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A Workshop on Erich Fromm Meeting Report

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A meeting on „Frommian Therapeutic Practice“ was held from August 30 to September 1, 1991 by the International Erich Fromm Society, in cooperation with the Istituto Erich Fromm di Psicoanalisi Neofreudiana of Bologna, Italy. The workshop took place in Verbania-Pallanza, on the Italian side of Lake Maggiore. (Fromm spent the last years of his life in Locarno on the Swiss part of the lake.) In 1974, while Fromm was still alive, Bernard Landis organized a seminar in Locarno on Fromm’s clinical methods. Another meeting was held in Locarno in 1988 to commemorate Fromm. In 1991 it was felt appropriate to organize a meeting on the Italian side of the lake, in recognition of the large Italian membership of the Fromm Society.

The subject of the meeting was the elusive topic of Fromm’s psychoanalytic technique. Since Fromm wrote so little on the subject, the workshop looked to the two other sources still available. The first source is some hitherto unpublished material—such as a lecture Fromm delivered in New York in 1964 and his remarks at the Locarno seminar mentioned above. At the start of the workshop, Rainer Funk (Fromm’s literary executor and editor of his unpublished works) presented a selection of Fromm’s unpublished writings on psychoanalytic technique.

The second source consists of the reports of people who were associated with Fromm. At the workshop we were lucky in having two such persons: Jorge Silva-Garcia, MD, and Ruth Lesser, PhD. Silva, who was for a long time associated with Fromm in Mexico, presented the case history of „Fernando.“ An interesting point was raised in the ensuing discussion between Silva and Lesser. Because Silva felt that at the outset his patient’s condition was precarious, Silva adopted a tolerant attitude: he preferred to wait and allow the patient to grow in his own way. Lesser felt that Fromm would not have waited and would have tended to set limits.

Lesser presented the case of „Herbert,“ a case that had been supervised by Fromm. She also presented notes from two seminars with Fromm. From her report it appeared that in many ways Fromm was close to a more radical psychoanalytic approach, the origin of which can be traced back to Ferenczi. For example, Fromm would acknowledge his mistakes; and Fromm wanted both the analyst and the patient to be subjects of inquiry. Because he believed that the analyst’s response should not be hidden, Fromm advocated a face-to-face position. Fromm felt that statements by the patient about the analyst ought not be dismissed as transference; rather the analyst should err on the side of thinking the patient correct. Fromm wanted to encourage the patient to develop powers of observation, and so Fromm used to invite the patient to report observations of the analyst. When the patient was right, Fromm said so.

However, according to Lesser, Fromm did not want to foster massive regression, and he discouraged intense transference reactions, believing that this did not help the adult part of the patient. (In this, Lesser felt, he differed from some British authors.) Likewise, Fromm believed that



intense countertransference is inappropriate. Lesser did not think that Fromm would subscribe to Merton Gill's third principle of the transference, according to which, sooner or later, the analyst falls in with the patient's negative expectations. She felt that, in such cases, Fromm would have been concerned that the analyst was not maintaining objectivity. Fromm wanted the analyst to be as rational as possible (which is distinct from being intellectual).

Lesser stressed that Fromm's main thrust in analysis was to bring to awareness who the patient is, the discovery of the patient's core orientation. In achieving this aim, Fromm was not interested in the „why“—i.e., in historical material. Awareness—not explanation—makes the difference. To quote from one of Fromm's unpublished writings: historical research „has value only when it's a part of uncovering what is the hidden experience the patient has *now*.“ To reach this goal, Fromm placed much value on dreams. He also made use of free association, but Fromm's sense of urgency and dislike of wasted time dictated the use of directed free association.

Silva stated that he used to feel „shaken“ by Fromm's confrontational approach. But Lesser noted that Fromm used to temper confrontation both verbally and nonverbally (e.g., by asking „Is that so?“ with a twinkle in his eye).

Three more papers were given by people who had never met Fromm. Thus, they could not claim to reconstruct Fromm's technique; rather they applied or extended his ideas in the clinical context.

In his paper on „The Being Mode in the Psychoanalytic Hour,“ Romano Biancoli made extensive use of six unpublished lectures given by Fromm in Mexico. Biancoli stated that in analysis the question „Who am I?“ can only be answered in the being mode, whereas social filters tend to organize experience according to the having mode. Thus, in a psychoanalytic session, memory has to become a living memory. The being mode is also the condition for „center-to-center“ relatedness between analyst and patient, in which the analyst experiences in himself or herself all that the patient experiences and thus sees the patient, so to speak, from inside. Biancoli gave an example of these concepts in an actual exchange with a patient.

„Core-to-core“ relatedness was also the subject of my own paper, in which I described the initial contact in two cases. These two patients re-enacted with me the most basic parent-child interaction—that at the beginning of life—in its two opposite forms: rejection in one case, acceptance in the other. In this paper I also tried to establish connections between Fromm's concepts and those of other analysts in Britain and the US.

Finally, Antonello Bazzan presented a paper titled „From the Patient as a 'Guilty Child' to the Patient as 'Co-analyst'.“ He described the case of a girl who was seduced by her employer at the age of 17 and felt guilty about it. He suggested that the patient's past could be understood in terms of Fromm's discussion of the authoritarian family, the authoritarian conscience and authoritarian religion. The analyst at first made the Freudian error of viewing the patient as guilty. He then acknowledged his mistake, thus implicitly offering the patient the role of co-analyst.

One issue raised during the meeting was the contrast between Fromm and Sullivan. Marco Conci pointed out the similarity between Sullivan's one-genus postulate and Fromm's humanistic premise („Nothing human is alien to me“). Lesser added that for both Fromm and Sullivan inquiry was essential. She felt that Sullivan, like Fromm, would not have subscribed to Gill's third principle. She also pointed out certain differences between them: Sullivan was interested in adaptation, but Fromm wanted people to criticize the social structure; and Sullivan sought a general explanation of behavior, while Fromm was interested in each person's uniqueness.

At the end, Rainer Funk remarked that two themes had emerged in the meeting: on the one hand there had been important contributions to the reconstruction of Fromm's technique; on the other, there had been attempts to apply and extend his ideas, and to connect them with other developments in psychoanalysis.