What Can Psychoanalysis Offer to Alleviate Toxic Polarization?

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I would like to share with you today thoughts about the difficult polarized atmosphere that analysts, analysts-in-training, and the general public – including our families, friends, and communities – are experiencing at this time. The state of the world has had many difficult moments, but the period of history that has characterized the last four years for the IPA has been unusually challenging. We have experienced both from a distance and up close the pandemic, growing socioeconomic inequities, climate catastrophe, and wars in Ukraine, Israel, Gaza, the West Bank, and also Africa where we have few members but human suffering has been extreme.

I was on a panel in Cartagena in 2023 called *What Can Psychoanalysis Offer to Alleviate Toxic Polarization?* The question was a call to explore what exactly it is that psychoanalysis has to offer on a societal level. What can we contribute that is specifically psychoanalytic? The project of making a difference continues and deepens in its importance.

The widespread presence of toxic polarization reflects the numbing and fragile state of the world and, as a microcosm of the world, the fragile state of our psychoanalytic organizations. We face the power of social media to bring both false and real facts into the mind of all who are listening. Psychoanalysts are well-prepared to recognize the necessary process of personal reflection and the need to realize the degree to which each of us who aspires to alleviate toxic polarization participates in it, consciously or unconsciously. Our own conscious and unconscious identifications can pull us into a domain in which helplessness is denied and subjective comfort is sought.

Some psychoanalysts have a concern that attention to external societal issues is necessarily political and if psychoanalysis becomes political it will lose its way. However, many recognize that we are not actually separate from the world that surrounds us; we are one with it. How we and our surround relate is variable but there is no question that the nature of that relationship informs our readiness to consider if and how toxic polarization enters our consulting rooms, our living rooms, and our organizations, i.e., our psychoanalytic minds and life experience.

In polarization, which is a current pervasive and ominous social reality, we can recognize an everyday defense: polarization is a psychic mechanism that alleviates anxiety. It constitutes splitting on an individual level and also on a large societal scale. It simplifies complex threatening realities. It is not adaptive because it is static. It resembles the paranoid-schizoid phase of individual development in which integration of difference is not possible.

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud (1930) built an argument about primary aggression based on the sadistic side of love relationships. He invoked the history of humankind to characterize the human being as “a savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien” (Freud, 1930, p. 112). Decades later Anna Freud (1982) used observations of toddlers to support the notion that aggression is a primary human trait. It emerges very early in development in ways that have no obvious goals and are not for purposes of defense. She established that the appreciation of the effect of one’s aggression on the other is a way station along a developmental line to humanization. John Alderdice emphasizes that when a person loses the capacity to recognize the harm their aggression does to another, both the “other” and the aggressor become less than human. (Alderdice, 2023, p.30)

When dehumanization becomes the petri dish for societal experience, it breeds violence. How does widespread dehumanization of the other and of the self get started? For years psychoanalysts including Heinz Kohut (1972), Ernest Wolf (1990), and David Terman (1975) have studied the related phenomena of humiliation and narcissistic rage. A deep experience of shaming or disrespect stirs a primitive wish for justice. The more devastating the humiliation, the more violent the retributive response.

Clearly, intervening in violent cultures of human experience is not for the faint of heart. But, what we have to offer is a unique professional ability to listen well, to hold different and sometimes opposing thoughts/feelings at the same time, and to listen to others and to ourselves without judgement. In the challenging case of toxic polarization, I want to consider how we can manage what we hear and what sort of communication has a constructive impact on those who are listening or telling their story.

I will describe a psychoanalytically informed method that rests on psychoanalytic clinical theory but focuses on groups rather than dyads and on psycho-historical large group conflict as it continues in the present. It engages the potential for dialogue to bridge difference and enhance tolerance for it. The method I have in mind is used by a group called IDI which stands for International Dialogue Initiative. IDI was founded by Vamik Volkan, recently led by Gerard Fromm, and since the Fall of 2024 led by Donna Elmendorf and Bijan Khajehpour. They are psychoanalytic thinkers who have deep experience in the field of toxic polarization and intractable conflict. They use dialogue to inform resolution of international conflict.

IDI is a small group that is interdisciplinary and international. Its members are psychoanalysts, diplomats, political scientists, lawyers, historians, and economists from a range of nationalities, generations, and ethnic groups. They focus on the psycho-historical origins of conflict and the possibility of gaining perspective on unmanageable feelings through exploring case examples of traumatic residues. (Shapiro, 2023, p.255) The work of Vamik Volkan (2006; 2020) on the organizing dynamics of large groups is in the background. It offers the insight that each large group has an identity that is created through the transmission of narratives, symbols and the residue of chosen traumas and glories. The members of large groups show through painful affects and subtle cues how they were shaped by the ethnicity, religion, customs, and multigenerational history of their group.

The IDI meets several times per year. The members engage in dialogue with one another about a presentation of conflict. They discuss how the presentation affects each of them as well as those described in the presentation. A dialectic develops in which the IDI group becomes an immediate participant in the complexity of a traumatic situation but with enough remove to think and reflect constructively on how multigenerational trauma has been experienced and transmitted. The outcome resembles the experience within the consulting room of a new and deep understanding of a complex conflict, enactment, or unconscious dynamic. The complexity of the issues is experienced, understood, and engenders a deep respect for multilayered traumatic experience and the importance of finding words for it.

To illustrate the vitality of IDI work I will borrow a vignette that Ed Shapiro (2023) includes in a chapter in the recent book edited by Vamik Volkan, Regine Scholz, and Gerard Fromm called: *We Don't Speak of Fear: Large-Group Identity, Societal Conflict and Collective Trauma*. The vignette is about a meeting of the IDI group which began with a general discussion of Germany's bearing the burden of guilt and responsibility of WWII. During the discussion a group member spoke about a Polish woman who had risked her life and saved the lives of many others by functioning as a spy during the war. She was in

Britain after the war, and she requested a passport. It was denied. She was later murdered in a British hotel. The story suggested that the burden of guilt for war atrocities was not simply Germany's.

A case presentation followed in which a young Polish psychologist described a group intervention she had initiated to encourage what she termed "reflective citizenship." She invited Polish citizens to explore the controversial topic of whether aspects of WWII Nazi atrocities "belonged" to Poland. The IDI group inquired how the presenter's social commitment related to her own life. Reluctant at first to speak about her own past, she wept as she described her experience of her family's postwar survival and how the terrible things that had happened were never discussed. Her grandmother had given her a book, however, which she treasured, and which contained detailed stories about the soap that was made from the fat of Jewish corpses. Her mother never spoke with her about the war, but her grandmother did. The stories she told were frightening and the films shown at school were horrifying. She woke up screaming at night. No one in the family helped her with her feelings. The presenter recounted that her sense of commitment to social issues had emerged when she had her own children. When she described how she now watched *only* romantic comedy movies, an IDI member inquired what would allow her to watch movies with war images again. She answered: "I might be able to do it if some others watched them with me and held my hand" (Shapiro, 2023, p. 257). The IDI group was moved, as was I on reading the case report, and they returned to their discussion of the shared guilt of war with a deeper awareness of the limits of categorical thinking.

The aspects of the IDI work that intrigue me most are the power of storytelling and the containing potential of dialogue. Personal stories present feelings in immediate terms. When the stories are heard in a way that one's hand is held, figuratively speaking, the feelings that were, in the story, horrifying become, in the telling and the listening, more manageable. What draws many of us to psychoanalysis is the privilege of experiencing the emotional history of another and through the process realizing more too about our own conscious and unconscious story. If we dispense with categories like victim and perpetrator and recognize the complex roots of despair on both sides of the polarization, we have a chance of opening a space for challenging but constructive dialogue. It is dialogue in which both sides feel heard that opens the door to collaborative thinking and creative solutions.

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