

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF PSYCHOANALYSIS TO SOCIETY 100 YEARS ON

More than one hundred years since its origin, psychoanalysis remains an anathema. It is criticized at every point, whether for the lack of evidence of its effectiveness as a treatment, the philosophical weakness of its conceptual framework or the dogmatic beliefs of its adherents - whose rigid ideas are said to indicate that they should more appropriately be regarded as a religious sect than a rationally based profession with a basis in scientific psychology.

Its founder Freud remains a controversial figure and is the subject of numerous biographies and studies which set out to show the pathology of his personal life and therefore that his theories should be discredited and consigned as curiosities to the history of the 19th century. It is also frequently stated that Freud's theories are invalid since they are based on the peculiar psychological state of bourgeois women living in Vienna at the end of the 19th century. Their neurotic problems are said to be the product of that patriarchal world and not valid as universal statements about human psychology. Freud's famed preoccupation with sex is widely dismissed as not having any scientific status, although, by the evidence of our current society and its media, which seems obsessed with sexual preoccupations, Freud could be said to be correct. Some religious authorities even blame this sexual obsession on the pernicious influence of psychoanalysis. At the other end of the spectrum psychoanalysis is also criticized in sexual politics where gay and lesbian groups attack Freud as a patriarch who condemned homosexuality.

The demise of psychoanalysis has been widely predicted for many years, both in



the USA and Britain. It is often spoken of as an outdated theory and method of practice which has been superseded by modern practice such as cognitive behavioural therapy. However, these predictions have not prevented an enormous expansion of psychotherapists and counsellors in Britain, the majority of whom based their theory and practice on psychoanalysis. Indeed this large and growing movement has begun to demand to be recognized as a new profession by legislation in Parliament. The demand from patients who wish to receive talking treatments continues to grow rapidly. In Britain the recognition of users' opinion is pressing for better provision of psychotherapy services.

A recent Tavistock Clinic TV series in 1999 of 6 programmes on the main forms of psychotherapy and including a film on infant observation led to a very large number of enquiries to the BBC asking for similar help and many favourable reviews. It is rather evident that despite the traditional and daunting image of Freudian psychoanalysis in a modern society there is a great demand for psychoanalytically based psychotherapies. Many would argue that the future of mental health treatment lies in this direction rather than in the attempt to solve problems by drugs, such as is seen in the vogue for treating anxious and difficult children with amphetamine-type drugs such as Ritalin. The recent adoption by the British NHS of universal standards for psychotherapy provision and the funding of child psychotherapy training in every region of the country are evidence of the movement towards the central role that psychoanalytic ideas will play in the mental health services.

In Britain, which contains a lively and theoretical innovative psychoanalytic society, there are no more than about 300 practising psychoanalysts, 90% of

them in London. Yet such a tiny group has created wide influence. In official mental health circles there is considerable hostility to the incorporation of psychoanalytic principles into mental health practice and therapeutic methods and the overt involvement of psychoanalytical methods in the training of mental health professionals. The paradox is that where any of these practices are named as psychoanalytical in origin they are challenged and rejected, but yet when they are not identified as such they can be adopted as effective and innovative.

It is interesting to compare this controversy about Freud's work with the fate of the other two great nineteenth century thinkers who have changed the world of ideas: Darwin and Marx. Darwin has been fundamentally accepted and is seen to represent one of the most interesting and exciting modern sciences. Modern evolutionists are celebrities and the most fashionable scientists. By contrast, Marx is dismissed but nobody needs to argue the case against him. His ideas which held such sway are now discredited but no longer represent a threat that needs to be combated. Freud and psychoanalysis remain truly controversial and troublesome and so call forth constant attack and the production of evidence to prove them wrong. Psychoanalysis is done the honour of being regarded as subversive and attractive and needing to be constantly kept at bay.

So we are faced with the paradox that despite this controversy and dismissal, the impact and influence of psychoanalysis continues to be extensive in many fields of society, but most deep-rooted and wide-reaching when its influence is not acknowledged and it has been assimilated into the everyday culture.



I would like to argue that the criticism and dismissal of psychoanalysis is an inevitable consequence of the powerful disturbing effect that its discovery has had. Freud's hostile reception in Vienna was much to do with the intense disturbance felt at the contemplation of the sexual nature of human development and the uncomfortable discovery that man was not rational. Further discoveries of psychoanalysis have only added to the dismay and alarm that it produces. Ideas such as the early and complex mental life of infants and evidence of primary human destructiveness and guilt remain controversial, as do psychoanalytical views of sexual disturbance. Even today many psychoanalysts themselves find the notion of a death drive hard to accept, despite the wide evidence of its existence in human behaviour. It may be that some of the most controversial ideas of psychoanalysis represent its greatest contributions to society, but equally in many crucial aspects where it has been influential, such as child-rearing, attitudes to emotional expressiveness, tolerance of a wide variety of human lifestyles and the belief in subconscious motives. Psychoanalysis has had great impact, but many of these ideas have lost their connection with psychoanalysis in the public perception.

I will illustrate this discussion by referring to the experience at the Tavistock Clinic, an organisation which was set up to apply psychoanalysis to society. During its 80 year history it has engaged in the provision of mental health treatment, in far-reaching research and in a major training venture. It has engaged widely in society in management consultancy, in army psychiatry and in the organisation of the Health Service as well as an active role in influencing public policy in mental health and child care. It has produced a range of psychoanalysts who have distinguished themselves in the application of

psychoanalysis, such as Bowlby, Bion, Balint, Jacques, Menzies Lyth, Malan and Steiner.

The Clinic has always occupied a complex position between medicine and psychiatry on the one hand and psychoanalysis on the other, sometimes being attacked by both sides. Indeed Ernest Jones discouraged psychoanalysts from working there and diluting psychoanalysis by seeking to apply it in the public sphere.

The Tavistock Clinic in London is a government-funded Clinic and training centre within the British National Health Service, devoted to five major aims.

- 1 The provision of mental health treatments for all ages based on applied psychoanalytic principles.
- 2 The training of a wide range of mental health professionals in therapeutic methods and emotional learning based on psychoanalytic principles, including specific training for psychoanalytic psychotherapy of adults and children. It is the largest trainer of child psychiatrists, child psychotherapists and specialist psychiatrists in psychotherapy in Britain.
- 3 The study of institutions, groups and management structures based on psychoanalytical principles - consultation, training and research in this field.
- 4 Research into human development based on psychoanalytic models.



Research into new applications of psychoanalytic ideas to mental health treatment. Research into the outcome of psychoanalytic base therapies to meet the challenge of the demand of evidence based medicine.

- 5 All these activities to support an underlying aim of influencing public policy in the provision of mental health services to adopt psychoanalytically based ideas and move away from a 19th century model of mental illness and of medical treatment and containment towards a developmental therapeutic approach to the individual. It also aims to promote psychoanalytical understanding of groups and institutions in public policy.

The Tavistock Clinic began as a direct consequence of the human catastrophe the 1914-1918 War. When it was founded in 1920 the impact of psychoanalytic knowledge enabled the understanding of the war and its human consequences to provide the inspiration for a number of physicians who specialized in psychological medicine and who had extensive experience of shell shock to set up a clinic with a new approach to mental health. The origins of the Clinic out of the war set its ethos as an attempt to bring therapeutic help to the struggle against regressive, destructive mental processes in the individual and in society. Eighty years later its ethos remains the same and it is well suited to the modern task of finding an effective and functioning model for mental health services which are in a state of crisis in Britain following the closure of the mental hospitals and the inadequacy of community-based services as well as the deterioration of many good therapeutic services such as the child guidance clinics.



At the historical crisis of human destructiveness in the war , a new type of mental health institution was brought into being, with a therapeutic aim based on psychoanalysis. The founders of the Tavistock Clinic intended to create a public clinic to address the mental disturbance in the community, a different kind of institution from the traditional mental hospital.

Although the Clinic began by providing psychoanalytical psychotherapy, which had proved successful in treating shell shock, it developed a much broader approach to society by providing consultation based on psychoanalytical principles, which was developed from the understanding of groups and institutions. This work began when the medical director, J.R. Rees, became a leading army psychiatrist in the Second World War. Psychoanalytic ideas were able to offer an account of the underlying causes of human disturbance, both in individuals' and also in the disturbance within groups and in the whole society.

The Tavistock's approach to institutional dynamics and group processes grew out of the Clinic's extensive involvement in military psychiatry in World War II and its involvement in officer selection procedures for the military: the War Office Selection Boards. The army was not only interested in curing individuals but also in developing an understanding and treatment for the stresses of military life in time of war. During the Second World War over 30 Tavistock staff members entered the army, many of them as staff officers in influential positions. The intervention of this talented group of psychiatrists, bringing with them ideas from the Tavistock Clinic, led to many innovations in social psychiatry: therapeutic community and group work. Wilfred Bion was one of the leading figures from the Tavistock. He had been a decorated tank commander in the First war. In the



Second he became an innovative and challenging army psychiatrist, with his experiments in therapeutic communities and his studies in group dynamics. His challenge to the ward organisation at the Northfield Military Hospital led to his being moved quickly, but his ideas led to a profound understanding of how projective processes operate in a social system or a group. These themes formed the basis of the whole field of group relations and were the basis of the Tavistock's institutional consultancy work.

In the post-war period, as had happened after the First World War when the Clinic was founded, these innovative applications of psychoanalysis and social psychiatry were applied to civilian society. There were plans for the integration of social science with dynamic psychology.

A substantial social agenda was proposed. There was a clear perception that psychoanalytical object relations theory had proved to be relevant in the social as well as the clinical field during the war. Many staff now completed training as psychoanalysts or undertook personal analysis.

The Clinic entered the NHS in 1948. Its academic consultation and research side remained outside the Clinic and was incorporated as the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations which engaged itself with the problems in industry at that time. This led to many important projects, including those of Eric Trist on social organisation in the coal mines and the famous studies by Isabel Menzies Lyth on the organisation of nurses in a large hospital: *Social Systems as a Defence Against Anxiety*. Many other productive extensions of psychoanalytical ideas into the field of industry and social organisation were carried out, including Eliot

Jacques' studies of social systems which function to keep unconscious anxieties at bay in the workplace.

The ethos of the Tavistock, based on Bion's psychoanalytic understanding of primitive interactions in groups.

For an individual or a society's survival and development, destructive omnipotent forces need to be contained and resisted by those that are integrating and creative. This equilibrium has to exist within the internal world based on the internalisation of previous good experience of a containing object as Bion has described it, which can resist the destructive forces. The containing object needs to have the capacity to recognize the destructive forces, but yet to continue to survive them without retaliating. A therapeutic institution has to have a similar capacity to function as a containing object and interact supportively with the internal world of its staff and patients to enhance their capacity to work with these dangerous forces.

In his studies of groups Bion delineated the work group as an organisation not based on regression to primitive modes of thought or dependency, that can resist destructive forces and enhance creative co-operative ones. The work group aspect of an institution must work to distinguish omnipotent and delusionary functioning from that which is reality orientated.

Bion underlined the need for a mental space to allow thinking which is not occupied by fixed positions or dogma which have paranoid assumptions at their root. These fixed positions are frequently to be found in states of anxiety and



disturbance in society or as part of institutional defence against change. The institution may be extremely threatened by change. This can lead to it being unable to adapt to changing environmental circumstances. In the past, the Tavistock Clinic has constantly had to adapt to many changes in the NHS with the introduction of the NHS market by the Conservatives under Thatcher and in the last three years with radical new modifications by a Labour government. It has required great effort not to fall into a defensive position of seeing all changes as a threat, while remaining aware that changes can be damaging. Inward turning and defensiveness also relate to the fear that an institution is not strong enough to survive new circumstances if its strength is only based on idealization and not on a robust capacity to cope with the world and prove its value.

Forensic Psychotherapy

The psychoanalytic work with offender patients at the Portman Clinic has led to the development of the new field of Forensic Psychotherapy which has application to the treatment of offenders and the management and understanding of the social systems in prisons and special hospitals. The recurrent problems of coping with violent and sexually disturbed individuals have caused the authorities to turn to help from psychoanalysts experienced in this field. One of the greatest problems is the pernicious influence of the dynamics of the social organisation of prisons and the justice system. Psychoanalytically informed consultation to institutions has proved effective in combating these chronic problems which give governments cause for concern.

The psychoanalytic contribution to understanding the problem of

destructiveness in society

Psychoanalysis and its developments have made an important contribution to understanding primitive mental processes in war and in social disorder. The history of the last century as been an all too painful demonstration of these primitive human qualities and their awful consequences.

Omnipotent thinking is an universal human tendency. In war, something best described as destructive omnipotence holds sway both in the individual and in the society and is sanctioned by the authorities of the state. A similar state of mind exists in psychotic illness and is a fundamental problem to the patient's capacity to accept help. This state of mind is based on a belief in power over others who are made into victims who can be enviously depleted. This will include the vulnerable dependent parts of the self, which will be attacked. Valuable institutions and relationships are also damaged in this state of mind. There is excitement and sadism in these actions and an initial absence of guilt at what is being done, since defences against guilt are in operation. In 1920 Freud described this force as the death instinct, a primary human destructive drive. This idea must have been influenced by his own observation of the terrible human forces unleashed by the First World War. For many, the concept of a primary human destructive drive is difficult to accept and destructiveness is felt to be always the consequence of trauma. Other clinicians such as Rosenfeldt have found the concept essential in understanding near psychotic mental process and the resistance against psychoanalytic treatment in very disturbed patients.

Rosenfeldt described destructive narcissism as a state in which there is an



idealisation of destructiveness. He viewed this state as a direct expression of the death drive. He described that in some patients the destructive narcissistic parts of the self are linked to a psychotic structure which is split off from the rest of the personality. This psychotic organisation can be described as a delusional world into which parts of the self withdraw. The delusional world is dominated by an omniscient ruthlessness which creates the notion that with the delusional object there is painlessness and lack of guilt and the freedom to indulge in any sadistic activity.

Bion described omnipotence as a universal human trend. There is always a drift in the direction of a delusionary state. He was particularly interested in how these forces could have a powerful effect on the functioning of a group or institution or a whole society. He illustrates the tendency with its delusionary consequences by references to religious cults or political groups led by charismatic or messianic leaders or political dictators in which the individual's capacity for judgment is given up to the leader with an impoverishment of independent moral capacity.

Freud's contribution to the problem of guilt and morality in society. The inevitable failure of attempts to avoid guilt

In his paper, 'Civilisation and its Discontents' written in 1930, Freud states that the sense of guilt is the most important problem in the development of civilisation. Melanie Klein was later to emphasize the constructive and necessary aspects of guilt, developing the ideas in Freud's paper, 'Mourning and Melancholia', where the capacity to grieve is fundamental to the ability to recover from loss, including

the loss of self-esteem. In melancholia there is a state of resentment and grievance, in which it is not possible to come to terms with the losses.

Freud said "The price we pay for the advance in civilisation is the loss of happiness due of the heightening of the sense of guilt. The increase in guilt is inevitable if civilisation is to exist because of the innate tendency to destructiveness. Freud did not clearly distinguish between severe and restrictive forms of guilt and an appropriate and necessary capacity for guilt. He said that "the fateful question for the human species is to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction".

Melanie Klein took this thinking further and added to the understanding of this dilemma by her description of what she believed to be her most important discovery, the paranoid defence against guilt. She explained the powerful attraction of the regression to the paranoid position which projects blame and avoids guilt.

It is inevitable that reparative agencies are attacked and disliked by those who are in an omnipotent regressed state, for the recognition of guilt causes a collapse of omnipotence and creates pain and vulnerability, which is blamed on the therapeutic agency. Paranoid position functioning, as described by Klein, is accompanied by persecutory anxiety. In such states there is a loss of internal and external containing structures and an increase in omnipotence with a weakening of the capacity for guilt. This may be accompanied by manic excitement based on the fantasy that it is possible to steal what is envied and



avoid vulnerability by projecting it into those who have been robbed, who then are made to be the ones who suffer the loss.

Once guilt has been repudiated and vulnerability projected, there is inevitably great anxiety that the victim will retaliate and take revenge, which will lead to the reinforcement of paranoid anxiety. This is a reason why it is so difficult to give up these states and they tend to persist and remain stable. It is inevitable that giving them up will be accompanied by intense persecutory guilt. A spurious morality can be brought into existence which denigrates shared humanity, awareness of vulnerability and depressive concern as forms of weakness which are to be despised and attacked. The capacity to feel guilt and concern is characterised as a form of weakness.

The psychoanalytic contribution to understanding war

The excitement based on the projection of vulnerability and weakness into another group, so evident in states of war, allows the gratification of sadism towards the victims. In politics this can lead to a kind of populist or nationalistic state of mind, with a claim to fight wrongs, destroy privilege and offer the spoils of envy to everybody, gratifying greedy destructive fantasies about possessing and spoiling what is good and enjoying sadistic gratification. As recent events in Yugoslavia show, this is all too often acted out in war.

Fornari has shown in his study of the psychoanalysis of war that a whole society can use the state of war and the existence of hated enemies as a way of enabling the society to use primitive processes to get rid of conflict and to indulge



in the widespread use of paranoid position functioning.

In war situations an omnipotent state of mind is released and there is regression to more primitive mental processes. In recent wars - the Gulf War in 1991 and Falklands War in 1982 - it was possible to observe that the whole nation began to regress towards paranoid functioning demonstrable with excitement at the prospect of war, while the wars in Bosnia in 1992 and in Kosovo in 1999 were much more connected with an identification with the victims. War allows a licence for the weakening of the individual superego which is given up to the leaders, resulting in an undermining of individual capacity for judgment and for guilt. The society may be in a deluded state at the time of war, just as the disturbed individual who commits a crime is often in a near psychotic state when the act is committed.

In political upheaval these defences against guilt can lead to damage to institutions and structures which are part of the organising and containing part of society. At these times the containing structures can be seen as elitist or restrictive. They can be damaged or destroyed without guilt and the excitement and gratification allow the destructive processes to receive wide support. Opposition to these processes becomes weak and is dealt with violently, as in so many dictatorships.

These organisations have remarkable stability as is evident from the long survival of dictatorships such as Mao and Stalin where the whole society is taken over by this form of mental functioning. These forms of society are the equivalent to states of mental illness in the individual.



There are wishes to fuse with the idealized figure and a weakening of the capacity to make an independent judgment. This form of human organisation may have some biological basis, comparable to a primitive herd instinct.

Psychoanalysis as a mental organisation in the mind and in society

Psychoanalysis may be seen as representing an internal institution which is set up in the mind as a containing organisation which is capable of thought and challenge to primitive processes. Psychoanalytic experience can provide the understanding of primitive processes which is necessary to struggle with the individual pressure towards destructive regression. Understanding must also be derived from personal experience and awareness derived from self-knowledge gained in analysis and self-analysis which must make the individual aware of their own destructive wishes and personal involvement in regressive wishes. This is a strong antidote to paranoia. Regression towards destructiveness needs to be seen to be a personal temptation where greed and envy are active and a fear of vulnerability is strong.

The problem of regression exists both at the level of the society and at the level of the individual. This is acknowledged in the Tavistock's recognition of the importance of dealing with social systems and organisations, as if they were similar to a patient seeking help. It is necessary to bear this in mind when considering the level of the national mind which is expressed by political activities, since it is clear that a nation can share a state of mind and political forces can radically alter this.



Conclusion

Psychoanalysis is eternally controversial but has made a rich and varied contribution to society, both in providing such a variety of approaches to the treatment of mental health problems, but in addressing many of the fundamental questions about how groups, individuals and society function. It has particularly been valuable in addressing the inexplicably destructive propensities of human society.

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