

**Psychoanalysis and Truth: Current Issues (A Symposium)—
Introduction Some Controversies Regarding Constructivism and
Psychoanalysis**

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THE IMPETUS FOR SELECTION OF THE THEME, "Psychoanalysis and Truth: Current Issues, " was the excitement and controversy currently being aroused by the introduction into psychoanalysis of constructivist ideas about the nature of knowledge (Barratt, 1984) ; (Loch, 1977) ; (Ricoeur, 1977) ; (Schafer, 1983) ; (Spence, 1982) ; (Steele, 1979) ; (Viderman, 1979). As it is used here, constructivism is a label for a broad movement in the contemporary thought of many fields, a movement based on

... the growing awareness that any so-called reality is—in the most immediate and concrete sense—the construction of those who believe they have discovered and investigated it. In other words, what is found is an invention whose inventor is unaware of his act of invention, who considers it as something that exists independently of him ...
(Watzlawick, 1984, p. 10).

Controversy during the discussions of the papers centered on the conflict between essentialism (belief that knowledge must

The following papers were presented at the annual weekend retreat of the William Alanson White Society held at Jeronimo's in Walker Valley, New York on April 7 and 8, 1984. The meetings were chaired by Donnel B. Stern, Ph.D. The introduction was written after the meetings as a response to the discussions the papers stimulated among the audience.

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match a single immutable reality) and constructivism, a dichotomy introduced and elaborated by Protter in his paper on psychoanalysis and epistemology. (Protter's "coherentism-pragmatism" is a constructivist view.) Some audience members felt that clinical psychoanalysis would be meaningless, solipsistic, without the confidence that two separate analysts could refer directly and independently to some underlying immutable reality in the patient's history and character. If the raw materials of new constructions are old constructions, as constructivists claim, then the truth about oneself (said the critics) may be merely "made up" instead of faced, and the concept of motivation loses its meaning. Personality becomes a rudderless self-regulating processor of information. Passion and responsibility lose the centrality in life that psychoanalysts have always claimed for them. There was also concern that constructivist theories of knowledge, because they eliminate appeal to any single objective criterion, require the legislation of meaning and thus raise the spectre of enforced truth.

Following are some brief responses to these issues.

Even before explicit epistemologic reformulations, psychoanalysis had moved far from assumptions of absolute truth. The rejection of universal symbolism, for instance, is so thorough that it is taken for granted. No one believes anymore that a dream carries a single meaning, and lists of dream symbols, always suspect, are now only anachronisms. The transference is now seen to be the reflection of an individual life and a particular patient-analyst pair, not to be grasped merely as a variation on a universal theme. We do not presume, as psychoanalysts might once have been more justly accused, that we know what we will learn in the consulting room from one day to the next. As Spiegel describes in her contribution below, truth may not even be the same phenomenon at different times in the same analysis. We no longer accept the archaeology metaphor; those hidden truths, unchanged by time, are the great exception, not the rule. Uncovering has been replaced by construction, and revelation by accretion. Today we are most concerned with the emergence of meaning in experience that did not have meaning before, less and less concerned with what Bollas (1983) has aptly referred to as "official psychoanalytic decoding."

This epistemological shift is by no means unique to psychoanalysis. In fact, psychoanalysis is in the process of importing it from

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a motley consortium of overlapping disciplines including the philosophy of science, literary criticism, history, hermeneutics, the study of language, cognitive psychology (see Tenzer's paper, below, on Piaget and psychoanalysis), and the arts (see Held-Weiss's contribution on modernism and psychoanalysis). In all these fields the questions are changing, as they may also be in psychoanalysis. Freud's nineteenth century materialism led him to assume the existence of objective, empirically verifiable truth. The questions he asked were attempts to uncover reality itself, and he expected to find timeless answers. Freud's epistemology centered on the question, "What do we know?"—or perhaps better, "What is there to know?"

Today philosophers often define truth as that which is useful or that which forms a coherent whole (see Protter's essay). The role of the knower in making knowledge is recognized. As far as psychoanalysis is concerned, this means (as Spence [1982] has particularly emphasized) that the very material of a session, not only the meanings found in it, depends on every characteristic of patient and analyst. The data do not have an independent life and therefore cannot lead inexorably to theory, as in the traditional model of theory-building. Instead, it is said that theory inevitably does the one thing it was never supposed to do in the older model: the theory of the analyst is one of the sources of influence determining the form and nature of the data. The epistemological question changes from "What is there to know?" to (paraphrasing Watzlawick [1984]), "How do we come to know what we believe we know?" For psychoanalysts especially there is a subsidiary question: "What individual reasons does each of us have for believing this or that?" The analysis of transference, for example, instead of being first and foremost the discrimination of reality and distortion, becomes the study of how and why the patient interprets experience in a particular way (Gill, 1982). As in epistemology, emphasis in psychoanalysis seems to be moving from what we know to how and why we have the experience of knowing. The process of knowing is assuming as much importance as the content of knowledge. In von Glasersfeld's (1984) words,

Epistemology thus becomes the study of how intelligence operates, of the ways and means it employs to construct a relatively regular world out of the flow of its experience (p. 32).

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All this has the effect of reinforcing (or perhaps even of having partly instigated) several trends in psychoanalysis: the current focus on the here-and-now aspects of transference and countertransference; a view of character as an active, world-building process; an increasing emphasis on the person's status as active agent; the recognition of the immense contribution of the immediate interpersonal situation on any experience, even memory, that arises in that situation; the inaccuracy of the traditional concept of the analyst's neutrality; and the recognition that no single school of psychoanalytic thought holds the key to the truth.

For the constructivist, then, the question, "What is the truth?" is an unacceptable reification. Regularity is substituted for truth. We cannot know reality apart from the operations we have used to form it, but what we can do is judge how well that regularity accounts for our experience. How good is the fit? Reality is understood as a constraint on our constructions, not as a match for them. As psychoanalysts we are always in the position of trying to remember that however certain something may feel, truth "... is like noticing a well-formed 'ship' in the cloud instead of a poorly formed 'rabbit'" (Fingarette, 1963, p. 20). We do not work with the presence and absence of truth. We work with goodness of fit. Eventually the "ship, " too, may be replaced by a better percept.

However, discarding an epistemology based on the match of knowledge and reality does not require the assumption that reality is merely what we understand it to be. To hold a constructivist view about the nature of knowledge does not mean that one has to believe that reality itself is our construction. If reality were dependent on our understanding of it, consensus could never be anything more than convention, and the objections that constructivism leads to solipsism would be justified.

Manicas and Secord (1983) have summarized the arguments of the growing number of philosophers of science (led, in the view of Manicas and Secord, by Rom Harré [1972] and Roy Bhaskar [1975]) who accept the substance of the attack on empiricist epistemology by Kuhn (1970) and others, but worry that Kuhn's paradigmatic view of science has "precipitously courted irrationalism." The empiricist or "standard" view of science is that meanings can be found in observations alone. Nothing has to be "organized" by the observer to obtain a fact. Facts are "givens, " and therefore the connection between observation and theory is logical and unambiguous. The

paradigmatic view of science is that all observations are heavily influenced by the theory of the observer ("theory-laden"). There are no "givens." The

relationship between observations and theory is highly ambiguous, deeply influenced by the norms and social structure of the particular science in question. Therefore, science is to be seen more as a social activity than a logico-empirical one. If the paradigmatic view is true, then scientific knowledge (and every other kind as well) can never be subjected to independent checking against an objective criterion. Knowledge would inevitably be heir to the irrationality of the social structure within which it came into being.

The position of the writers cited by Manicas and Secord is that even though "knowledge is a social and historical product, " not an empirically derived one, "... it is the task of science to invent theories that aim to represent the world" (p. 401). There is a natural world external to us, in other words, but our sense data and the ideas based on them bear no simple relation to it. Furthermore, the natural world is complex enough, is composed of so many interlocking strata, that no single understanding of any phenomenon is adequate. This is especially true of phenomena as dazzlingly complicated as social and psychological events. According to Manicas and Secord, the work of Harré, Bhaksar, and others is known as the realist theory of science, transcendental realism, or fallibilist realism. These views incorporate the constructivist contribution of the paradigmatic view, but reject the irrationality of pure self-reference. Thus, there is an answer to the objection that constructivism implies solipsism: Constructivist epistemology does not require relativist ontology.

To make this point more concrete, here is a simple example of a view in which constructivist epistemology and realist ontology coexist: We can say something about reality directly, but only when our constructions fail, when they are clearly inadequate. Then we can say what reality is not. Otherwise, as long as our constructions continue to be adequate we can only attempt to represent the world by choosing those constructions which are most precise and inclusive (von Glasersfeld, 1984).

All right, replies the critic, but doesn't someone have to decide which interpretation is the best fit? And doesn't that raise—inside psychoanalysis and outside it—dangers of conformism and totalitarianism?

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Constructivism certainly requires neither, and neither has essentialism ever been an inoculation against prejudice and factionalism. As a matter of fact, conformism and authoritarianism of any kind are corruptions of the constructivist process of knowing, which rests on what have been characterized by constructivists as the "facts" of autonomy and self-regulation in human life and the values of tolerance and pluralism (von Foerster, 1984) ; (Varela, 1984).

Contrary to the fears of psychoanalysts who worry that giving up the search for the single truth will lead to irresolvable disagreements, the uncertainty inherent in constructivism is less dangerous than the presumption of immutable truth. Arguments about whose judgment is best remain arguments; arguments about who is right become schisms and wars.

Reality is defined for the constructivist by community, a free community in which each may argue his or her own interpretation. Interpretations which attract interest from the community are useful, and grow in influence. Those interpretations not adopted by a significant portion of the community are not necessarily poorly formulated, and they endure as long as their advocates do, preserving the opportunity to make a contribution. Disagreement about best fit is of course routine under these circumstances, and uncertainty expectable.

In psychoanalysis, the community of patient and analyst tries to understand how and why the patient has come to be this particular person. Their acceptance of the impermanence (since their truths may change) and imperfection of their work makes no less satisfying to them their discovery of words that fit experience closely, and no less painful to formulate unfulfilled hopes and desires and disavowed motives. A constructivist view of knowledge may make one think twice about the certainty with which one holds a position, but there is no encouragement in such a view to avoid facing oneself. Purpose remains the wellspring of personality. Motivation is no less real because the words used to describe it are a fit and not a match. Psychoanalysts and patients are constrained by reality no less than anyone else. Given two sincere participants, psychoanalytic constructions are no more likely to be "made up" than theories of any other kind.

Interpersonal psychoanalysts, because they have always claimed that clinical work is pragmatics and uncertainty, not guided by immutable principles or predictable outcomes, that the work is a

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joint creation of patient and analyst, and that consensual validation is a criterion for any statement that qualifies as truth, will be particularly interested in constructivist epistemology. As an example of the kind of work interpersonalists will find amenable, read the following quotation from Francisco Varela (1984), neurobiologist, mathematician-cyberneticist, and epistemologist.

Tradition would have it that experience is either a subjective or an objective affair, that the world is there and we either see it as it is or we

see it through our subjectivity. However ... we may look at that quandary from a different perspective: that of participation and interpretation, where the subject and the object are inseparably meshed. This interdependence is revealed to the extent that nowhere can I start with a pure account of either one ... (p. 322).

This is the kind of model of knowing consistent with participant observation, a viable philosophical underpinning for a psychoanalysis in which the transference-countertransference field is a complex interaction not reducible to reality and distortion. In the consulting room, as Levenson (1979) has written, what is said and what is done are transforms of one another. There can be no event which is somehow unrelated to the participants. Patient and analyst inevitably influence one another in subtle, unsuspected ways, and the field is the result. Today, in our understanding of the clinical relevance of countertransference, we have the conceptual tools to understand the field from the point of view of the analyst as well as from the point of view of the patient, a method of understanding which would not be possible if one participant were the mirror and the other the image. With Varela we conclude that "... interdependence is revealed to the extent that nowhere can I start with a pure account of either one ..."

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