



IPA Webinar, 17th November 2023

Toxic polarization within psychoanalysis: What can be done about it?

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1. Thank you for inviting me to speak on this important topic. I am humbled by the prospect of saying anything useful about the horrific situation in Israel, which is deeply distressing to so many of us, irrespective of our differing perspectives. My remarks will be focused primarily on how to address toxic polarization within the field of psychoanalysis.
2. Toxic polarization is defined as a state of intense, chronic polarization marked by high levels of loyalty to a person's ingroup and contempt or even hate for outgroups. Toxic polarization limits our ability to humanize and engage with political opponents.
3. At the IPA Congress in Cartagena, I chaired a panel entitled, "Does psya have anything to offer to alleviate toxic polarization. I argued, we are trained to be good listeners, to be able to hold different and sometimes opposing thoughts in our minds at the same time, to listen to ourselves as we listen to others, to pay attention our reactions, both conscious and unconscious and to forego judgement.
4. Although our training would suggest that we are uniquely prepared to address polarization and to lessen its impact, that is not what we have seen within large group settings.



5. In fact, psychoanalysts seem particularly prone to polarization and to be intolerant of those who disagree with them. especially on psychoanalytic listservs-- a form of social media that can quickly become toxic.
6. The rupture that occurred at American Psychoanalytic Association (APSA), in March of 2023 is one of the most extreme examples. The conflict was exacerbated by attacks and counterattacks on the APSA listserv which resulted in the resignation of President, Kerry Sulkowicz.
7. But Oct 7th brought polarization within our field to an entirely different level.
8. See this example from an extremely progressive psychoanalytic listserv that had, up until Oct 7th, had been able to avoid the kinds of polarization seen on other listservs such as APSA and Division 39.
9. Names have been changed and this is a digest of a longer thread.
10. Ariel on 10/8: Dear colleagues, I am beside myself with grief, so this will be short and perhaps ineloquent. In light of the traumatic horrors that have unfolded and are still occurring in Israel, I am writing to encourage your emergency support for Israelis in your personal and professional community. I also encourage everyone to reach out to your fellow Jewish and Israeli colleagues with the understanding that we are overwhelmed by our own grief and fear and worried for those who are reaching out to us. With great sadness, Ariel
11. Malik on 10/9: Let's be clear, Israel has more than enough psychotherapists. They'll be okay. Israel is not the victim here. I won't sit here silently while Israel commits genocide, and watch a listserv I'm on recruit support for the settler colonial population. If you want to do your Israeli patients a service, tell them to leave Israel and stop participating in a violent settler colonial project.
12. David: With the exception of "leave Israel"— if that implies, as I think it does, that Israel should no longer exist— I agree completely with this statement.
13. Well then David you missed the crucial part. Malik



14. Ahmed: Do see the Israeli patients, of course. No one is advocating withholding care. If you really care for them, however, ask them to give up their colonizer status and leave the settler colonial structure of Israel. Free Palestine.
15. Malik: don't see how one can help them in the capacity of a therapist. This goes beyond therapy. No therapy in my view can cure a material state of unfreedom and genocide. Breaking out, which is what is happening now, at enormous cost, is the only form of therapy, if one could even call it that. Malik
16. Ariel: What do you mean by "breaking out"? Are you calling murder and torture a therapy? I don't want to continue this conversation with you. If the moderators and members of this community will not rise to the occasion and limit this destructive expression of evil, I am leaving this listserv. Shaking with tears, Ariel
17. So what do we (psychoanalysts) have to offer to alleviate toxic polarization?
 - a. Chris Heath and I co-lead a group called the Depolarization Project. We have a diverse group of members, half of which not psychoanalysts. We're diverse in age, religion and political perspectives and frequently disagree with one another. In our group, we recently read a chapter from Lara and Steven Sheehi's controversial book, *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation*, in which they discuss their clinical work with Palestinians. In this chapter they reject dialogue as a tool for lessening conflict and polarization. "We have seen how psychoanalytic innocence at the heart of dialogue initiatives pathologizes the politics of refusal—that is, the insistence of saying 'no' to dialogue, no to nonviolence, and no to the settler-colonial fantasy."
 - b. By settler-colonial fantasy, I assume they mean the "fantasy" that Israel has a right to exist.
 - c. Sometimes dialogue is just not possible.
 - d. In times of extreme polarization, it would seem that dialogue becomes imperative. Without dialogue, splits become even more extreme and those on the "other side" are increasingly vilified and their views exaggerated. But what if dialogue is not possible?



- e. Dorothy Holmes, Chair of APSA's Holmes Commission on Racial Equality noted, "High level dialogue that is necessary to help resolve toxic polarization may require pre-dialogue in terms of assessing and addressing the degree to which polarized individuals or groups are coming from the paranoid-schizoid position" (Splitting and projection)
1. The Boston Public Conversation Project provides an excellent example of what I think Dorothy Holmes might mean by pre-dialogue. This project was initiated in Boston to address polarization on abortion that had become violent when a shooter wounded three people and killed the receptionist in one abortion clinic and injured two and killed one person in another clinic.
2. Six women who were leaders in their communities and very distressed by the situation, three pro-life and three pro-choice met together for 5 and 1/2 years. The meetings were private and confidential because the women feared that those in their own camp would be strongly opposed to their "speaking with the enemy" and see their dialogue as a betrayal. that could make *them* vulnerable to violent attack.
3. At the first meeting, ground rules were established: no interrupting or personal attacks All agreed that the meetings would be completely confidential unless everyone agreed on how to go public.
4. They found that toning down the rhetoric was critical. At the start of their meetings the six women grappled with clashes over language. How do you refer to what grows and develops in a pregnant women's womb? The pro-choice women couldn't agree to "unborn baby," and the pro-life women would not accept "fetus." They finally came to a consensus, uneasily and for the sake of moving forward, to "human fetus." Over time, it became apparent that for the pro-life women, life itself was (and is) more important than the quality of life, which the pro-choice women felt to be the preeminent value.
5. Importantly, they found some significant areas of overlap:
 - a. prevention of teen pregnancy



- b. expanding options for adoption,
- c. addressing situations in which a woman might feel she is being coerced into having an abortion.
- 6. Although the Public Conversations Project did not directly involve psychoanalysts, its aim was deeply psychoanalytic in the sense that it healed splitting, reduced binary thinking, and allowed for more nuanced and ambivalent views.
- 7. The Public Conversations Project focused exclusively on abortion, but these ground rules could be used to address other "hot button" issues that divide people. As the world becomes increasingly polarized and people are unable to talk to each other, this divide increases the sense of danger and insecurity that then leads to more splitting and polarization.
- 8. What did the Public Conversations Project accomplish?
 - a. Stereotypes they had brought to the dialogue, in some cases unconscious, softened.
 - b. The dialogue experience had altered the way they interacted with people of different perspectives.
 - c. They developed greater understanding of the roots of others' viewpoints, and a profound respect for the integrity and humanity of members on both poles of the issue.
 - d. They concluded that the dialogue initiative had achieved its primary goal: the de-escalation of the volatile and divisive climate surrounding public debate about abortion.
- 9. Can we use this as a model? It may be overly idealistic-- It requires commitment and the will to listen to those with opposing views that may be very disturbing. But I think it's possible.
- 10. Can we revive the art of disagreement?