

COMMENTARY

Reflections on a Profession

What's in a Name?

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Abstract:

A profession's self-identifying label has a normative effect on its practitioners. This article briefly explores the consequences of the term *psychoanalyst* and discusses some of the inherent contradictions in its use in clinical practice. The need for human beings to talk to and to listen to each other is explored, and the import for both participants is discussed and placed within an historical context.

A rose by any other name, Shakespeare reminds us, would smell as sweet.

Not so, however, for human beings, we who are children of culture, of ritual and, most importantly, of words. Words give form to our thinking and thereby shape the world we live in. Language defines and refines who we are and who we are supposed to be. In this short communication, I would like to examine the implications of defining ourselves as psychoanalysts and distinguish what that word suggests from what everyday practice entails. I

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bring a phenomenological perspective to my observations; my primary purpose is simply to convey how defining titles affect clinical practice.

Psycho-analyst. But do we analyze psyches? What can that possibly mean? There is, as we know, no such thing as a psyche without a body, without a family history, without a particular culture's words to shape one's knowledge both of oneself and the world. Even such social virtues as compassion, cooperation and considerateness are, as Antonio Damasio (2003) reminds us, products as much of our corporality as they are of our thinking. Consequently any assumedly detached observation of a person's fantasies, memories and/or impulses, from the distance behind the couch, is an isolation of perception that does not serve either observer or observed well. Is it not more to the point to say that we create a safe atmosphere where memories can be reawakened, and where fantasies and drives can be recognized and acknowledged? We hope to create a place where individuals can begin to find who they are and who they want to be. We do this through our tone of voice, through our bodily movements or lack thereof and, of course, through language. We are witnesses to each person's struggle to find a ground upon which to feel alive and eventually to enjoy nature's gift of life. We stand witness, so to speak, to the best of what life can offer more than to what it may have offered in the past.

Witnesses can be noisy or quiet, preoccupied with telling what “they” saw or they can be companions who are ready to offer assistance when they can. Too much of psychoanalytic practice, I believe, has the mark of showing what “an analyst” sees, with a subsequent commitment to teaching the patient to see the same. The danger in such an approach, as Theodor Reik (1937 & 1948) reminds us, is that it hinders one’s capacity to be surprised. Surprised by ourselves as much as by any patient. Surprised by one’s findings. Findings that come to be not in either participant’s psyches but in the dialogue that is the bridge between them.

Doesn’t a psychoanalyst analyze the unconscious? Isn’t that an adequate job description? Not really. No one analyzes what is unconscious – least of all an analyst. All that can be known about the unconscious is what interpretation creates. What we know is the interpretation (Gargiulo, 2006), usually an analyst’s but sometimes a patient’s. Does that capture all that may have been repressed? Does that adequately describe all of what may have been distorted? We can never know. When all goes well a patient decides to push the tide of forgetfulness back, recognizes his or her divided loyalties to past life experiences and present life needs and, somewhere in that process, makes use of what comes from speaking, honestly, with another – this other that we call a psychoanalyst. In Freud’s topography, an analyst supplies the

word to the preconscious – seeds of remembering – but it is only a patient who waters and lets the sunshine in. To belabor this process with detailed descriptions of defenses, repetitive categorization of transferences and/or countertransference, etc., may be informative for the more academically trained patient, but it is, more often than not, a display of an analyst's knowledge, frequently unnecessary, sometimes unwanted and often, unneeded.

If we exclude what falls under the category of the repressed unconscious, i.e., the individual vagaries of one's particular emotional, intellectual and social life – one can still speak, as psychoanalysts do, of an unconscious. Such an unconscious, however, is encountered; it is not analyzed. It echoes through our being, particularly in moments of creativity, in a manner that eludes analysis. Both personal and universal in a way that defies description, it ties us together and to life – to life in its constantly coming to be and in its falling away. It refers to what many philosophers speak of as the ground of being. It is more akin, as I (Gargiulo 2006) have discussed to the world of unlimited possibilities that life manifests. Winnicott's exploration led him to write about the alone space of each individual, which is the soil out of which creativity, both individual and social, arises; Bion speaks about the presence of "O"; Lao-Tzu (1981) speaks of *the everlasting Tao* (p.20), the name that

cannot be named, just as Meister Eckhart (McGinn, 2001), in his *mystical atheism* (p.145), yearns for the god beyond god – the nameless, unknowable.

Therapy is not a course in philosophy, per se; it should, however, lead individuals to embark upon a search for what is real. Each person has to find that which grounds his or her sense of being alive and creative and be comfortable with whatever name, or lack thereof, he or she employs. If the history of humanity's inner searching is of any help, it suggests that that which transcends us and yet informs us is not captured by language. Personal awareness is a journey full of mystery, but it is one that ends, when all goes well, with a solid appreciation of the banalities of life. The everydayness of existence is just as much the "location" of an unconscious, as is any individual or possible collective mind. It is in this sense that one can speak, as I (Gargiulo, 2004) have done, of an *everyday transcendence* (p.13) that informs life, an everyday transcendence that reveals the hidden in all the varied ordinary dimensions of one's experience.

What then of psychoanalytic training? Of supervision? Of a didactic analysis? Are such experiences useless? Is psychoanalysis and what we do therein, just a walk, so to speak, in a literary world of magical realism – each patient a fantastic, inviting and unique Borges short story? Have I thrown

out learning under the guise of personal presence and existential authenticity?

Not at all.

If a patient must overcome the tides of forgetfulness and denial, an analyst must welcome such tides. The only way an analyst can forget, with honor, so to speak, is when he or she has mustered all one's strength in the service of learning, of understanding, of reading, for example, everything one is capable of. An analyst's learning must go on continually yet, when with a patient, one should have no desire to know anything. This seems to be the lesson of Bion, a lesson that was foreshadowed in the writings of Theodor Reik. To witness means not knowing in advance what one is going to see; to guide means the path is only somewhat known; to help means to quietly assist, not predicting in advance where the assistance might be needed. The role of theory and theorizing is to help individuals open up new lines of thought; it is not to offer direction as to what to do. Directions quell anxiety but cripple personal autonomy. Indeed each analysis is a unique short story that patient and analyst tell to each other and to themselves, a short story grounded not in fantasy but in the soil of childhood and the vicissitudes of life. Such story telling is a very old ritual – religious in some cultures,

secular in ours. *Virgilian guides* is a better description of our work; *dispassionate surgeons* misses the joy as well as the pathos.

What is it we do? What shall we call it if not *psycho-analysis*? Such a difficult question, yet such a simple issue. Dante called Virgil his guide, a guide through some very perilous stages. We call ourselves analyzers of the psyche, but we are more midwives of memory and desire as each person an analyst works with finds a self as well as a soul. We analysts are not unlike shamans, who, with their long and arduous training revisit the hidden and dark places of conflict and desire. A profession chosen yet also deeply needed by anyone who chooses it. Such is the meaning of the word vocation: to be called.

But, if we are secular shamans, are we a scientific enterprise? Is the language, love and healing that makes up our daily work in any sense scientific? I believe it is. It is a disciplined and creative process giving birth, when all goes well, to awareness. Every growth of awareness makes the world more comprehensible, more manageable. Winnicott suggests that psychoanalysis, like other scientific enterprises, does not presume that its assumptions are automatically validated, that is, it is open to recognizing contrary evidence (Winnicott 1985, pp.172-176). Good observation. Would that psychoanalysts were all committed to such a perspective. Although

psychoanalysis has to do with the dynamic unconscious it makes no claim to higher powers, it does not appeal to the gods for explanation, but attempts to understand human phenomena in human terms.¹ But giving up the gods is difficult – too often we just change their names! I believe psychoanalysis is scientific in a way that we are still struggling to express. It is not a science of empirically validated, testable and repeatedly predictable events; it is not that kind of science at all. Again we are caught with a name: “science.” The task is more difficult than imposing one model of human experience on another level of human experience and seeing if it fits. Better to say we are in search of a name – maybe *humanistic science* does it, maybe not. Freud (1926), in *The Question of Lay Analysis* suggested that he was letting loose a band of *secular pastoral workers* (p. 255). I think he was right. Pastoral workers, who would be dedicated to care for the soul of humanity, dedicated to life’s joys rather than death fears. Perhaps it was such convictions that made psychoanalysis, in its formative moments, a movement. It is no longer a movement – it is now a profession.

Should we listen to Freud? Should we call ourselves secular pastoral workers, rather than psychoanalysts? Should our fees and our commitment

¹ Theodor Reik (1948) discusses his understanding of the scientific basis of psychoanalysis in chapter 33 (pp. 383-396). I believe, allowing for the vagaries of memory, that the particular image of not appealing to the gods came out of class discussion, when I had the pleasure of studying with him over thirty-five years ago.

reflect such a title? Would that mean retreating from a profession back to a movement? Would the world, once more, take note of such a movement? And if we called ourselves by such a name, would we act the same, or differently?

It is always a difficult journey, as Dante reminds us, out of a dark forest.

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