

The Interpersonal and Freudian Traditions: Convergences and Divergences

Authored by
mohammad looti

November 19, 2022

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2022). *The Interpersonal and Freudian Traditions: Convergences and Divergences*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=38532>

The traditional Freudian and interpersonal schools of psychoanalysis diverged during the psychoanalytic wars in New York in the 1940s. Each has developed from a different set of assumptions concerning the mind, especially the role of structure and the role of interaction. Recent developments in both schools in the last twenty years suggest a convergence and overlap in theory and technique. The relevant history of the divergence is examined and the work of three contemporary interpersonal writers explored in depth. That work is contrasted with contemporary developments in traditional Freudian psychoanalysis.

Freud (1930) made an observation about group and cultural life that is a subtext of this essay: "The advantage which a comparatively small cultural group offers of allowing this instinct an outlet in the form of hostility against intruders is not to be despised. It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness.... I gave this phenomenon the name of 'the narcissism of minor differences'" (p. 114).

With the benefit of hindsight, we might well apply this observation to the psychoanalytic wars in New York City in the early 1940s. What seemed to be huge differences at the time--about drives, about interaction, about structures of the mind--no longer seem so unbridgeable. Freud emphasized group cohesion as the advantageous aspect of the narcissism of minor differences, but we could equally well cite self-esteem and a lessened vulnerability to narcissistic injury. The psychoanalytic community in the 1940s was small and insecure in its professional status. Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) believe that interpersonalists and Freudians coexisted in relative peace until the influx of newly arrived Europeans fleeing the war in Germany. There is no better way to create group solidarity than to form an idealized orthodoxy and expel the deviants.¹ This, I believe, is one of the dynamics that caused Karen Horney to be expelled from the New York Psychoanalytic Institute in 1941 and led eventually to the formation of the interpersonal school as distinct from, and hostile to, the Freudian tradition.

Perhaps today we are starting to emerge from this split. Freudians have developed an interest in interaction, and interpersonalists an interest in mental structures. The Freudian tradition has until very recently for the most part ignored the interpersonal tradition. Within the Freudian tradition, change in theory and practice has evolved out of internal splits and controversies. I believe it is the Kleinians who, while retaining a strong concept of internalized structure, introduced ideas of interaction into the transference concept. This theoretical shift occurred through their formulation of projective identification and the greater attention to countertransference that this entailed. Out of this then came the development of object relations thought and theories of intersubjectivity. Currently, intersubjective practitioners are quite comfortable with such ideas as the importance of here-and-now aspects of transference, the informational value of enactments, and the mutual influence between the analytic pair, all of which have long been accepted by the interpersonal tradition.

In contrast, those in the interpersonal tradition have always read the Freudian literature and debated and reacted against that tradition. Modern interpersonal thinking is a fusion of Sullivanian thought and European psychoanalysis as mediated by Ferenczi and Thompson. What the Kleinians did in England in the 1940s and did simultaneously and independently in the United States. While the interpersonal tradition has never entirely denied a concept of internalized structure, there is to be found in the works of Mitchell (1988b) and Greenberg (1993) a move toward theories regarding more highly differentiated internalized mental structure and intrapsychic conflict that overlap with the ideas of many contemporary Freudian writers.

I hope to show here that within each tradition there is at least as much difference and dissent as there is between traditions and that, moreover, there is now considerable overlap between the traditions. On the interpersonal side, Hirsch (1996, 1998) has come to the same conclusions. We are now seeing the beginning of a real exchange of ideas. There are journals now that solicit articles from both traditions, a CD-ROM that includes journals from both, and speakers who regularly cross the divide at national meetings. However, I do not believe that these changes have filtered down to the rank and file. Talking with colleagues, participating in seminars and case presentations, I find the narcissism of minor differences very much alive. Freudians tend to see interpersonalists as "sociological," concerned only with the surface, the individual as a passive vehicle for social norms. Interpersonalists tend to see Freudians as "distant mirrors," concerned only with the depths, the individual driven by tormented desires. Each side sets up a straw man to attack. Much of what Freudians say casually about interpersonalists is based on misperception, misinformation, and very little direct knowledge of what the interpersonal tradition really stands for.

It is this problem I wish to address. I propose to show that modern interpersonal theory and the various forms of relational psychoanalysis belong as much in the "big tent" of psychoanalysis as do traditional Freudian theory and its variants. In this postmodern era, we generally agree that a unified theory is neither possible nor desirable; we are in an age of theoretical pluralism. At such times, however, there exists a tension between "lumpers" and "splitters." I tend more toward inclusiveness and common ground, but one can also argue for vigorous demarcation among theories (Richards 1999). Should we move toward unification of theory or encourage theoretical struggle among competing theories? (This is another subtext of this essay.) If psychoanalysis is to remain viable and vital into the millennium, we must ensure a flow of critical ideas among theories.

I limit myself here to certain questions of technique and experience-near phenomena of transference and resistance. I am also interested in concepts of mental structure, especially as they bear on various concepts of transference. I will not address the question of drives, which remains a major area of difference but would require an essay in itself. Nor should the present essay be considered a complete review of interpersonal thinking in these areas. After a brief historical survey, I will focus on three current interpersonal thinkers, chosen because they have written extensively, have clear ideas about the subject matter under consideration, and have

distinct and contrasting positions.

© Copyright 2008, Robert S. White

Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing

Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 49:427-454

ARABPSYCHOLOGY.COM