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The Ethical Dimension of Psychoanalytic Training

The psychoanalytical institutions have long felt the need to anchor the ethical dimension institutionally by drawing up ethical guidelines. But it would be a long time before they anchored them institutionally. During my training in the early eighties there were, with a few exceptions, no seminars directly bearing on this wide-ranging topic. Only in the late eighties and early nineties did a discussion on ethical, unprofessional behavior begin at the international level. Since then, psychoanalytical professional ethics have become incorporated into the statutes of almost all psychoanalytical societies. If one looks at the history of psychoanalytical professional ethics, however, one realizes that it is a constantly changing collection of ideas about ethical or unethical behavior. For this reason, psychoanalytical professional ethics can be seen as a “work in progress”.

First I would like to say something about the general, unspecific ethical dimension of psychoanalytic practice. This first perspective includes the generally accepted principles of medical ethics that also apply to other professions such as doctor, teacher or social worker. Through the work of Beauchamp and Childress (2009) they have become widely disseminated. These principles are: Respect for the autonomy of the patient, no harm as a principle of damage avoidance, the principle of care and assistance, and respect for equality and justice. In this area, the psychoanalyst has sole responsibility for any treatment errors that may be regarded as deviant from or non-compliant with general medical ethical standards.

The second perspective takes into account the specific nature of the analytical situation and analytical relationship, which by its very nature poses characteristic ethical challenges. All elements of the analytical situation – working in the medium of the unconscious, the co-creation of the analytical relationship, the methodical accessing via free association and evenly suspended attention, the central phenomena of transference and resistance, of the setting as a “safe place”, meant to foster openness to delve into this “place of emotional turbulence”, and the psychoanalyst’s focus on listening and interpreting – all of these principles already show a general ambiguity, connected to the very

specific ethical dimension.” (Zwiebel, 2019). Special attention needs to be paid to abstinence, with its two poles of prevention and of enabling – prevention of exploitation and of boundary violations, and the enablement of regression and transference (Picht, 2014).

It is helpful here to make a distinction between the classical and the so-called post-classical treatment models. The classical model is based on a person’s psychology, which is associated with the notion of a clear separation of analyst (observer) and analyst (observed). The post-classical model is based on a two-person psychology. Here, the analyst’s contribution is understood as a co-constitutive part of the analytical situation, which thus cannot be seen as a one-sided event determined by the analyst, but as the result of an interplay between the transference of the patient and the countertransference of the analyst. In recent psychoanalysis, terms such as involvement, entanglement of the analyst, enactment or unconscious assumption of a role are paradigmatic. This specific way of working on the part of the psychoanalyst is subject to the dynamics of success and failure; one can speak of deceptions, errors and mistakes in this regard, but they are inherent in the analytical way of working. Even if they are undesirable, they are an indispensable source of psychoanalytic understanding and work.

In each case, however, it must be clarified whether it is an error in the sense of “mistake” (Schneider, 2014) – an error that can be used to aid understanding in the analytical situation – or an everyday error, for example one caused by an analyst’s bad form “on the day”. This has to be distinguished from systematic and damaging behaviour and thus ultimately from an ethical violation of the limits, as these have been elaborated by G.O. Gabbard & E. P. Lester (1996). What is at issue here is the development of a culture of error in the sense of perceiving, understanding and transforming the deceptions, fallacies and errors that occur, the preconditions for which will be described in more detail.

From my perspective in the discourse on the ethical dimensions of psychoanalytic practice will need to include the terms “responsibility” and “ambiguity tolerance” (Zwiebel 2019), and their linkage. These terms, both separately and connected, are important for a fundamental discourse on the ethical dimensions in analytical training and the analytical institutes. In her work on the ethical dimensions in psychoanalytical practice, based on the work done by philosopher

Emmanuel Levinas, our colleague Chetrit-Vatine (2004) has used the term “ethical awakening of the psychoanalyst“. She focusses on the fundamental responsibility for the OTHER, which is generated in another contradictory relationship, that of mother and infant. Here, too, we are confronted with a very basic ambiguity and ambivalence, as each encounter with the Other generates a double reaction, made up of concern, responsibility and empathy for the other, and also the need for self-preservation and potential hostility.

After these very condensed thoughts let’s now go to the core of my contribution, the ethical dimension of psychoanalytic practice from the perspective of analytic training and the institute.

I would like to reflect on some important steps in psychoanalytic training, that include ethical challenges.:

a) Admission of candidates

There is an ongoing controversy as to how to conduct application interviews: should it be a collegial conversation, or should it be a psychoanalytic initial interview, within which there should also be an opportunity for analytic interpretation? The application procedure may in fact already be seen as a first test of the applicant’s ambiguity tolerance, to see whether they can open up in spite of the application procedure. But – picking up on Chetrit-Vatine’s line of thought – it could also be seen as an ambivalent dynamic, in analogy with the inclusion of a newborn into a family: interpretation as friendly acceptance or hostile rejection. But from an ethical point of view, it remains unclear whether interpretation in this type of situation could also be perceived as potentially upsetting and transgressive.

Rejection can cause deep mortification, on the basis of which people still act decades later, sometimes with deep hatred. In the case of admission, selection can easily be linked to the fantasy of now “being chosen”.

The decision on whether an applicant will be admitted or rejected is a far-reaching one, for the applicant, for the institute, for potential analysands, - actually for the future development of

psychoanalysis as a whole, and therefore implicitly has an ethical dimension.

b) Training- or personal analysis

I am grateful to Dr Sara Zac de Filc and Clara Nemas who brought again to my attention a paper presented by a candidate in the IPAC Berlin. The title of the paper is “Losing a training analyst for ethical violations: A candidate’s perspective”.

Nemas writes: “It is a very lucid and touching account of the effect of the way an institute dealt with the analytic treatment of a candidate in training after her analyst was investigated for violation of boundaries, found guilty and was expelled from the society. It opens up a discussion about privacy, secrecy and confidentiality in the intimacy of a psychoanalytic institution.”

I would like to refer here to another aspect of confidentiality, linked to the duty of professional discretion. For example, in exchanges with colleagues and at meetings of the training committees, people say: “I know that from the couch”. As if we are in the possession of knowledge that nobody else can have and even more, as if this knowledge is not part of the internal world of the patient in the transference-countertransference situation. Such behavior does not recognize that this is material from the analysis and not a fact to be made use of. Are we mindful of such statements and what attitude are we passing on to our candidates? One candidate reports: In the restaurant I recognize two trainers exchanging information about patients. They talk about a patient and discuss her specific and clearly recognizable family relationships. Disrespectful remarks are made. I would like to emphasize that especially at the beginning of the training, a way has to be found for dealing with overwhelming affects and distancing oneself from them again. Also when training analysts and supervisors give interpretations outside the framework, these are violations of abstinence. Complaints from candidates about the questionable ability of a supervisor or training analyst to work must be taken up and not hushed up. This raises the question of how to deal with rumours

in the institute. A very difficult question. But it is crucial to follow up the rumors in order to check which of them corresponds to the truth. In my association (DPV) we have a low-threshold ethics committee that takes up the complaint, examines it and, if necessary, contacts the parties involved and requests a written report. This Ethics Committee is a neutral body, whose advice and assistance regarding inquiries and complaints about possible ethical misconduct allegedly caused by DPV psychoanalysts can be called upon by anyone at any time. The Ethics Committee is the first point of contact for clarifying ethically questionable facts and developments and works in a psychoanalytically reflective manner. It has no administrative or judicial function.

Supervision and Evaluation

Also in the case of supervision I would like to emphasize the supervisor's responsibility for confidentiality. Seemingly minor breaches of confidentiality, such as asking the supervisor for details about another supervisor or talking extensively about one's own experiences with other supervisors, lead to uncertainty among the candidates and contribute to a climate in the institute with unclear boundaries.

Supervisors have twin tasks, which are in tension with each other. The challenge is to develop a beneficial working relationship with the candidate, between the poles of dependence and encouragement to self-determination. The focus should be on accompanying the candidate throughout the training and not exclusively on the evaluation at the end of the training. The further challenge is to carry out the function of assessment and to make decisions as to when the candidate is qualified to complete the training. These decisions are always made by a group, the Training Committee, whose members are elected by the institute / society. But in these groups, too, group dynamics can develop which endanger the group's ability to work. Phenomena of a 'basic assumption mentality', as described by Bion, can take over.

The problem of ideology, dogmatism and authoritarianism in the transmission of psychoanalysis

There is an ethical dimension to the culture of psychoanalytic institutes. This brings us to the problems of ideologies, dogmatism and fundamentalism in the transmission of psychoanalysis. The danger of incestuous entanglement is relatively great due to the never completely resolved transferences. This applies in particular to the Eitingon model, where the training analysis runs alongside the entire training. However, in the French model, too, similar processes of unresolved transference and continuing idealisation of the supervisors take place.

This implies that for some analysands there is a certain obligeness to confirm the theories of their own analyst, which can be understood in function of transference. The decisive question is: What kind of connection do we have with the analytic community and its history? Do we believe in a simplistic, alienating allegiance or is it possible to consider that our affiliations are carrying thirdness?

The analytic identity probably refers to a sense of solidity in one's core identification with psychoanalysis as a theory and practice, an increasing sense of confidence in knowing what one is doing, even when not knowing what is going on in the session. It is about finding one's own voice as an analyst, being able to develop a particular quality of listening – both listening to the patient's unconscious communications, but also to oneself, with a complex interaction between the two sides.

The analytic 'voice' is not only shaped by the clinical encounter, but also of course by other influences – from training, personal analysis, colleagues, reading, and life. One could say that a psychoanalytic identity involves both feeling 'at home' in one's role, and, hopefully in one's institution, but that there is also a necessary pull away from feeling too settled in one's position; it does not pay creatively to be too comfortable with one's position.

“In this way, the analyst is presented with the possibility/difficulty of “emerging from an institutional transference of a strictly familial kind, to open themselves up to the equivalents of secondary school, workplaces outside the family and socio-cultural life in a wider sense” (Bolognini, 2014).

The actual multiplicity of models could be seen as dangerous, its risk being the loss of a common ground. It has, nevertheless, the merit of offering us elements which can help us out of a belief system, from adhering to a single meaning in a single vortex.

This leads us to the last point, which considers conflicts and splitting of societies.

The “life within psychoanalytic institutes, in which the mixture of personal, professional and group-dynamic issues creates an abundance of ambivalences and ambiguities, often turning decision-making into conflict-ridden affairs.

Psychoanalytic institutions, as they are positioned in the tension field between dogmatism and arbitrariness, as is also reflected by the increasing plurality in psychoanalysis: on the one hand, one may interpret the psychoanalytic polyphony as an expression of increased ambiguity tolerance, while on the other hand this may also be seen as “anything goes”.

In the current situation, which challenges our previous understanding of ourselves so that we have to leave apparent securities behind, groups in particular have a disposition to primitive states. Groups lose their way of functioning as working groups, and basic assumptions that serve to defend against more or less conscious fears prevail over the conscious goals of the organization. Institutes then tend to isolate themselves from external reality and prevent necessary change.

Bion among others, has described the inevitable tension that exists in relation to the introduction of new ideas.

“As we try to express or formulate our findings... so we also excrete a kind of shell around them. A layer of knowledge that we can neither penetrate nor break out of. And very soon we get

to the point of thinking. "Well, I don't want somebody to start arguing with me. Because they may say something and I will have to think again". It is much nicer to feel, that we are establishing a kind of authority that can't be questioned and that is an impenetrable shell, Inside which we lie snugly and simply deteriorate".(Bion, 33)

We easily slip into the illusion that we are defending an essential truth about the very nature of psychoanalysis, the pure gold.

In such group dynamics, it is important to view them from the outside. A third position is often insufficiently established in psychoanalytical institutions. I am thinking here of Bolognini's "IV pillar". We often make reference to it, but seldom dare to set of activities that can be realized.

If we consider increased tolerance of ambiguity a prime virtue of the psychoanalyst, then this would also need to be part of successful analytical training. The more an institute and its individual members strive to establish a "culture of ambiguity" in the sense of a collective ambiguity tolerance, the greater the chance that candidates will internalize this attitude, a prerequisite for developing into "sufficiently good" analysts." (Zwiebel, 2019)

In my opinion, the only answer to the uncertainties which are inherent to psychoanalysis is to continuously strive for differentiation between mutual and exclusive responsibility, between secrecy in the negative sense and the necessary confidentiality in all sectors of institutional life. This is a constant ethical challenge for all parties, without final and ideal solutions

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