

Chaya Anis Abraham has shared with us her thoughts on Gabriel Sapisochin's article: "Enactment: Listening to psychic gestures" and John Steiner's response to the article.

I found the dialog between the relational psychoanalyst Sapisochin, and the Neo-Kleinian Steiner fascinating and thought provoking. Chaya has summarized the differences between the two. I want to recap some of what she has written in order to use it for my own purposes:

Sapisochin approaches enactment from a relational, two-person perspective. He defines a psychic gesture as the analysand's unconscious communication of preverbal object relations. The analyst's subjective experience of this enactment provides information which the analysand cannot communicate verbally.

Steiner agrees that the analyst's subjective experience of the enacted psychic gesture is an important source of analytic information but he differs from Sapisochin in what is being communicated. Steiner conceptualizes enactment as the result of the analysand's unconsciously maneuvering aspects of the analyst's personality into a place where he can receive projections of unwanted, split-off part-objects and phantasies from the analysand's unconscious.

As I read this dialog about the relative importance of real relationships vs. phantasy, two-person vs. one-person psychology, analytic neutrality, and the role of countertransference I find myself, like the Rabbi in 'Fiddler on The Roof', shifting my prospective as I agree first with Sapisochin and then with Steiner.

And this brings me to my point. It seems to me that a binary, either/or approach to psychic phenomena is overly restrictive. To make my point I offer a thought experiment. Sapisochin used his subjective experience of Daniel's enactment and shared with his patient his sense that at times they were disconnected. Daniel responded with a previously undisclosed revelation that recently he had fantasies that his analyst would not be there when he arrived at the session. This revelation lead to associations about Daniel's divorced father who often forgot the times he was supposed to visit. Sapisochin's interpretation resulted in exploration of an early object relationship that was previously unstated and unconsciously being re-enacted within the analysis. Measuring this piece of analytic work against Strachey's criteria I would say that this was a successful, mutative interpretation.

Now what would Steiner have said to Daniel? I can't speak for Steiner, but he indicates that he would have seen Daniel's neglectful father/analyst as a split, 'bad' object created from Daniel's inability to accept a parental pair who excluded him from their pleasurable experiences. Similarly, Daniel experienced an internal 'bad', intrusive mother whom he excluded from his relationship with his 'good' father. I can imagine that Steiner would identify his own subjective feelings as projective identifications and use them to interpret to Daniel his split, projected internal objects. I suspect that this interpretation would have an equally positive effect on the analysis.

Following Freud's concept of overdetermination and the multiplicity of symptom meaning, I suggest that psychic phenomenon can serve multiple functions and have multiple meanings. Enactment can be both the analysand's communication of unconscious preverbal object relationships as well as his projection of unwanted split-off elements into the psyche of the analyst. For me the interesting clinical question is the timing of these interpretations. I think that Sapisochin's interpretation could be made earlier because it was closer to the David's conscious mind. However, I agree with Steiner that ignoring the projective identification aspects of enactment and accepting David's conscious version of his parents misses the opportunity to explore the ways that Daniel splits his internal objects and projects these parts of himself onto others.

One final point: Chaya writes that it is important to distinguish between countertransference which originates in the unconscious of the analyst and projective identification which originates in the unconscious of the analysand. I agree with her but given the subjective ways in which the analysand's unconscious is intertwined with our own, I'm not sure that this is ever fully possible. I think the best we can do is to interpret what we feel is going on and then use the results of our interpretation as feed-back as to the correctness of our subjective understanding.

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