

Can Theory be Culture free?

Psychoanalytic Theory an a creative Process between Culture and Analyst

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It is a well known fact that psychoanalysts have written much about culture, and obviously those writings belong to the most considerable contributions of psychoanalysis to the western civilisation. I only can mention Erich Fromm whom we honour by this International Forum. He has extensively investigated the state of men in modern society and culture and left a valuable work to us. His description of the social character and of the social unconscious are milestones in the development of psychoanalysis as a cultural theory. .

Nevertheless, the topic of this morning "Can theory be culture free?" focusses on quite another approach than traditional psychoanalytic considerations on culture. We do not discuss phenomena and dynamics of the cultural process from the psychoanalytic point of view. What we aim at is to regard the impact of culture to psychoanalytic theory itself.

When Carola Mann invited me to present a paper on this very subject, initially I was worried. I could not imagine theory other than a cultural production, like each product of human thinking. Moreover, I felt that theory is substantially culture, as it is conceptualised within a certain cultural frame and as it is an interpretation of the state of men at a certain point of cultural development. Thus, the answer to our question seemed trivial for me: Theory, as a cultural production, could never be culture free.

But then I started to think about the importance of culture for the analyst during his work. Thus, I regard psychoanalytic theory as his cultural environment. I came to the conclusion that analyzing means cultural experience in the sense of a process between the analyst and his cultural environment. My thesis is that the theory of the analyst is something what he is provided by the psychoanalytic culture and what he



is using as a transitional object: We can regard analyzing as the discovery of an unknown world. It is provoking persecutive and separation anxieties. Coping with these anxieties, the analyst refers to theories in the way like the baby uses transitional objects. He uses objects and symbols of thinking which he finds in his cultural environment as well as he creates them. We can compare that process with the processes of separation from the object of the early stages of life.

From this point of view, I consider culture, in general, as the mental environment of the human being. It is the result of human development and the matrix of mental life. We may assume that culture has different aspects which are supplementary. It is the frame and the product of mental activities like psychoanalytic listening and thinking. It provides symbols for speech and thinking, patterns of interpretation and regulation, criteria for normality and madness, values and standards.

For the analyst culture offers one of the virtual areas where psychoanalysis takes place. We may call it the cultural space or, as Winnicott did, the area of cultural experience (p. 107). Other areas are the inner psychic reality of the analyst and that of the patient, the intermediate space between both of them and the area of the external reality.

I want to give you some comments on the function and origin of that cultural space in psychoanalysis, referring to the theories of Winnicott.

It is the intermediate area which may exist between the analyst and psychoanalytic culture. The extend of this area is extremely variable between individual analysts, as it depends on the experience which they made during their primary and secondary socialisation as analysts; I shall refer to that aspect below when discussing the role of psychoanalytic training in that regard. The cultural space is the area of creative thinking which derives from playing. It is the place where we are creating ideas, which means objects, by imagination, intuition and phantasy using what is offered in the clinical material by our patients. Doing this, we digest in a certain way what is projected by the patient in the sense which was described by Bion as containing-contained. This area is characterized more by an atmosphere of trust and confidence, as Winnicott calls it, and by reverie, to quote again Bion. Thus, it must



not be mixed up with external reality which is dominated by rules, ratio and desire - though both, external reality and culture are part of the environment of the individual.

Contrasting pure male and pure female elements in males and females, Winnicott assumes that the female element in both establishes the "experience of *being*" which is result of the early object relation of the pure female element, while the pure male element is the origin of *doing* (p. 81). Applying this contrast to the relatedness of the analyst to his environment during his work, we may state that the cultural space is derived from the primary female elements and that it is established by the capacity of being. In contrast, the area of the external reality is developed from male elements and from the experience of doing.

The cultural space in psychoanalysis is a transformation of the transitional space between the individual and his object in the very early stages of life. It is formed by playing which is a transitional phenomenon symbolizing the dependability to the mother during the early separation. In the psychoanalytic situation, the dependability to the mother-object appears as confidence into culture - which is substantial in psychoanalytic theory, and playing is transformed into listening and thinking in relatedness to psychoanalytic culture. Thus, the early relatedness of the pure female elements lays ground to basic capacities of the analyst, like "the capacity to develop an inside, to be a container, to have the capacity to use the mechanisms of projection and introjection and to relate to the world in terms of introjection and projection" (p. 82). We may say, that it is the experience to exist as an analyst.

Let me put these these theoretical considerations on a clinical background.

I suppose that in our development as analysts we all come earlier or later to the crucial point where we get into some distance to what we learned about analyzing and psychoanalytic understanding and thinking during our training. This is the point where we start to think in a creative way about what is going on between us and our patients.



In my case I approached to that crucial point when I first was confronted with worrying countertransference feelings in the analysis of a female patient who was my first patient after having finished my training. She suffered from a cancerphobia which she projected to her genital organs, especially to her uterus. She was afraid of being overgrown by proliferations and metastases, and her phantasy was that she would be suffocated.

During the first year of her analysis, I was occupied in my mind extensively with sex in general and with female gender and genital organs in special as I was expecting to become father during that time. Initially, I felt to understand what was going on in her unconscious. She bore the burden of a contradictory relation to her father who was depressive and seductive, provoking her phantasy to be delivered by her devotion and exclusive love. I regarded her to be fixated to the more or less unconscious idea to be a better lover to him than she had the phantasy that her mother was, and that her love and devotion would deliver him from depression if she only would become pregnant from him. Accordingly, I understood her cancerphobia to be the result of her loyalty conflict with her father. That approach corresponded with the way of thinking of my training, and I was busy to work with the clinical and transference material in that direction.

Nevertheless, my patient did not make progress, but fell into a more and more desperate situation. We entered into continuous misunderstanding and a crisis of communication. She felt that I did not understand her, and I felt that she rejected what I supplied to her. Increasingly, she became suicidal.

At this point in one of the sessions I had the phantasy to penetrate into my patient and pull out her uterus. This phantasy was connected with feelings of disaster and hate. I was dismayed. But suddenly I heard myself saying to her: Perhaps your complaints of being killed by what is going on in your womb is your interpretation of what is going on between us. Perhaps you are afraid that I could pull you out of our relationship, as you guess was your mother's phantasy when she was pregnant with you. Perhaps you bear the phantasy that your mother tried to get you out of her womb, and, complaining, you fight for existing.



I was surprised about this interpretation which proved as a turning point and was most helpful for the further analysis. I was surprised because it was far away from my clinical thinking during those years in the middle 70s, when the significance of projection and identification for understanding and handling countertransference was still in an initial state in German psychoanalysis. For the analysis in question, I had to bear doubts and fears whether I was right to communicate such a spontaneous and - from the standard of those years - foolish interpretation. But I felt in some way that I was right and that I had regained understanding and touch with my patient. For my own development, I obtained from that episode some insight into the communicative processes in the analytic encounter which formed the basis for my understanding of countertransference thereafter.

When I look back to that episode from the distance of 25 years, I think it is quite obvious that we as an analyst are depending on theories, especially during the first years of our development. Theory is another term for the first analytic objects which are represented by our training analyst and supervisors, by the training institute and by the symbols which we have formed by studying psychoanalytic authors and literature. Depending on theory is an expression of dependability in that early state of the development as an analyst. We need those objects for coping with the challenges of being confronted with unconscious processes and thinking.

But generally, in the course of development there occurs a desidentification, and a greater autonomy towards psychoanalytic theory is arising. This progress mostly is connected with new clinical situations which confront us with unknown phenomena like incomprehensible transference manifestations or countertransference resistance. Often, it is caused by a crisis in the analytic encounter. In the experience of the analyst, it provokes persecutive fear and guilt feelings and constitutes a dilemma: When he is in need of reliable analytic objects, the analyst feels abandoned. It may be said: At the border of failure he is realizing the separation from his first analytic objects. But accepting them as not-me, he is enabled to find new solutions.

What I mean to say is that the analyst now is creating understanding, ideas and perhaps interpretations which represent the relatedness to his psychoanalytic



objects in a secondary, i.e. symbolic way. He can think of them and he can use them but he is not depending on them. In conclusion one can say: There appears a certain point in the development of the analyst where he begins to realize his analytic objects as not-me and copes with separation by introducing the psychoanalytic theory as a transitional object.

I am convinced that such progress in individual development as well as the progress in psychoanalytic theory in general - which is a part of the cultural process - is the result of coping with crises in the way I have described. Personal and cultural growth is depending on the capacity to stand paranoid anxieties and guilt feelings. That means it is depending on the ability to recombine symbols from theory with individual experience to creative insights. In that way, the analyst in general will open a new area of relation with his patient and provide for him the experience of being interpreted in a good-enough way. Such a creation is a heartening outcome which builds up the patient's sense of existence.

There are especially talented analysts who are able to come to general insights by that way enriching psychoanalytic theory and culture. Freud's work is a great proof that therapeutic crises can lead to extend insight and progress in theory. Ferenczi's clinical diary is another document. But his life and work also demonstrates in a moving way the struggle with Freud as his early analytic object and how he failed because obviously his analysis was not good enough to enable separation.

It is no doubt that there are analysts who are who are not in contact with their creative potential during their work with their patients. They reach their limits in confrontation with clinical situations which are not to be managed only by psychological investigation. Generally spoken, they are not capable in such situations to bear their madness which by the situation is provoked in them. Thus, they are not capable to contain the material which the patient projects into them and digest it in a state of reverie. In their unconscious, they seem to feel persecuted by their patients. Thus, they unconsciously fight against their patients or tend to force their own solutions into them, not being aware of their needs, what leads to stagnation, malignant regression or even break of the analysis.



We can assume that in such cases either they have not been given the opportunity to gain ability for playing in their early development, or their creative potential has become deserted by their psychoanalytic training. Therefore we have to be concerned that creative potentials are not destroyed by the experience as a candidate. I guess that is especially a question of the atmosphere of the training which should be based on what Winnicott calls the pure female elements instead of rules and ratio, and on the readiness to tolerate the candidates need for autonomy.

In conclusion, I go back to the topic of our session: "Can theory be culture free?" I hope that it became convincing that theory as I described it is a creative process within the analyst which takes place in the intermediate space between him and his mental environment, which means culture and psychoanalysis which is a part of it. Thus, psychoanalytic thinking and theory is immanently involved into culture, while prominent thinkers, nevertheless, may contribute by creative new ideas to the cultural process.

No doubt, Winnicott, whom I owe the inspirations to my paper, was one of those extraordinary thinkers, as well as Erich Fromm was, whom we honour by this Forum and to whom I want to dedicate this paper. I think, he would deeply agree with what Winnicott wrote (p. 99):

"When one speaks of a man one speaks of him along with the summation of his cultural experiences. The whole forms a unit."

Literature:

Winnicott, DW (1971) *Playing and Reality*. Tavistock, London

