

Psychoanalytic Institutes as “Second Skin”: Bullying and the Challenges of Belonging, Authority, and Uncertainty

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“Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.”

C. Wright Mills

“An analyst or therapist who is unaware of the effect of social facts and social forces cannot be sensitive to the unconscious recreation of them within the therapeutic situation.”

– Earl Hopper (1996) from *The Social Unconscious in Clinical Work*

Abstract:

This paper will propose that bullying can be viewed usefully as a reflection of a social unconscious, and illustrative of larger socio-cultural forces, as well as personal and interpersonal (“micro-psychological”) processes. Informed by this paradigm of systemic embeddedness, the organizational and authority structures of psychoanalytic institutes may often be understood as also mirroring these larger cultural patterns. Within a larger sociological frame that views American culture as saturated with sociopathy and bullying (Derber, 2013; Derber & Magrass, 2016), this paper will selectively review some of the literature examining the problematic use of authority in psychoanalytic training institutes. This literature includes Eisold (1994) on the roots of the anxieties that generate intolerance of diversity in psychoanalytic institutes; Kernberg (1996) on the paradoxical prescriptions for inhibiting creativity in psychoanalytic training; Kirsner (2000) on the

defensive institutional search for security and certainty in the face of the “uncertainty and ambiguity,” which ironically defines the psychoanalytic enterprise. This paper also suggests that concepts such as Kohut’s “group self;” Volkan’s “second skin;” and the emerging paradigm of “community psychoanalysis” (Twemlow & Parens, 2006) may help illuminate these dynamics as well as facilitate productive institutional change.

The dominant narrative in our society defines bullying as residing in personal, micro-psychological sources, with the preferred solution being personal psychotherapy. I believe that it is this micro-psychopathological attitude blinds us to a *socio-pathological* perspective, distracting us from the larger cultural sources that engender bullying. This was brought to my attention by Dr. Herbert Weiner (2016), who eloquently articulated that “bullying must be understood and resolved in communal terms. We can perceive bullying as a personal problem to be solved by the victim, using his or her own resources. But, when it happens so frequently and to so many people, it is clearly a social problem like domestic violence, sexual harassment and child abuse.” I’ve come to believe that bullying is embedded in a *cultural sociopathy*—a social unconscious that has become normative.

According to Derber & Magrass (2016), it was the famous 20th century sociologist, C. Wright Mills who pointed this out many years ago in his books “The Sociological Imagination” (1958) and “Character and Social Structure” (1964). “Americans are taught to believe that our personal problems are separate from our public institutions in the

economy, political system and international relations” (Derber & Magrass, 2016, p.8). Mills further argues that “personal problems are rooted in societal values... it is impossible to separate private troubles and public (and political) issues... any attempt to do so would lead to... myths and illusions... cultivated ignorance” (Derber & Magrass, p. 8). Inspired by Mills’ conception of the “sociological imagination,” Derber & Magrass challenge the isolated, intrapsychic, and reductionistic mental model of classical psychoanalysis, and articulate a philosophy and sociology of mind that is aligned with contemporary psychoanalytic perspectives (intersubjective systems theory, relational field phenomena, and psychoanalytic complex theory).

This socio-psychological sensibility resonates deeply with my emerging commitment to a “community psychoanalysis.” I have written elsewhere that our contemporary global context requires “an expansive, socially responsive shift in theory and therapeutic practice” which requires “a reconceptualization of the self and psyche, a new bio-psycho-social conception, co-developed in alliance with other disciplines and epistemologies...” (Bermudez & Kramer, 2016, p. GEORGE PLEASE PUT PAGE NUMBER). In their book, “Bully Nation,” the two distinguished contemporary sociologists, Derber & Magrass (2016) persuasively argue: “...the psychological way of framing the bullying conversation serves the power and profit interests of dominant institutions” (p.9). They go on to detail how American society and its institutions have been historically and contemporaneously deeply saturated by sociopathy and bullying. They describe how political, economic, and military elites utilize bullying to maintain power and status—and how the United States has acted as an international bully!

After providing a definition of bullying, Derber & Magrass conclude that at the heart of bullying is power inequality. Bullying is defined as including threats, harassment, intimidation, attacks, and exclusion from a group, with the core goals being domination, control, generating fear or harm, and establishing a sense of superiority in the bully and inferiority in the victim. Any social system that has power inequality generates “potential or latent bullying,” by individuals or institutions. According to Derber & Magrass, “Potential or latent bullying, always present in relations of unequal power, leads to actual bullying only under certain conditions, mainly when the degree of inequality, political norms, social mores, and psychological dispositions encourages it” (2016, p. 22).

Although I am in full agreement with this definition and analysis, I would add that that a fifth factor or contingency that facilitates bullying is any significant disruption or threat to the social order, or to strongly held beliefs and values of a community. (The significance of the last factor will be obvious when I discuss the bullying via the shunning of Dr. Arnold Richards by the New York Psychoanalytic Institute, when the hegemony of the medical profession over psychoanalysis was challenged by psychologists.)

Social structures or cultures that set up enduring patterns of inequality amplify what Dr. Dacher Keltner, social-experimental psychologist and leading expert on power dynamics, calls the “power paradox” (2016). According to Keltner, who has spent a long career studying power, the first casualty of unchecked power is empathy: “When we experience absolute power –unchecked by the collective processes through which groups afford

power to individuals—our attention shifts to our own interests and desires, thus diminishing our capacity for empathy—understanding what others feel and think. Consequently, when empathy wanes, so does our capacity for moral sentiments that depend on empathy—namely concern for others (compassion), reverence for what others give (gratitude), and inspiration experienced in appreciating others’ goodness” (p. 101). Furthermore, Keltner has experimental evidence demonstrating that “power leads to self-serving impulsivity... incivility and disrespect... [and] to narratives of exceptionalism” (p.101). Keltner’s illuminating discoveries concerning power, in my view, are a strong argument for expanding the training curriculum for psychoanalytic candidates to include knowledge and skills in the understanding and responsible management of social power, especially its impact on those lower in the social hierarchy, whether institute culture or wider social context.

Dr. Edgar Levinson, is a seminal theoretician in the interpersonal-relational psychoanalytic tradition, who long ago posited a universal embeddedness in and enactment of unconscious systemic dynamics (“The Fallacy of Understanding,” 1975; “The Ambiguity of Change,” 1983). Inspired by Levinson’s ideas, I propose that psychoanalytic institutes are embedded in and enact the larger cultural and social structural forces that Derber (2013) and Derber & Magrass (2016) have outlined. Another inspirational and illuminating concept is the idea of the “social unconscious.” Originally introduced by Erich Fromm, and first applied by Karen Horney, the social unconscious has more recently been defined by Dr. Earl Hopper, the British Group Analyst, as follows:

“The effects of social facts and forces are more likely to be unconscious than conscious. The concept of the social unconscious refers to the existence and constraints of social, cultural, and communication arrangements of which people are unaware, in so far as these arrangements are not perceived (not ‘known’), and if perceived, not acknowledged (‘denied’), and if acknowledged, not taken as problematic (‘given’), and if taken as problematic, not considered with an optimal degree of detachment and objectivity” (1996, p. 9). (In a related vein, I am proposing in a soon to be published paper that recent neuroscience findings provide support for the concept of the social unconscious, and that both clinical work and research demonstrate that the social unconscious is characterized by implicit cultural organizing principles, for example social stereotypes regarding social positions and identities [Bermudez, in press].)

Turning our focus more directly onto psychoanalytic institutes and training, Kirsner (2009) avers in his study of psychoanalytic institutes (“Unfree Associations: Inside Psychoanalytic Institutes”) that one of the fundamental sources of conflict, which leads to schisms and misuse of authority and power, is theoretical “imperialism” at the heart of the psychoanalytic movement. Similarly, Eisold (1994) also suggests that the anxiety generated by the conflict between the need to commit to the theoretical certainty of a “school” and the need to be receptive to the enigmatic unconscious leads to a regressive intolerance of pluralism and to isolation. Moreover, Eisold argues, psychoanalytic institute cultures have an ambivalent attitude toward the external world of reality, needing the buffer of impermeable boundaries as a protection for the private exploration of “psychic reality”—a “second skin” using Volkan’s (2003) metaphor for the socio-

psychological envelope that contains group identity. He diagnoses these systemic reactions as regressive social system defenses against persecutory and depressive anxieties (Jacques, 1955). Kernberg (1986; 1994), in a related perspective, views the lack of genuine “interdisciplinary scientific inquiry” and the resulting “intellectual isolation” as destructive to psychoanalytic creativity. Dr. Arnold Richards’ narrative (2016) reflects his experiences of what he calls “passive aggressive bullying” at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute—because he supported the acceptance of non-physicians for psychoanalytic training. The bullying noted by Richards seems to suggest a confluence of several factors: economic competition; theoretical imperialism regarding the biological hegemony of psychoanalytic ego psychology; and the threat of interdisciplinary (“out-group”) contamination by psychologists and other mental health professionals. Richards (2016) writes of his long, painful struggle:

“ This is very difficult for me to write. It concerns a more than fifty-year saga. In 1995 I was invited to give the A.A. Brill Memorial lecture... The title was ‘A.A. Brill and the Politics of Exclusion.’ I spoke about how the shadow of the founder (A.A. Brill) falls over an organization... and faulted NYPSI for what I called the politics of exclusion, in this case excluding non-medical psychoanalysts.

I think that changed how I was viewed by the members of NYPSI, especially those in charge and including many of my colleagues and friends. The medical identity was a very important part of the identity of the Society and Institute.

I am not sure bullying is the right term to describe how I am treated at my institute. A better term would be ‘persona non grata,’ which is what I have become in my

own institute. Since the 90s I have not been asked to teach, supervise, or analyze...”
(Richards, 2016).

Before Dr. Richards experienced this institutional shunning, he had been a respected and distinguished member and highly regarded psychoanalyst, teacher, and editor of the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*.

Eisold (1994), Kernberg (1986; 1994), and Kirsner (2009) locate the central source of the problem in the power and secrecy surrounding the idealized senior training analyst. All three agree that the training analyst should have no formal or informal role in the assessment of candidate progression. They suggest that institutes should borrow best practices from university contexts: empowerment of faculty; open, transparent decision-making and promotion protocols; and genuine scientific inquiry and critique.

However, more profoundly, Eisold and Kernberg both regard the private, dyadic exploration of the unconscious as a process that unleashes powerful intrapsychic and intersubjective dynamics which closed off, rigidly-defended institute cultures cannot “contain” (in the Bion’s [1961] sense of metabolization, with reflective capacity). This can lead to processes of enactment, splitting, projection, and envy, etc. Kernberg terms this the “radioactive fallout” (2016, p. 48) from exploration of the unconscious without the requisite “containing” institutional structure. Eisold (1994) recommends that psychoanalysts should be explicitly trained for leadership/executive roles, and that

systems psychodynamics theory and practice should be taught, applied, and used for consultation.

Both Eisold's and Kohut's recommendations are consonant with my emerging conceptualizations and practice. I've been proactively engaged in an evolving experiment in systems psychodynamics theory and practice at my institute, with both didactic and experiential components. Facilitating several large group discussions, applying systems-focused approaches, which I fold into the emergent paradigm of "community psychoanalysis" ("Social Dreaming" [Lawrence, 2003]; "Open Space"[Owen, 1997]), I've uncovered, with community collaboration, many of the institutional symptoms outlined by Eisold (1994), Kernberg (1986; 1994; 2016), and Kirsner (2009):

- a sense of institute fragmentation or lack of cohesion, accompanied by a collective yearning for a renewed sense of community;
- "bullying," linked to a lack of theoretical pluralism and the absence of a reflective and responsible use of authority, and this was ranked the number one concern at an Institute retreat;
- isolation from external "social reality" or interdisciplinary discourse;
- the need for more transparency;
- an expressed desire to have a reflective community conversation on "what is psychoanalysis?"

Despite these conclusions of the large discussion groups, I experienced very strong resistance when I proposed making the Institute's "second skin" (Volkan, 2003) optimally permeable by inviting to our strategic planning retreat carefully vetted participants from our external ecosystem—participants who might bring expertise, information, resources, and future partnerships (university programs in mental health; community agencies; our own advanced psychotherapy program students; analysts from other institutes, etc.). I was told that we were not prepared to air our "dirty laundry;" I was asked rhetorically, why would they care about our institute?; and I was reminded that *other* institutes are so competitive. I continued to gently remind my colleagues that it is an established principle in open systems theory that all systems are maintained and grow by obtaining resources (energy and information) from their ecology—hence the need for a permeable boundary!

The second resistance I encountered was suggestive of a system-wide defense of internal avoidance, hence perpetuating the experienced lack of cohesion, and thus fueling the conscious yearning for renewal of a sense of a cohesive, vitalized community. Kohut's (1976) concept of a "group self" seemed useful: the institute's "group self" could be diagnosed as lacking vitality (depressed) and cohesion. I continued to make the case that a system ("group self") can only know itself when the "whole elephant is in the room" (Coburn, 2014). I posited that, therefore, we needed to organize a strategic planning meeting that integrated all sectors of the institute and facilitated prolonged reflection on its organizing principles (the past), current internal and contextual reality (the present), and a vision and strategic action plan (the future). I recommended a large systems

intervention approach called “Future Search” (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995), which was developed out of an integration of open systems principles and Bion’s (1961) *group-as-a-whole* theory and basic assumptions. Two attempts to promote and organize such a large planning meeting were made but neither was successful, as they were derailed by a lack of the requisite level of participation; the lack of Board members’ support, understanding, or commitment; and, an institute crisis requiring that resources and attention be directed elsewhere.

The sad irony is that the institute’s crisis involved a threat to its existence because of the lack of a required *external* accreditation. Among the institute’s core organizing principles/values were its fiercely defended independence, its proud “unaffiliated” status, and its exceptionalism, rooted in its progressive and democratic ethos. It was these very principles that seemed to have generated an impermeable, protective “second skin” (that I had challenged with my proposal), and which now placed the institute in jeopardy!

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