Interpretation Today Conference

Parallel Paper Session 2

Abstracts
Interpreting in the Social: Psychoanalysis and the ‘Social Subject’

Karl Figlio (British Psychoanalytical Society, and University of Essex, UK)

There has been a debate over decades about the scientific status of the social sciences (I include history), about its methodology, about its objects and about the validity of psychoanalysis in relation to these issues. It shifts from the extremes of science in all its aspects, to which psychoanalysis can make no contribution, to a mode of understanding, often called hermeneutic. Following the German philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey, one speaks of Einfühlung, a feeling into the object as a subject: an empathy with the subject’s thinking, feeling and acting; or of the symbolic interactionism of G. H. Mead, in which social communication begins with elemental interactions, including gestures (see Chancer, L. and Andrews, J. (2014) The Unhappy Divorce of Sociology and Psychoanalysis: Diverse Perspectives on the Psychosocial: Houndmills: PalgraveMacmillan).

At the core of the relationship between psychoanalysis and the social sciences is their fundamentally different objects: the individual for the former; society for the latter. I leave out Freud’s own profound concern for the social, as well as group analysis, social defence analysis and group relations approaches, in order to bring out this basic difference and the implication that often follows: in the climate of a ‘divorce’, psychoanalysts and Social Scientists seem to agree upon a stand-off with mutual non-recognition. Social scientists think psychoanalysts should stay out of social matters because they can only speak about the mind of the individual, not about society, which has no mind and no mental attributes. In this climate of opinion, psychoanalysts agree: the social world is not a subject, has no mind and offers no immediacy of interaction – it lacks the living moment of the transference. Overall, they both can say that the social world can be addressed objectively by social scientists and the individual world can be addressed subjectively by the intuitive psychoanalyst, even though such a division carries with it the loss of what really matters: the psychical basis of sociality.

Perhaps I generalize in positing these two extreme positions, even with respect to the hermeneutic approach, but they do capture commonly-held views. In this paper, I aim to show that these two areas of enquiry cannot do without each other. I will deal with what I call ‘interpretation in the social’, in line with the conference aim of focusing on interpretation in psychoanalysis. The social sciences need psychoanalysis in order to tie together the events that they explore objectively, as if not formed by human actors, or as if they could be captured without the actual subjectivity offered to the psychoanalyst. Given that psychoanalytic methodology is based on interpretation, we must conclude that the interpretation of social phenomena implies that we have to attribute subjectivity to social groups. I call it the ‘social subject’.

In drawing this conclusion, I argue that we must attribute love, identification, aggression, guilt and reparative urges to social phenomena. My paper comprises two parts. Firstly, I will
explain what I mean by a ‘social subject’. Secondly, I will present an example of the convergence of individual and social feeling with respect to mourning and reparation at sites of remembrance. I choose sites of remembrance because people come to them as individuals with individuals in mind, and also as groups with groups in mind. Here, one can try to understand these two ways of being present at a site of remembrance, including the conflict, ambiguity, ambivalence that they occasion.

Karl Figlio was founding director of the Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Essex and is now professor in the Centre. He is a registrant of the British Psychoanalytic Council, Senior Member of the Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Association and Associate of the British Psychoanalytical Society. His research interests include the psychoanalysis of science, of masculinity, of culture and of historical memory as reparation. He is working on a book for Palgrave Macmillan with the working title, Psychoanalysis, Reparation and Historical Memory.
Variations of Interpretations in the Psychoanalytic Process

Emad Bishara (Swiss Psychoanalytic Society)

Throughout the psychoanalytic process, analysands show different levels of functioning. They oscillate between extreme regression and a more evolved oedipal symbolic functioning. Inspired by clinical material in one analysis, the author explores the change of focus and manner of interpretation during the evolution of the psychoanalytic process and the subsequent psychic change that follows. At the start, the patient brought to the sessions her own construction based on the notion of trauma. However, while she explained how traumatized she was during her childhood, she looked as a drowning little girl asking for help though not wanting to swim. She seemed complacent with her feelings of being a victim, avoiding to be responsible for her own life. Simultaneously, her various enactments were intended to keep her in the position of an irresponsible, incapable victim. In the first phase of analysis interpretations focused upon projection, splitting and enactments. Later on, toward the end of analysis, she gained more insight, and was capable to see her life history in a more adult responsible way. The focus of interpretation could then change to a construction in analysis. The trauma she went through could then be explored and dealt with. She seemed no longer a drowning small girl asking for help, and she started to learn how to swim.


Emad Bishara is a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who works in private practice in Geneva, Switzerland. He works mainly with adults. He is a member of the Swiss Psychoanalytic Society. He is also part of the committee in charge of the organisation of various conferences in the Centre of Psychoanalysis Raymond de Saussure in Geneva. He wrote a few articles in Swiss or international reviews.
The ‘Potential Space’ of Kettle’s Yard

Jennifer Scott (University of Western Australia)

The places and buildings that we inhabit possess deep emotional meaning for us. As Michael Frayn wrote, ‘We seek out significance from our environment like we seek out food’. (Constructions 1974). Interpretation is needed if we are to understand the meaning that the environments we build have for us.

Kettles Yard is internationally renowned as a unique combination of a home and important art gallery. Bequeathed to Cambridge University in 1966, Kettles Yard was created by Jim Ede, a former curator of the Tate Gallery. Ede was a close childhood friend of Donald Winnicott’s. Ede’s conception had its origins moving furniture around at Winnicott’s family home while both were still pupils at Cambridge’s Leys School. In the spaces of Kettle’s Yard, Ede assembled paintings and sculptures by his network of artist friends: Gaudier-Brzeska, Brancusi, Barbara Hepworth, David Jones, Miro, Henry Moore, Ben Nicholson, Alfred Wallis and Christopher Wood.

Based on archival research, Jen Scott uses Winnicott’s five suggestions for observing the ‘transitional object’ to understand the meanings and significances inherent in the place, building and artistic contents of Kettle’s Yard. These are: nature, other, boundary, imagination and affection. Through examining the complex of physical, personal and social
environments in which this cultural artifact exists, Kettle’s Yard can be understood as ‘potential space’.

Jennifer Scott studied architecture in London and Sydney before working on large projects including museums, schools as well as a hospital in South West Australia, which led to an interest in therapeutic aspects of design. In 2005, she completed an art therapy training at Edith Cowan University and began teaching architecture. Her interdisciplinary research at the University of Western Australia explores linkages between therapeutic and creative spatial forms of understanding.
Interpretation in Work with Patients with Unrepresented Mental Areas

Luca Quagelli (VII-Diderot University, Paris, France) and Paola Solano (University of Genova, Italy)

For decades interpretation has been looked upon as the analyst’s central tool to promote transformation and development during treatment. Although Strachey suggested that Freud intended interpretation as a synonym for making the unconscious conscious, different conceptualizations can be found in Freudian writings according to the development of different models of the mind. However, these conceptualizations apply to neurotic mental functioning and do not suit the work on unrepresented mental states where symbolization and early mothering situations cannot be taken for granted. Reflecting on Freud’s choice of the word “Deutung” to call what English psychoanalytic literature has always referred to as “interpretation”, we underline the different implications this word has for the German-speaking ear that were lost in translation. For instance, “hinting at, suggesting, alluding” and “indicating, pointing a direction/way to someone” allow the retrieval of the original complexity of the meaning of Freud’s word and help us shed light on its applicability in work with unrepresented mental states where no verbal register can be achieved. Thus, “classical interpretations” in terms of projection are not likely to get in touch with the traumatic nuclei that employ more primitive registers and mechanisms to communicate.

In these clinical situations, the setting acquires a pivotal role since patients cannot access the as-if dimension and use it as a concrete holding object providing a first experience of safety, reliability and predictability because that had not been possible in the encounter with the object. The analyst’s negative capability – preventing the repetition of early impingements – together with his capacity to construct links (Bindung) between the fragments of the patient’s material allow the development of a potential space where experiences pertaining to the split off traumatic nuclei can emerge, often in body-centred countertransferringal feelings, and find a first representation through the analyst’s reverie. What language can reach those frozen nuclei? We believe and put forward for discussion the need to employ other forms of interpretation, that we shall call “interpretative experiences”, to be included under a broadened umbrella, encompassing Ogden’s “talking – as – dreaming” and Green’s “non – silent technique”, which allow the development of a potential space where experiences pertaining to the frozen traumatic nuclei can emerge, be “fluidified” and become transformable. We believe that these techniques are “interpretative” since they “act” from the still mysterious and fascinating vertex of “ucs – to – ucs communication” in “hinting at, suggesting, indicating, pointing a way” from the analyst’s ucs to the patient’s, thus fulfilling the meaning of Freud’s Deutung. It is tempting to suggest that by Freud choosing this word, in a way, he had another meaning in mind and we can imagine that, through this word, he hinted at other ways to communicate, e.g. “ucs – to – ucs” communication, that becomes more relevant in clinical activity every day and on
which contemporary psychoanalytic research should focus since, even nowadays, it remains largely mysterious. Contributions from the French and Post-Kleinian psychoanalytic models concerning theoretical and technical issues will be compared and discussed, each within their own conceptual frameworks.

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