

Commentary to the Paper: *Psychoanalysis in Form and Action*

Nicola Artico*

The choral effort of reflection by the authors of '*Psychoanalysis in form and action*', reminded me that, in times long gone by, I too was an intern. At that time, internship was not compulsory for future psychologists. However, as soon as I graduated, I felt the moral necessity, underpinned by other less clearly defined needs, to expose myself to this kind of experience. I offered to work for a mental health service, and the person in charge at the time thought it would be useful and interesting for a young aspiring clinical psychologist to be exposed to a real psychiatric ward. Today, it would be called the Psychiatric Diagnosis and Treatment Service, complete with wards and personnel on duty full time. So, as far as many of the themes discussed in the article are concerned, I was immediately put to the test, as a young aspiring psychotherapist in a context and an institution so unlike the private psychoanalysis offices, or the outpatients' clinics for psychologists in the NHS.

Yet even today, after many years, I am grateful to those who allowed me to confront a context so unlike what I had imagined or expected. A place where the mental states of the patients, as well as of the operators, became apparent to the observation of those who expressed interest and curiosity for human nature. Of course, some preconditions have to be met: the intern should express sufficient desire, curiosity, to face the new, the different, the unexpected; at the same time, there should be at least one experienced professional willing to welcome and guide these requests. The first impression when reading the paper is that, happily, both conditions were fulfilled in those placements. Moreover, they were enriched by a third positive variable: that of a group that succeeded in being united without having to give up their individual approaches.

A large part of the work we are commenting on refers to what it means

*Director, Operational Unit, Psychology and Mental Health; Head of Functional Unit, Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Livorno area, Public Health Authority, Northwest Tuscany, Italy. E-mail: nicola.artico@uslnordovest.toscana.it

to relate to a care or training institution. How interesting it can be, but also contradictory and, in some cases, even perverse. Whenever someone discovers that doing things in a certain way is useful, with certain rules, within certain organisational structures, they believe they are obliged to propose that way, those rules, repeatedly in the future. They think that those contexts are so important that they must continue to exist even after their death, and so institutions are born. Of these, the best known and most important are those for care and training. However, as the students pointed out, nothing is neutral even in those contexts and nothing can be taken for granted. Not least, they reminded us of how, 'in the corridors' of their training school, very interesting things are often said and heard. This happens less frequently, however, in the institutionally designated spaces. But, let me say this straight away, this dynamic whereby more truth can be found 'in the corridors' rather than in the places designated for debate, is also typical of many other institutions. Including the one where I have worked for over thirty years. I believe this is true also for Universities, as well as Parliament, and numerous other well-established institutions in our society.

Thus, recalling the words of Giovanni Jervis, I am firmly convinced that psychoanalysis should first and foremost be a critical exercise. Furthermore, I think this assumption should be applied - *sic et simpliciter* - to all psychology. Of every order and degree. So the first predisposition that I believe should be necessary in aspiring psychologists or psychotherapists, whatever their orientation, is curiosity. Better still if seasoned with a little irreverence towards the constituted powers, every now and then. So I really appreciated the fact that the authors did not censure themselves, and acknowledged that their unveiling was not easy to do, nor entirely without emotional effort. After all, as we know, one of the most common drives in institutions is to self-reproduce.

In this regard, years ago I found an enlightening article by Otto Kernberg, now considered a classic in its genre; the title leaves little doubt about the risks of training courses and certain relationships between colleagues: '*Thirty methods to destroy the creativity of psychoanalytic candidates*' (Kernberg, 1998). With severe irony, the great Austrian psychiatrist and psychoanalyst wrote in point 30:

'Bear in mind, when feeling doubtful about dangerous developments that may put to the test established methods to inhibit candidates' creativity, that the main goal of psychoanalytic teaching is not to help students acquire what is known, in order to develop new knowledge, but to acquire proven knowledge about psychoanalysis in order to avoid its watering down, distortion, deterioration and misuse' (Kernberg, 1998).

The article ended with an even more explicit and ironic warning:

'Always remember: when there is a spark, a fire can develop, especially when this spark appears in the middle of a dry forest: extinguish it before it is too late!' (Kernberg, 1998).

It turns out that Kernberg wrote this article shortly before taking office as president of the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA). Which, it must be said, is a point in favour of the old institution.

Another question that emerges in the pages of the colleagues can be summarised as follows: is it really possible to apply the psychoanalytic method within a Service? Or, with a slighter nuance, is it possible to be a psychoanalyst within the Service? In the text one can find some rather eloquent relational vignettes on the problem. Once again I find myself rummaging through the archives of my memory when, in the course of my first contract as a psychologist in the national health service, due to a combination of causes of little relevance here, I was placed in a multi-purpose clinic for over a year. It was also used by a dermatologist one and a half days a week. So I found myself organising my first clinical interviews sitting at an anonymous white Formica table, with a doctor's couch placed under the window, equipped with magnifying lamp. What to do? What - of all I had learned about the human mind and behaviour, about the relationships between these and the various contexts in which words, thoughts, emotions and gestures emerge - could be of any help to me? This is the challenge a psychologist has to face. Always. Especially if he accepts the mandate that the state and his community assign to him, to try to take care of its citizens psychologically. Because there is always a great risk that our training courses, still largely assigned to private organisations, will end up preparing us only for one type of user, who is similar to us, or to our friends, whom we expect to meet only in private settings, due to affluence and culture.

So I think the most valuable thing a good training course can offer us, in our field, is to bring us closer to a more accurate theory of mind, and correlative theory of technique. But above all it should strengthen our ability to understand the processes through which we acquire information and meanings. from the world and in the world. It should enrich, even though awareness, our epistemological capacity. If our teachers have left us with an 'inner pot of gold' in this sense, then we will be able to think, decline, and even invent something useful for our clients. Whatever the context, whether human or physical, in which we find ourselves operating.

Finally, I do not know what it means to 'be a psychoanalyst' within something. But if we have assimilated valid conceptual, interpretative and relational categories, I think we should be able to apply them in the most varied contexts. Even non-clinical ones. Training cannot have identity as its purpose. It should help us to be able to assist someone psychologically. Better still if we bear our own mind in mind when we act. After reading this paper, I can state that here that objective seems to me to have been fully achieved.

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