

The Role of Psychotherapy in the Modern World

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Thank you so much for inviting me to speak to you today. I would like to share some thoughts about Psychotherapy with particular regard to the challenges which face us all both professionally and culturally in a changing world. These discussions today come at an opportune time. Throughout our societies there is a loss of social cohesion, rising levels of anxiety, displaced populations and increasing complex ideologies leading to deficits in democratic accountability. This in turn is leading to what some sociologists call a fluid modernity where everything is fluid and can take on the shape of any ideology that can hold it. Bauman Z. (2000)

These themes and discussions which strike at the core of contemporary life will hopefully invite a quality of engagement from the participants here today that will provide an opportunity for the Irish Council for Psychotherapy to rise to the challenge of continuing to innovate in addressing serious and relevant issues and to envisage new possibilities for our profession.

In this address to you today, I would like to invite you to reflect with me on the dissonance between the public and private spheres in all our lives, the

denigration of subjectivity and the challenges and questions facing us as psychotherapists located as we are within the wider cultural and social matrices.

Postmodernism, Globalization and Acceleration are three major cultural developments within which people live today. Within these contexts there are challenges facing psychotherapy as a profession and as a practise in modern life. What are the social and political relevance of psychotherapy ideas and their use in the understanding of cultural phenomena? How can we understand the relationship between individuals in their cultural and social milieu? How do we position ourselves as a profession so that the relevance of psychological processes, insights and ideas might become a creative part of the wider social and political discourse in modern life? How can we find a way to language its insights so that the richness of its discourse, where it has access to a rich vein of the fabric of consciousness in a culture at any point in time yields new opportunities for expression?

What are the contemporary dilemmas and presenting issues emerging in our clinical practise? How do we address or see these specific dilemmas and issues within our clinical settings? Have they changed? Is the unconscious different in contemporary culture? No, the unconscious is always the unconscious. We are always addressing in our psyche, with different emphasis dependant on our earlier attachment history, the foundational desires of belonging, intimacy, power, significance and transcendence and our relationship to them. How these needs are shaped or distorted in the narrative of a person's life is what is presented to us.

How can psychotherapy, as a practise, familiarise itself with newer forms of emotional distress? In cultures, both in the West and in Eastern Europe the

loss of privacy under capitalism has resulted in a shattering of social bonds which worldwide is creating dislocation and fragmentation. More and more people who come to us are suffering from broken attachments, fragmented states, and borderline presentations. It is almost as if the inner jagged states of distress are amplified by the multi-faceted mirroring in their external world. We live with a paradox in that popular culture has become more emotionalised however there is a denigration of subjectivity leading to, for example: a confusion between online and offline identities and an increase in what Susie Orbach calls body hatred (Susie Orbach, 2009) That phenomenon is further evidenced by a rise in presentations of body dysmorphia in young adults and an increase in anorexia presenting in children at a young age.

We are becoming homogenised. There is a movement towards sameness. This is driven by the social and economic dynamics of globalisation. However we need to note that Psychotherapy as a practise and as a profession is not an homogeneous product! The practise and profession of psychotherapy is always embedded within the culture that it is part of. For example, the emergent profession of psychoanalysis in Eastern Europe has very different, distinct cultural shaping as opposed to the shaping of psychotherapy in Ireland.

Increasingly social media and internet chat rooms mediate human ways of relating. (Aaron Balick, 2014). This phenomenon presents a lot of questions? Has the revolution of information technology brought about an irreversible shift in our psychological world? As various new communication systems have altered the way we communicate with each other, have they changed the way we work?(Lemma and Caparrotta 2014) How do psychotherapists address deeper realities in a world where instant solutions are sought that offer certainty and immediacy? What are the borders between technological

advances (social media) and the privacy of the inner world? Have they intruded on or complemented the therapeutic setting. How does Psychotherapy adapt to this rapid evolution in society? We are all part of a communications and social field which has become part of our lives. We avail of innovative educational platforms that facilitate access to education and cyber based learning as well as a glimpse into other cultures and experiences of everyday living. All these are progressive developments.

Yet we need to enquire in to the devolutionary pull within social media towards regression, the multiple identities assumed by people in their desire for intimacy, the demand of free speech across the airways offering disinhibited and sometimes vitriolic comment, the ever-growing thin divide between the public and the private. As the development of a person occurs within the social context they are immersed in, they can also be impacted by its engulfment's (T.Scheff), impingements and intrusions into their lives. People can now, it seems, reconstruct who they want to be seen as through social media, fashion, reality shows. Virtual communities are leading to new definitions of intimacy. (Glen Gabbard. 2014). People can retreat into the safe cocoon provided by cyberspace to manage the demands of reality that they cannot face. 'In cyberspace the virtual promise of a disembodied space can offer an intoxicated *other* experience which creates an illusion of safety' (Lemma A, 2014)... an illusion of safety that sometimes provides camouflage and a safe harbour for an anorexic woman afraid of the demands of their bodies and of their life!!

The challenge of who is Other, is becoming one of the greatest challenges in our societies leading to waves of nationalism, entitlement ideologies and values based on economic necessities rather than human values. As societies

we have a broken response to immigration. There are complex culture wars between tribalism and globalism. There are new configurations in our social and culture lives about how we belong.

We live in cultures which present great challenges. We live in environments where we are continually being over-stimulated. This results in the experience of our physiological/ nervous system as being always switched to on. This hyper aroused state can lead to states of over excitation i.e. anxiety or deflation i.e. depressive cycles and exhaustion.

We work in multi cultural contexts. People and countries shift allegiances and bond together based on the next perceived challenge. Living with people who differ—racially, ethnically, religiously, or economically—is the most urgent challenge facing civil society today. We tend socially to avoid engaging with people unlike ourselves, and modern politics encourages the politics of the tribe with all the primitive processes of tribal allegiance. These processes of projection and denial always need to be challenged and we always need to know, by entering into the dominant discourse of the day, who we might be excluding.

These conscious and unconscious forces in society have been well documented and discussed by our esteemed colleagues Vamik Volkan, Professor Andrew Samuels, and by many others including the sociologist, Thomas Scheff.

Large groups, Professor Volkan states, function the same way as individuals do. When traumatized, or going through great change they regress. Regression need not be unhealthy—in fact, it is the quickest way to creativity when coupled with progression, writes Volkan. The problems begin when the defense mechanism either is disproportionate or just won't shut down. As we

know regression is one of the formative elements in the development of neurosis which leads to an inhibition of desire (V.Volkan 2004). What he describes as symptoms of large-group regression includes: loss of individuality, (paradox in fashion, people like to create a distinct image, all styled the same), unquestioning support for a leader, dehumanization of outsiders, adoption of symbols, (how important the symbol of the flag is in culture?), and sensitization to blood and borders. I think this is an interesting proposition offered by Volkan. This is the whole emerging field of Psychopolitics within psychotherapy which is just developing.

I was speaking at a conference in London a few months ago where we were looking at the role and relationship between the NHS and the psychotherapy services. One of the speakers was discussing neo-liberalism and the fantasy inherent in these regulatory frameworks of market forces in the economy regulating all human activity.

One example that stood out for me among many others was the linking of the provision of psychotherapy to welfare payments. It is almost as if the welfare state was engaged in the remaking of identities and subjectivities in monetary terms. Psychotherapy insights and concepts must interrogate and question this conception of human nature. It is essential that we engage in dialogue to restore imagination to public discourse as citizens become captive to more and more being marketed, imaged, talked out or talked over. The internet and cyberspace are wonderful facilities but the illusion of what they purport to be needs to be challenged, so that the difference between what Zizek calls the “appearances and simulacrum” (image) are understood at their own level. (Zizek,S.2004)

This distancing in society of the depth of peoples lived experience and the economic inequalities within society where everything is measured in monetary form rather than human values put insurmountable obstacles in people's lives. We know that sometimes the biggest obstacle to living a fulfilled life is to confront realities that cause us the most psychological pain. If we continually re-create these obstacles within our economic and social contexts we are heading towards futures that are uncertain due to all the unrest stirring beneath surfaces that are supposedly there to help contain and create trusting bonds in people's lives. It is important at this time of huge change that we develop and incubate the social and political relevance of psychotherapy ideas so that we can challenge the neo liberal blindness of institutions and systems that subjugate human desire for productive capacities.

John Mc Gahern, one of our great Irish writers, said it is the writers' job to look after his sentences-nothing else....! What is the psychotherapists job? What is psychotherapy? It is the art and science of patient listening. Psychotherapeutic theory and practice is essentially an enquiry into the human condition from psychopathology to the broader philosophical, social and cultural context.

In this changing landscape what kind of new practitioners do we need? Candidates and students in training seek an identity as a psychotherapist. It's almost as if we have to slow down to become a psychotherapist. This is a process of engaging in a reflective, critical discourse on the nature of the human subject. That of course, includes our own personal psychotherapy. As we know, in the therapeutic space we need a capacity of attention, to be able to hold tenderly deep immersion in human experience and also to be able to struggle with a radical separation from it. These transference dynamics need to be experienced and suffered in all their intensity within the candidates'

personal therapy so that they will have the capacity and responsiveness to engage deeply and relationally in our consulting rooms. How can we ensure that the next generation of psychotherapists will be able to engage these intensities within this changing social mediated culture where everything is seen to be immediately accessed?

How is the capacity to be alone in their mind nourished in our students and candidates? There is such a difference between learning and knowledge. Perhaps knowledge comes dropping slow and our learning contexts need to have within their structures a developed curriculum and capacity to enable students to be receptive to the reflective capacity to think in the marrow bones... W B.Yeats (one of my favourite poets) describes this process of accessing deep knowledge in his poem "A prayer for old age"

God guard me from those thoughts men think

In the mind alone;

He that sings a lasting song

Thinks in a marrow-bone.

The future face of psychotherapy is changing. In recent decades more and more links have developed between scientific theories and research between body and psyche. Researchers are asking questions like: How does the brain "create" the psyche and how do psycho-emotional experiences affect the brain and nervous system development? Research in the field of developmental trauma demonstrates how the early trauma experience can be stored in the nervous system and the body affecting brain development and neuro-physiological arousal systems.

All of these developments create bridges between different professions, in psychoanalysis there are newer developments in what is called affective neuroscience. It is not just a matter of looking at MRI scans and mapping out the correlates of the brain structure. The whole question of consciousness is being explored.

For the future I see us forming more alliances with other healthcare colleagues: psychologists, psychiatrists and healthcare professionals. We are all addressing the field of wellbeing, health and the alleviation of emotional distress. There are different emphases based on our perspectives, knowledge base, methodology and view of the human person. Hopefully we can unite around research, input into social policy and common areas of interest. Of course we are in professional contexts that have professional competition and professional rivalries. We lessen our creative capacities as a profession where, instead of occupying a position where radical truths could be discussed and reflected on, psychotherapy and the other professions become limited to regulation of its place and entitlements.

How much influence do we have or should we have with regard to issues of public interest, how much institutional authority do we have? How have we colluded with silencing ourselves? Are there inhibiting forces that stop us finding a psychological language for translation in this regulated neo liberal world?

How can we accept the invitation of Professor Andrew Samuels in his recent writings , to engage the energy of the archetypal trickster to help develop a shared playspace between ourselves and the development of ideas within society and culture where the radical truth of what is emerging in a societal collective will give us glimpses of a way forward. .

ICP was originally established to organise ourselves because of the regulatory frameworks that were discussed at European level. We found when we met with many of our colleagues here and abroad that we were all responding to a need in modern psychotherapy to re-discover the way it has been organised and elaborated in both the professional and training fields. Over time, we have developed frameworks for certification and have adopted rigorous training standards and ways of implementing them. We are ready for statutory regulation!

We are the national awarding body for the European Certificate of Psychotherapy. We have continued to develop closer and closer links particularly with the EAP and psychotherapy colleagues and organisations throughout Europe. We have dialogued and held influential positions within the European Association of Psychotherapy. ICP is represented on the Governing Board, TAC committee, Executive committee, Training Standards committee, International Journal, Marketing committee of the European Association for Psychotherapy. We have a strong voice in European psychotherapy. We have been involved in the NUOC discussing with others our common concerns. I, for example, have been fortunate to travel in Russia and Ukraine and help develop a lively psychoanalytic culture there.

As time has passed something just as important has happened in the Irish Council for Psychotherapy and its member organisations. The social fabric of the ICP and its constituent organisations has been weaved together through our engagement with each other through scientific discussion and joint understanding. We have developed through a process of inclusion not to solely become captive to bureaucratic requirements but to encourage a lively vibrant culture to emerge.

Sometimes we have fought together to elaborate, defend and understand our differences. Our desire to belong must also include the voice of difference. We have developed a common ground.

In conclusion, Psychotherapy is not just an event in history or an interesting way of explaining the world with its drives, forces, defences and compromises. Psychotherapy is basically an encounter with what moves people and what constitutes the truth of desire. The discipline, profession and work of psychotherapy can act as a conduit and restorative act that enlivens discourses, question certainties and events. In this way psychotherapy is both a hermeneutic interpretive and subjective discipline. Ultimately, Psychotherapy is about meaning making, making meaning of the subjective reality of someone living their life.

In cultures and individual lives, there is a time when words want to get themselves said. For that, you need a deep listening. Psychotherapy as a qualitative inquiry into the nature of being human is a valuable discipline to explore these complexities.

One of our greatest poets, Seamus Heaney was once asked how you write poetry. He said ' I listen in'

My invitation to all of you today is to listen in and hopefully in the afternoon and at the end of the day, out of the collective insights we gather together we can provide a wider platform for psychotherapy to embrace a spaciousness that has always been at the heart of its dialogical process. From that spirit of enquiry we can have an influence on public and social policy.

Thank you.

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