

ecologic unconscious, our psychotherapy again. I take quite seriously the possibility that the human psyche is deeply grounded in planetary eco-system, that we are in touch, and that the planet is in touch with us in ways that as deeply unconscious psychiatry thinks the sexual impulse may be, and that those forces

work upon us to change us and through changing us to change the culture.

When I ponder that I tend to be a bit more hopeful, though it seems to me that disintegration of major industrial systems can be so messy and so haphazard, so chaotic, that it's not necessarily going to be a pretty prospect.

Politics in Therapy

Andrew Samuels

One of the most potent criticisms of therapy and analysis is that the client is encouraged or even required to turn away from external concerns such as political issues, and focus exclusively on the 'inner world'. This, it is argued, makes nonsense of the statement that therapy develops the whole person. Text-books of therapy and analysis accentuate the introspection by making it clear that exploration of outer world issues is simply not done in 'proper' therapy and analysis.

Over a period of time, I have sensed that this professional consensus is collapsing and that therapists and analysts are indeed beginning to pay more attention to what could be called the political development of their clients. In my own practice, I have noticed that patients seem to be introducing political themes more often. Colleagues say that this also goes on in their work so it is not all due to suggestion on my part. We have tended to put it down to the fact that,

since the mid 1980s, the pace of political change in the world has quickened. At times I have felt that the usual formulation — that such material needs to be understood as symbolic of what is going on in the client — worked pretty well. But at other times it has turned out that the client had a need to talk about some public issue, maybe to work out what their true feelings and opinion were. For example, during the Gulf War there were certainly some clients who were using war imagery to tell me something about their inner state. But there were others who were hiding a profound need to talk about the Gulf War behind the flow of regular, normal clinical material.

I decided that what was needed was a large-scale investigation, by means of a questionnaire, to see if analysts and therapists were experiencing something similar in significant numbers. I therefore obtained the co-operation of 14 professional organisations with differing

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theoretical orientations in seven different countries and sent out 2,000 survey forms. I got a return rate of almost exactly one third (very high for a cold-calling survey in which the respondents had to spend some time and write fairly lengthy and thoughtful answers).

In the survey, I asked which themes from a list of 15 possibles were most frequently introduced by patients. This produced a worldwide league table as follows:

- (1) gender issues for women
- (2) economic issues (e.g. distribution of wealth, poverty, inflation)
- (3) violence in society
- (4=) national politics, and gender issues for men
- (5) racial or ethnic issues
- (6) international politics

There were some striking departures from this order. For instance, German analysts had 'the environment' as the most frequently introduced issue whilst for British psychoanalysts economic issues came in seventh. This enables us to make all kinds of speculations about whether there is or is not something like a 'national psyche' or 'collective consciousness' — at least as evidenced in the political themes brought to sessions by analysts' clients.

I asked the participants how they reacted to, handled or interpreted this material and the replies were fascinating.

Contrary to my expectations, 78% of the respondents mentioned that they understood the material as referring to reality. For many, this was in conjunction with a symbolic interpretation or an exploration of why the client was interested in that particular theme at that

particular moment. One British psychoanalyst wrote: 'I acknowledge the reality of the event and of the reaction to it and also interpret its use — i.e. defensive/distracting or expressive of internal conflict or a transference communication. Over some universally and immoderately threatening issues such as Chernobyl and the Gulf War (and our Government's attitude to the Gulf War) I would feel that it would be a mark of health if a patient raised it and feel it is worrying if a patient does not do so.'

An American psychoanalyst wrote: 'I support the patient's perceptions and may link their particular experiences to the general to give a broader perspective provided they don't use the general to avoid the particular — e.g. using the word racism to avoid looking at their own feelings, behaviour etc.'

Another American analyst had this to say: 'I am a woman. Patients of both sexes often bring up issues regarding abortion conflicts, gay-bashing and prejudices toward women. At least in New York City, patients and therapists tend to be liberal and belong to the Democratic Party. I tend to listen and agree when patients indicate that Anita Hill seemed to be telling the truth or that gays and women are discriminated against.'

A German analyst wrote that, 'I don't exclude political questions from the treatment. I try to clarify how far political attitudes are influenced by neurotically faulty attitudes. After this clarification has been achieved. I encourage my patients to think and act politically.'

The voice of orthodoxy is represented by this comment from a British psychoanalyst: 'The only way is to understand

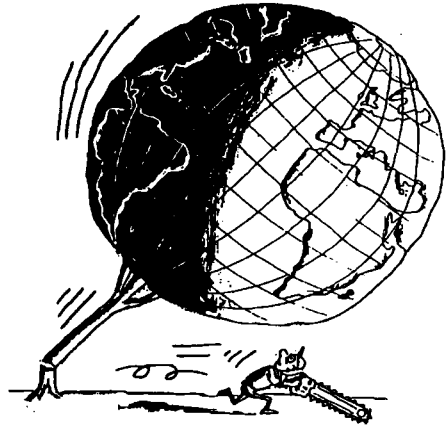
what it is behind the political presentation and interpret it. Only that.'

In the survey, I went on to ask if the respondent discussed politics with his or her clients. Of course, I realised the explosive nature of the question and deliberately did not define what might be covered by the word 'discuss'. Worldwide, 56% said they did discuss politics and 44% that they did not. American Jungian analysts do the most discussing (72%) and British psychoanalysts the least (33%). However, it is interesting to note that the implication of the one third of 'yes' answers given by the British psychoanalysts is that 43 of them admit to discussing politics with patients (one third of the 129 respondents).

I was also interested to see if analysts and therapists participating in the survey had thought about their own political attitudes, development and history and I asked them to write something about this, saying what had influenced them in these areas. Here is a selection of replies.

'As an analyst, and with increasing age, I feel a growing concern with political issues; it seems to be concern with the well-being of groups beyond one's own intimate family and friends, extending to communities, nations and the international community. These groups begin to have more meaning than they did in earlier life when one's concerns were establishing adult identity as a woman, wife, mother and analyst. I am interested in the unexpected capacity to invest emotionally in larger groups as one gets older.' (British psychoanalyst)

'A background in anthropology (and field experience) has greatly influenced my attitude to ethnic, racial and social



diversity issues. Jettisoning my early Church of England background for the Quakers has given me greater freedom to explore moral/religious values.' (British psychotherapist)

'Frustrated left-wing. Brought up in an ex-colony, identifying with loving servants. Witnessed hypocrisy of family, society. Witnessed immorality in appalling ways. Vaguely religious.' (British analyst)

'I am very concerned about the environment and the poverty increase in this country. My parents are conservative, upper class. I believe in the good in every person.' (British humanistic therapist)

'As a Jew I feel I have been in the liberal tradition. I have identified with the oppressed and was drawn to the study of social psychology as well as clinical psychology. I was impressed by a grandmother who devoted herself to the care and feeding of the poor. The value system of Judaism as represented by the prophets also influenced me greatly.' (American psychoanalyst)

As a white male from the South I

tended to be over-solicitous toward minorities — especially black. But I also share southern suspiciousness of large government. Have been active in politics in student days and was disillusioned with the fanaticism.' (American analyst)

'Left orientation, environmental concerns. My history as an adolescent in 1968 was crucial. My moral values developed in opposition to my family's. Specific events: definitely 1968 and the feminist movement.' (Italian analyst)

'I have been influenced by my exploration of the relations between Nazis and Jews. Also, fascist tendencies at the analytic institute.' (German analyst)

'Anti-semitism and the Holocaust influenced my political attitudes with regard to the possibility of the Jewish people defending themselves against mass destruction.' (Israeli analyst)

'I have always tried to become involved but the government's campaign against the left prevented me from doing it.' (Brazilian analyst)

'I am distant from politics but the best I think is democratic. I was active during 19-21 August 1991, the abortive but crucial coup against Gorbachev. In the former USSR, psychoanalytically oriented work was against official rules so I think that, independent of my personal views, the fact that I did such work could itself be considered as evidence of political activity.' (Russian therapist)

I asked the obvious question: have you ever been/are you politically active? To my great surprise, 67% said they had been politically active at some time — a figure which, less surprisingly, dropped to 33% at the present time. Nevertheless,

my intuitive impression, just from talking to colleagues, that a good deal of them had been politically active at some time, was borne out. The stereotype of a profession composed of introspective, introverted, self-indulgent types was challenged.

So what does it all mean? In the most down-to-earth terms, it means that, if you are contemplating analysis or therapy, and if you are interested in politics (however defined), it would be as well to explore with a potential therapist or analyst what they are likely to do if you bring political material to the consulting room. For the profession is clearly divided about it. Even if everyone who did not return their survey form abhors politics in the consulting room, there is still a significant minority of practitioners who do not. The other, hitherto unknown, clinicians see that involvement in, and concern for, the world is part of growing up, of individuation, and maybe even of mental health. The split is at its most destructive when it is between the public, apolitical, hyper-clinical face of the profession — something that has quite rightly been criticised — and a private face of the profession. Many therapists and analysts are all too aware that they are citizens too, that they have political histories themselves, that they, too, struggle to find the balance between inner-looking and outer-looking attitudes. As a British psychoanalyst put it: 'We are political animals. Everything we are and do takes place within a political framework. It is impossible to divorce this from the inner world of either our patients or ourselves.'