of his partiality despite himself, and envies the knowledge-power of the other. Also, each knows that to attack the other is to attack a wished for part of himself, so such attacks only happen indirectly, by showing subtle contempt or indulging in self-denigration.

Conflicts surface

The conference was singularly without overt controversy, until at one point on the last day Glyn Bennett seemed to touch off the underlying fire. He affronted both the analysts and the pragmatists by his easy acknowledgement that his particular way (a broad mix of experiential techniques developed by the growth movement) was an 'ego-trip', not authorized by Freud or underwritten by Science. He was attacked from both sides. Sandra Grant, an analytic psychotherapist, interestingly misunderstood the degree of self-exposure that he was recommending and told a story about authority being toppled by 'confusion of boundaries' and spoke darkly of 'perverse qualities', 'voyeurism', etc that such tendencies revealed to the analytic eye. To swat this gadfly from the other flank, the empirical gun was wheeled out (quite amazingly, the only time during the whole conference) and turned on Bennett. Provoked by what he saw as *ex cathedra* statements, Sidney Bloch cited a study which seemed to counter Bennett's claim that intercurrent experiential groups helped the psychodynamic process along.

Why were such guns silent against what would seem the much deeper affronts from the analytic pulpit? It was the 'cognitive behavioural' John Cobb, who cast Stuart Lieberman and himself as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern because he expected 'something nasty to happen to us here.' Why was it not they who came between the 'incensed points of mighty opposites', but instead, the experiential and alternative Bennett? The answer lay partly, of course, in the need of the two regnant approaches at the conference to take common cause against what they saw as attack on psychotherapy as a whole. Cobb and Lieberman very clearly represented the pragmatic approach since theirs was the only presentation of an attempt to validate a form of psychotherapeutic training. They were duly attacked by the analysts, but subtly. No blood was spilt. Jonathan Pedder said in the nicest possible way that such things were 'all right for the Outer-Hebrides' but not, surely, for the Metropolis. David Bell deprecated the 'awful busy-

ness' of form-filling, that would obliterate the 'space' that is so important for therapy.

But no, it was Bennett who was the perfect scapegoat for the frustrated aggression of both approaches. After all he had divested himself of both power-bases, science and the analytic stance: he was fair game and perhaps the self-appointed sacrifice that might have brought the two sides together. Such an interpretation is suggested by Andrew Powell's summing up with Oscar Wilde's story, 'The Nightingale and the Rose', as an association to a 'conference dream' of the previous night. But he left out the denouement of the story. What he told was how the nightingale took pity on the student's sighs, and fed with his own life's blood the red rose that the student needed to dance with the professor's daughter: what Powell did not tell us (forgotten, it would seem, under the spell of the conference dynamic) was that when the student took the rose to her she rejected him for his shabbiness. The student, disillusioned, returned perhaps to his collected Freud. Meaningfulness was not enough, gained by however rigorous a sacrifice: the hard-headed professor's daughter wanted evidence of our poor analytic student's cost-effectiveness.

Hope for reconciliation

Such evidence must come: but it will not be quick. While the two main approaches have only an uneasy marriage of convenience, mutual creativity will be sadly curtailed. My belief is that if the varied dynamic approaches can find their place in a metatheory of therapy and training, research will be more co-ordinated and pertinent. At the conference there were two contributions which to some degree claimed such a meta-theoretical status. Jeremy Holmes presented what he felt was the essence of the psychotherapeutic method in an impressionistic paper, rainbow-coloured from the palettes of Heaney and Proust. In marked contrast was the matter-of-fact paper of Cobb and Lieberman who nevertheless equivocated about whether they were merely 'planting the seeds of communication skills' or offering something much more grand—a 'grammar of psychotherapy'. Both theories claimed to be 'a-theoretical' in the sense of not depending on any particular psychodynamic school. Holmes' 'calculus of discovery' was much too vague and the presentation of the grammar of psychotherapy much too short to assess whether either might form the basis of a much needed unifying theory. Maybe with the help of such perspectives, at some future conference we will be able really to talk to each other, and even dance with the professor's daughter.

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