

# **SOME POPULAR MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT PSYCHOANALYSIS<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

Today, we dwell upon the fact that, in 1910, Sigmund Freud took the initiative to start a global organization for psychoanalysis, now called IPA: the International Psychoanalytical Association. As a short introduction, I will sketch the historical situation of that time. Then, I will proceed with the main topic of this presentation, discussing some of the persistent misconceptions that exist today, even in people who are not antagonistic to psychoanalysis. I trust that you understand that in my limited time, I can only briefly touch upon some, and that I have to simplify, loosely using and switching between terms like ‘theory’ and ‘practice’.

The start of the IPA was a rather unlucky event and a misjudged situation. This is well documented, everybody can find the facts in the history books. For a better understanding, it is important to look at some of the circumstances in that year and what preceded it. Among other things, Freud was afraid that psychoanalysis would be considered a ‘Jewish’ enterprise by the outside world, and he was convinced that a ‘Gentile’ colleague had to be the prime representative. In those days, relationships with Jung were still good, he was considered by Freud to be his successor, son and heir. So he was the one who had to be the first president of this international organization. In 1909, Freud had visited the United States together with Jung and Ferenczi, where he had been invited to give lectures at Clark University. He experienced this as the first international recognition of his work. He later wrote: “At that time I was only

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<sup>1</sup> *Paper to an audience in Vilnius, 26 February 2010, on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the International Psychoanalytical Association*

fifty-three. I felt young and healthy, and my short visit to the new world encouraged my self-respect in every way. In Europe I felt as though I were despised; but over there I found myself received by the foremost men as an equal. As I stepped on to the platform at Worcester to deliver my *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* [1910a] it seemed like the realization of some incredible day-dream: psycho-analysis was no longer a product of delusion, it had become a valuable part of reality”.<sup>2</sup>

Back home, he and Jung had time to prepare the second international congress, held in Nuremberg, in the last two days of March 1910. Freud thought it was the right moment to have an organization that was broader than only local psychoanalytic societies, and he asked his Hungarian colleague Ferenczi to propose the international organization at that congress. However, Freud’s colleagues from the first hour in Vienna felt treated wrongfully and: “There was at once a storm of protest. In his speech, he (Ferenczi) had made some very derogatory remarks about the quality of Viennese analysts and suggested that the Centre of the future organization could only be Zurich, with Jung as President”.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, he had made some other suggestions that had felt as degrading. Freud did everything to calm down the opponents. In a long letter some days later, he wrote to Ferenczi that he felt that both of them were to blame for not realizing the effect of the proposals on the Viennese, and somewhat further on he said: “With the Nuremberg Reichstag closes the childhood of our movement; that is my impression. I now hope for a rich and fair time of youth”.<sup>4</sup>

This youth is now long past, and the IPA gradually expanded over the years. In 1911, there were a hundred members, in 1950, eight hundred, in 1980, 5000, and in the year 2000, there were somewhat more than 10.000 members. Currently, the IPA is an organization with 70 component or local organizations in 33 countries and a total of 12.000 members. For people who follow the global warming statistics and its graphic representations, this is the normal ‘hockey stick’ representing enormous growth in the second half of the former century.

It is a well-known fact that psychoanalysis has had a tremendous influence on our way of thinking about man. No cultured person will deny this. It has formed not only our ways of conceiving psychopathology, comprehending the workings of the mind, treating patients and understanding group dynamics and processes, institutions and even political conflicts. It has informed in many ways also many varieties of present-day psychotherapy and invaded all domains of reflection upon relationships with ourselves, our children, and our society. Some of its notions have pervaded common language, people easily say something like “I did this unconsciously”, or use other expressions that

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<sup>2</sup> *SE 20*, p.52

<sup>3</sup> *Jones II*, p.76

<sup>4</sup> *Jones II*, p.78,79

originally were introduced clinically. Moreover, psychoanalysis has proved to be of use in shaping and modifying theories in fields like education, literature, history, philosophy, arts, anthropology, studies in film, and so on. Modern life in general is unthinkable without the insights gained by psychoanalytic discovery, a discovery which has to be considered as one of the great achievements in history.

## **Popular misunderstandings**

Having said that it is impossible to discard the influence of psychoanalysis in all fields of our living and thinking, it is true also that the history of psychoanalysis shows varying degrees of positive and negative reception over the years. This is not uncommon in the arrival of revolutionary ideas. You see it not only in science with theories that break new ground, - Darwin is an excellent example -, but also in all of the branches of real creativity. Think of Picasso, who in his early days was considered a terrible Andalusian monster, or Strawinsky, whose *Sacre*, now considered by many as the Big Bang in modern music, enraged an audience feeling insulted. Psychoanalysis, demonstrating how much we are determined by unconscious processes, undermined the idea that we are master in our own house, and this has been and still is a severe blow to man's self esteem. So, should we be happy with such a message and knowledge? No, most people do not want to hear it. Furthermore, as is suggested some time ago, we still have to deal with another blow, also inflicted by Freud. The more we know about the mechanisms of splitting, the more we have to acknowledge that man is not even master in the conscious part of his house.<sup>5</sup>

These insights are extremely difficult to accept and digest. On top of that, psychoanalysis as a body of knowledge has a major disadvantage, regarding the understanding and acceptance of its basic tenets. This handicap is connected with the fact that it deals with psychic facts that you cannot see or touch, which is very different from data and discoveries in most of the natural sciences, for example, in medicine or in something like geology. So, the understandable objection is: 'you are talking about the unconscious, but where is it?' Interested people acquire some understanding of psychoanalysis by reading or hearing about it, and this, of course, can give a fair idea to the inquisitive and sensitive mind. But only very few people of the total world population have been able to personally feel what psychoanalysis is all about. They have, either as patients, or

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<sup>5</sup> Alexander Moser in *IPA News Magazine* Vol. 12(2), December 2003, p.21: "the worst scoundrels in the history of the world are in fact not lunatics from psychiatric hospitals but masters of splitting".

as professionals for whom a personal analysis is mandatory in their training, experienced a psychoanalytic treatment by themselves. Under the circumstances of this thorough investigation of the personal blueprint, and the ways this has its consequences in the present, psychoanalytical notions and insights come to life, and can produce the convincing truth and value one can attach to them. I have heard many patients saying: “how on earth can I tell others what I have gone through”, realizing that the full impact of what happens in an analysis is in fact impossible to communicate to someone without that experience.

Psychoanalysts in earlier periods have, in my view, made the error to call their opponents victims of defense mechanisms, supposing that what they saw as evident had to be clear to everyone and needed no further explanation. This might be true from a psychoanalytical viewpoint. Nevertheless, a dogmatic attitude by the profession in the past, combined with the fact that written words in books ideally have to become experientially understood in a personal analysis, and also combined with the fact that psychoanalysis is not selling ‘The Glad News’ and that much mental work is needed to be able to accept its core notions, all these have contributed to a situation in which misunderstandings can flourish. Even people with a favorable mind towards psychoanalysis are easily led to feel entrapped by misinformation, and I would like to ask your attention to some examples. I am going to speak about such ideas as: 1) nothing has changed in psychoanalysis since Freud; 2) psychoanalysis is old fashioned, connected with a Victorian era and too slow for the digital era we now live in; 3) psychoanalysis is only digging into the past and of no use for our life in the present; 4) psychoanalysis is fostering dependency and you get out of control over your own life; 5) a psychoanalysis is only for healthy people or for the really mad ones.

### ***In psychoanalysis nothing has changed since Freud***

It is a persistent misunderstanding that psychoanalysis did not develop since Freud, and it is often said out of malicious intent or sheer ignorance. As if it is not, like every science, constantly moving, changing and developing, both in its theories, as well as in its practice. I suppose that every educated person has his or her own version of Freud, formed as it is by knowledge, but also by transferences, distortions and projections that shape that internal image. He is a historical figure and there not only has been a time that he was despised. After having gained world fame, he was also collectively idealized, but quite recently, when denigrating was fashionable, we have seen again the so-called Freud-bashing. We need not be blind to Freud’s deficiencies and weaknesses to acknowledge his greatness in relation to truth, and what is important here: his courage in changing his views when he discovered new facts. So there is no

‘monolithic’ Freud, but a man collecting data and during his lifetime permanently developing new ideas. The enormous creative output is to be found in the English Standard Edition of his works, which consists of twenty-four volumes, apart from all the books with his letters. Do his words still have value for us today and are his books the Bible for psychoanalysts? Yes, they still have value, but not all, and they are not the ultimate truth in psychoanalysis. Almost every sentence of his has been scrutinized and placed in the ongoing development of his own work, but both during and after his lifetime there have been many new theories, some refining his ideas and some at variance with them. The situation at this moment is one of pluralism and divergence, there are many psychoanalytic theories from a variety of perspectives. I will sketch two areas of theory and practice where you can see best the difference between current psychoanalysis and that of seventy or ninety years ago.

Psychoanalysis is a science and an art, it is a craftsmanship based on observation and a body of knowledge. Freud strived for a psychoanalysis with the same scientific status as the natural sciences. He thought that the observer, the analyst, did not influence the study of his object, the patient, which even in those days was already a debatable premise in the natural sciences. He suggested that the psychoanalyst should assume the attitude of a surgeon, not emotionally involved in his work, and only performing the operation skillfully and correctly. One of the consequences of this was the prescription, that feelings of the analyst should not play a role in the treatment. The whole complex of his reactions, summarized under the term countertransferences, had to be suppressed.

From the fifties on, there has been a growing realization that it is impossible to do this, and even more, that these reactions of the analyst can give valuable information about what unconsciously is going on in the patient. Since then, psychoanalytic theories have given much more attention to the analyst’s part in the analytic process, and it is understood that there is an intricate transference-countertransference complex at work during treatment. The so-called one-person-psychology, solely concentrating on the patient, has changed into a two-person-psychology in which the analyst is acknowledged as a participant-observer and no longer as the observer possessing the truth about the patient. All of the new theories give much more weight to the relationship between patient and analyst than before and even have made this the central vantage point. You can probably imagine that this has led not only to a wealth of new information about what is going on in the analyst and how this influences the treatment, but also to a dramatic change of ‘climate’ in the sessions and of the behavior of the analyst.

Another big difference, compared with Freud’s time, is connected with his idea that psychoanalysis could not learn from the other sciences. Psychoanalysis had its own unique field of observation and data gathering, and its discoveries could be useful to the other sciences. This might have been true for many years,

and it is abundantly clear that other sciences have made use of psychoanalytic insights, but this has led eventually also to a scientific isolation that has lost its tenability. Modern psychoanalysis is informed by all sorts of new knowledge, not only from the inside but also from the outside, and I will try and explain this in a few words.

Compared with a century ago, we now have much more knowledge about infant development and what goes on in the first few years of life, based on day to day observation and studies in the social sciences. Insight into primitive mental development has grown tremendously, and already in the sixties and seventies, new theories emerged inside psychoanalysis about early pathology. This has led to the so-called widening scope, meaning that patients in the narcissistic range could be treated by psychoanalysis, something which was unthinkable in Freud's time. A very recent development, for example, is attachment theory, bridging the gap between general psychology and psychoanalytic thinking, which is originally based on a biological and ethological basis. It assumes that the survival of the infant is dependent on attachment through proximity to the caregiver. This body of knowledge, rooted in systematic observation and empirical research, has grown rapidly over the past twenty years, and has proven to be attractive to many analysts. The neurosciences are another field of relevant research, and there have been recent discoveries, for example, concerning memory that gave new insights into the workings of the brain and the mind. Psychoanalysis as a science of the mind cannot ignore these facts, although some brain imaging techniques and the resulting knowledge are just supporting analytical knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

### *Psychoanalysis is old fashioned and too slow for the digital era*

It is a widespread opinion that psychoanalytic practice with its daily sessions and a treatment duration of many years has outlived the recent revolution in the information technology, and that in a digital era we need other forms of treatment, adapted to modern times. Recently, I found a survey stating that in the United States, children between 8 and 18 years spend seven and a half hours per day watching TV, playing video games and using their mobile phones.<sup>7</sup> Computer use outside school amounts to one and a half hour per day and 'reading' has become less 'popular'. These figures are impressive, but what are the consequences? Will people change as a result of these new developments, and in what ways? The call for shorter therapies is not new and not connected to the digital era. Some of these opinions are combined with the

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<sup>6</sup> What Freud got right. *Newsweek*, November 11, 2002, p.54.

<sup>7</sup> *Time*, February 1, 2010, p.7.

idea that psychoanalysis is an invention of a Victorian civilization with all sorts of sexual inhibitions causing neurosis, and that we, especially after the so-called sexual revolution of the sixties, are free of taboos and no longer suffer these ailments. Hysteria, for example, is seen as an affection of a bygone era and only to be found in some very remote places on earth. Maybe for the old-fashioned types of problems psychoanalysis was a right answer, but with modern complaints we need modern answers, and they have to fit the speed of living and the use of current means of communication.

At this moment, I can only answer this type of thinking with two observations. The first one is that many people think that men and women have changed so much over the past decades, compared with earlier times. Is this a true assumption? I do not think so. People are driven by all variations and intensities of love and hate, compassion and envy, joy and sorrow, revenge and reparation, and all these elements and many more you encounter daily in yourself and in the people around you. You can find these also in written history, from the Greek tragedies till the latest novels in the bookshop. However, what we see these days is that people seeking psychoanalytic treatment present symptoms, complaints and inner psychic structures that we consider as much more disturbed and primitive than the patients treated in the early days of analysis. Probably people with problems that are easier to treat have found their way to other forms of psychotherapy, or otherwise they will be referred by analysts to other forms of treatment, because of the unfavorable balance between investment and prospective profit from analysis. We now encounter much more conditions based on pathological narcissism, and psychoanalysis has developed the insights and instruments for treating these. In my view, and I am not alone in this, it is in fact the only form of treatment with theories, a treatment setting and professional competence capable of understanding these conditions. It is inevitable that the enormous growth of alternative forms of psychotherapeutic help in the past fifty years had its impact on the practice of psychoanalysis. You must remember that, before the sixties, psychoanalysis in this respect had a monopolistic position, and that people with problems were used to go to the clergy or to people otherwise considered helpful.

The second point is that in the complaint that psychoanalysis is outdated and not in line with the digital era, many people seem to voice something else. Something which is connected with a relatively recent change in Western culture, which maybe is only partly due to the new information technologies, and probably more due to a recent increase in prosperity in many countries. There is a general feeling that the centuries-old ideal of self-knowledge is abandoned, and that there is a certain reluctance to introspection, combined with an increasing materialistic way of living in which earning a lot of money and becoming famous for many young people seem to be new ideals for which to strive. In history, this is not a completely new trend, even writers in Roman times complained that the new generations disregarded old and enduring values.

It is probably true that what psychoanalysis stands for, values like freedom of thinking and feeling, seeking truth and the imperative of ‘Know Thyself’, are rooted in a culture in which a ‘Bildungs’- ideal was dominant. (This German word is difficult to translate, it refers to education, knowledge and personal development.) This indeed means being out of step in a world in which access to all sorts of data is quick and easy and everything seems so much more directed towards the outside than to the inside. For many people, prompt gratification, which has to be gained instantaneously and via the quick path with immediate profit, is much more attractive than the long and difficult way with an unpredictable outcome. This is at least one of the ways in which the problems of psychoanalysis in the present West are explained, but it probably is only one of the many determinant sources. Moreover, society these days is asking for easy to understand ‘evidence-based medicine’, and governments, wishing to control everything, are pressing towards working according to simplified protocols. Psychoanalysis has difficulties in answering these outside pressures, which in many ways are contrary to a psychoanalytic way of thinking and practice. Efforts are made to find out how to cope with them without losing analytic specificity, identity and integrity.

### ***Psychoanalysis is only digging into the past and useless for the present***

Many people think that psychoanalysis is only about the past. You dig into your personal history as if you are opening a can of worms, and when they come out they will make you miserable. All this has no relevance for your personal life in the present. Isn't it better just to forget the past and live towards the future?

In this idea, we encounter a mix of interesting misconceptions about the workings of the mind, about time, and about how psychoanalysis works. When a patient visits us for the first time, the first question is always what his or her problems are now. A second question will be when these problems or complaints or symptoms started. Some people can answer this, others cannot, only to discover something later on. It is true that psychoanalysis is based upon developmental thinking, meaning that problems in the present do not appear out of the blue, but have a history in personal development. We thoroughly investigate before starting a treatment what kind of background and personal history the patient brings with him. And after having assessed the pathology, the personal capacities, the opportunities in reality for a psychoanalytic treatment, and the elements in the patient and the couple for working together, only after having formed a picture of this as best as possible will we advise for or against a psychoanalysis.

In this treatment, working along the lines of the patient's free association, we automatically are drawn into earlier times. As an example: becoming conscious of how a man behaves towards his wife, he may detect that her special way of saying something reminds him of how his mother used to speak to him, and that he remembers how as a boy he got irritated and felt threatened. In this way, the present and the past at that moment in the session become interconnected. Usually also some fantasy about the future emerges, for example, in the wish to behave otherwise towards his wife because he feels to have been unjust to her. Now you see that in fact all three time modalities: past, present and future appear in the treatment. This occurs not only on a conscious level, but also in an emotional experientially way in the relationship with the analyst. In this treatment relationship, we encounter the red line and the sustaining ground through treatment: the transference-countertransference complex in which patients stage their early history in the actual contact with the analyst. This reveals the unconscious infantile blueprint which, although present from the beginning, gradually emerges, and which characteristics are usually exemplary for the way people also feel and behave in relationships with others in the present. As a general rule, the present can be understood only partially without the past. We even have to say that the past is always and to the slightest detail active in the present, which is a knowledge to become evident in every single case only after much hard and usually painful work. In most cases having the past at your disposition on a conscious level offers opportunities for change in the here-and-now, which is one of the therapeutic aims of psychoanalysis. A childhood revisited and recreated as an essential element of this treatment can open new ways of development, and will contribute to richer, more creative and more satisfying living.

### ***Psychoanalysis is fostering dependency***

Many people think that in psychoanalysis you become dependent and have no more direction over your own life. Just because of the intensity of the treatment, the attachment to the analyst and the regression to past stages in life will cause you to lose your balance, even to the point where you are not able to take important decisions.

Yes, there is a certain dependency, and the analyst is obliged to behave in specific ways to secure the autonomy of the patient. This, among other things, is put down in the Code of Ethics, which formulates many principles that are intimately connected with psychoanalytic technique. I mention some of these: treatment is voluntary and the patient can leave when he or she wishes; respecting the confidentiality of the patient's information and documents; fees and financial arrangements shall be fully disclosed and agreed to by the patient

prior to analysis commencing; business dealings between psychoanalysts and their patients must not take place; the analyst shall not participate in or facilitate the violation of any individual's basic human rights, as defined by the UN Declaration of Human Rights; a psychoanalyst's professional position, authority or confidential information shall not be used to coerce patients, or to generate profit, or benefit to the psychoanalyst or any third party. A psychoanalyst shall neither solicit nor have sexual relations with a patient or candidate who is under the psychoanalyst's treatment or supervision. This code states rules about maintaining skills, honesty, professional integrity, and much more. In case of violation, there is a disciplinary jurisdiction and punishment. These regulations are set up to safeguard the setting and the rights of patients under treatment. There are, however, other considerations connected with worries about dependency, and one of these is the following.

For many, the great fear behind this idea is that it is a dependency which is not in the service of growth and development, as it has been experienced in the past. It easily brings back the world of the child, controlled and dominated by others without due respect to the child's needs, wishes and rightful expectations, and with a lack of empathy for what is going on in the child. In optimum conditions, the child's inevitable dependency is a vehicle for learning and development and caregivers have to behave according to this. Most of the time they do so, but, even with all possible benevolent intentions, they inevitably in many ways also fail to do so, and it is understandable that fears exist that this will happen again in an analysis. This would mean that the treatment is expected to be a repetition of old traumatic situations, and that dependency is not leading to the benefit of the patient. You have to consider analytic dependency in this light: in the service of acquiring new ways of living and coping with problems, in a way resuming development at the point where things went wrong. For most people living by the false idea that everything can be conscious, it might seem quite incomprehensible or paradoxical that it is possible to function on two levels, the one in normal life, like everybody and behaving as an independent adult, the other - while being in analysis - in a mental state where the unconscious can operate alongside consciousness and in a state of relative dependency. It resembles living in the past and the present at the same time, being the one who is experiencing all sorts of feeling states and also capable of reflecting on them. It might be that this is hard to imagine, it nevertheless describes analytic reality.

***A psychoanalysis is only for the healthy or the really mad ones***

Much ignorance exists about for whom a psychoanalysis can be of help. This is a question of indications and counterindications, and it is in fact a field of

knowledge in its own, beset with all sorts of assessments and estimations. Most psychoanalytic patients are, seen from the outside, quite normal people: they have jobs, sometimes very responsible jobs, families and friends, and they live a decent life. But there is something inside, let us say a deep unhappiness and an inability to live and enjoy life, which causes them to seek treatment. They can be seriously depressed, anxious, or controlling, have feelings of being the target of bad intentions of others, experience themselves as living behind a glass wall, or feel very unsatisfied with themselves. You will find all of the symptoms and disorders in the diagnostic manuals. Coming back to the question about the past and the present, they are in fact imprisoned in the past without knowing it, and in a way they still live in the past which is for them the present.

The popular belief is that when you are able to be in analysis, and at the same time just live your normal life, then in fact you need no analysis, because you are too healthy for it. When you can be on the couch for four or five times a week and after 45 or 50 minutes are able to walk away and resume your daily work, your complaints must be minimal. And yes, these patients indeed are healthy enough to tolerate the hardships and the suffering they encounter in analysis, but, at the same time, they are disturbed enough to invest so much emotionally and in terms of time and money to do this. This being disturbed enough nowadays has much to do with what I have mentioned earlier: pathology of the personality without many overt symptoms. In the earlier days of psychoanalysis, patients presented symptoms, and when the symptoms had disappeared they just left treatment and were cured. But with new insights, especially on narcissism and splitting, we see and treat patients who, in fact, need a cure for pathology which is rooted in early infancy with its effects on the total personality. So the overall answer to the idea that a psychoanalytic patient is either healthy or mad must be that it is a matter of balance. The suffering usually is immense and real, and on the other hand there must be enough health to be able to profit from a psychoanalysis. You have to believe me that this general answer can be specified in detail, and that the decision to enter treatment is based upon a mutual agreement between patient and analyst, both reaching the conclusion that a psychoanalysis is the treatment of choice at that moment in the patient's life.

With these considerations, I close my talk on some popular misunderstandings about psychoanalysis. I sincerely hope that I have given you some information and insight in the objections and themes mentioned. I assume that had you been really convinced of the truth of these misunderstandings, you would have spent your time elsewhere this afternoon. Thank you for your presence and attention.