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FORUM

OPACITY

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Abstract: In this piece, the author attempts to establish connections between a clinical situation and certain ideas of Bion and Freud that could be called informal, as they are not mentioned in published scientific works, but rather in supervision in the case of Bion, and in Freud's correspondence. The author believes that we find in these 'informal' materials a rich source which has hardly been exploited and which shows similarities in the way both Bion and Freud work in terms of humility and intuitive sense of truth.

*This passion of our kind
For the process of finding out
Is a fact one can hardly doubt,
But I would rejoice in it more
If I knew more clearly what
We wanted the knowledge for,
Felt certain still that the mind
Is free to know or not.*

W. H. Auden

Some people are simply unsuited for analysis, said Freud. I don't know whether you have ever examined protozoa under the microscope. Some animals are completely transparent; others are opaque, even though they only consist of a single cell like the others: they have too much pigment in them. Some people are like that too, and one cannot see through them (Wortis, 1954: 55).

My purpose in addressing this sensitive issue, which raises various passions, is not to enter polemical discussions on the question of the ‘analyzability’ of an individual, but rather to consider the phenomenon of opacity from the ‘suggestion’ of Freud, an idea I consider exciting and helpful for reflection.¹ I believe that the mental state that I shall call opacity is a common occurrence in the consulting room and can be perceived through the intuition of the analyst. I shall consider opacity as a function (Bion, 1970) of the personality, and suggest that the task of the analytical couple is to see which factors are working in conjunction in order to make this emotional impoverishment dominate the field. Bion (1970) also suggested that manifestations of hatred can take the form of mindlessness, sexualization and degrees of stupor. This last one could have a kinship with the opacity suggested by Freud.

In terms of factors that hamper the analysis of an individual, we find in Freud’s correspondence valuable and extensive material which is worthy of serious consideration. Freud does not refrain from offering his sincere opinion on this subject, and his perception that psychoanalysis is not for everyone is clear. Even with all the developments in the theory and technique of psychoanalysis, I believe that the intuitions of Freud with his extraordinary sensibility, still remains unsurpassed.

Among several options, I tried to select a number of important extracts of Freud’s correspondence with the pioneer of the Italian psychoanalytical movement, Edoardo Weiss. I realize that with this colleague Freud felt very free to communicate his innermost thoughts. The title of this book, *Sigmund Freud as a Consultant* (1970), reflects the relationship established between them. Weiss sent a ‘complete’ report on those patients of his, about whom, with their consent, he wished to have Freud’s opinion, and they themselves paid Freud for his report. In certain cases, the patients and Dr. Weiss actually went to Vienna to meet Freud.

In 1911, Dr. Weiss recommended Dr. A. for analysis with Freud. In 1919, Weiss asked Freud if he could translate an article of his and suggested that Dr. A could help in the translation due to the depth of his knowledge of German and Italian. But when he contacted Dr. A, Weiss realized that Dr. A was in a sorry state, leading a dissolute life. He then sent a letter to Freud detailing Dr. A’s situation and asking whether Freud would accept him again for analysis. Here is Freud’s answer on October 3, 1920:

Since you are asking me today for a professional report on him, I shall not hesitate to give my opinion. I believe it is a bad case, one particularly not suitable for free

analysis. Two things are missing in him: first, a certain conflict of suffering between his ego and what his drives demand, for he is essentially very well satisfied with himself and suffers only from the antagonism of external conditions. Second, he is lacking a halfway normal character of the ego which could cooperate with the analyst. On the contrary, he will always strive to mislead the analyst, to trick him and push him aside. Both defects amount actually to one and the same, namely, the development of a fantastically narcissistic, self-satisfied ego which is inaccessible to any influence.... It is also my opinion that nothing would be gained by having him come into treatment with me or anybody else. His future may be to perish in his excesses. (Weiss 1970: 27)

When he consulted Freud on another patient, Weiss reported that the patient had an 'immoral ego', having 'betrayed many people', including his father, who had received the information from his son that the fees for the analysis were higher than they actually were, so he could pocket the difference. As Weiss had studied that Aichhorn and Federn had treated similar cases, he thought he might try. Freud's opinion was different:

The second patient, the Slovene, is obviously a scoundrel who is not worth your trouble. Our analytical art is powerless with these people, nor can our insight penetrate the dominant dynamic conditions of such cases. I do not answer him directly, I assume that you will send him away. (1970: 36)

In order for the readers not to have a 'partial impression' of the posture of Freud, I now reproduce an excerpt about an analysand of Freud, whom he refers to as L. M.:

I am very fond of her. For the time being it goes very well. Her seriousness and her intelligence are very welcome helpers. Naturally some difficulties are waiting us somewhere, but they shall not frighten us. (1970: 30)

Throughout human history, there have been numerous examples of how difficult it is for humans to give free rein in order to respect the truth. Maybe for a small number of people who come to our offices and end up submitting to the analytical experience, it is possible to

be able to closely observe the movements for and against the development of a more genuine curiosity about themselves, which for many has been buried for a long time.

Before introducing a clinical vignette, I shall mention some creative ideas of Bion (1988) communicated in a supervision held in Sao Paulo in April 1974. In this supervision, he made profound observations on the human mind. The case he had supervised was that of a young lady of 27 years-old, diagnosed as suffering from nervous anorexia, and, who, according to her analyst, felt she was living in a prison. Other information provided by the analyst will not be considered here so that we can keep to the striking ideas Bion gives us. He suggests that inside an anorexic, there is a hungry person struggling to be fed, in the same way that 'in every fat man there is a thin man inside, trying to struggle to escape'. Bion proposes that a struggle is being waged inside the individual, a struggle between what we might call sanity and insanity, birth and non-birth, etc. The person may, Bion suggests, be identified with a prison, and that release from this prison is not viable, because there is a fear of disintegration. And where does this idea of disintegration come from? In the elegant analogy that Bion makes, the chick is afraid of birth out of fear that the breaking of the egg shell which has protected it until then would mean not only the disintegration of the shell, but that of its very self. As if this disintegration was felt like a mental death in itself. In short, before being able to break free, the person is afraid of the mental death that the change from one state to another results in, leaving the alternative of being locked into anorexia, opacity, or whatever the substitute may be.

Disdain

Roland – I would hate to go to a psycho-analyst –

P.A. – And would hate it still more if you got there. 'Insignificance' is not a discovery which anyone wants to make about himself and his affairs.

Alice – Do you include his analyst in the 'affairs' of which he discovers the insignificance?

P.A. – It is part of the reality to which human beings should not be blind. Whether that discovery is achieved or not depends on the two engaged in the psycho-analytic research; they may prefer to discontinue the search before such culmination. Discovery is only transitory – on the way to another discovery. (Bion 1979: 91)

Peter is an engineer, and, despite his youth, already has reached a position of respect within his company and is one of the people his boss trusts. He coordinated the work of a number of trainees, and it was with a female intern that the ‘disturbing’ fact, which he says made him look for analysis, occurred.

The episode that took away his ‘emotional support’ and ‘produced an intense suffering’ was frustration in love. This event, not unusual in the life of a young man, is added to the fact that such frustration curiously came with the ‘break’ of a relationship that did not even exist. Peter had developed an affection for the trainee and decided to declare himself, even though she was already in a steady relationship with someone else. Although, according to his account, they had a respectful and polite conversation, the intern was perplexed and decided to change the sector where she worked, to avoid having contact with him. Since then, Peter has wanted to establish a contact with the girl so that he can apologize, but has not had the courage to approach her.

This event triggered off in his mind a huge turbulence, which did not seem proportional to the reality of the situation. It was as if his visiting card to the analysis said: ‘Although I am a grown man, I suspect that I have aspects of immature child’. At the beginning of our work, I had a chance to track the movements of Peter in the living experience of analysis. In order to observe how the contact evolves in the session, I can relegate to the background the partial information and inevitable transformations that all visiting cards contain.

Peter – Today the whole day was very painful for me. The office is full of competition between people, to see who knows most. My boss told me off because I had done something he thought was wrong, just for those who ... I can’t allow myself to make mistakes! [Emphatically].

Analyst – Maybe you hate it when you see that you are human, and, like any human being, capable of mistakes, errors.

P. – Yes. ... (After a few minutes of silence) There has been cost containment in the office and they want me to travel by Gol Airline Company. Think of me flying by Gol. It’s not for me! [With sarcasm].

P. – [After a long silence] I don’t know whether you like football, but I’m very interested in the German championship. Super cool!

A. – And did you pay attention to the remark I made?

P. – Um ... I don't remember. If you want, repeat it!

The disregard of reality and, subsequently, what I tried to say to him, seemed to be normal practice in the way he behaved, according to what I could see from our contact. If I pointed out to Peter something that I considered important for him to observe, he needed to systematically ignore my presence, and there was no reference to the fact that my speech might have touched him in some way.

The fact that the situation with the intern has been a disaster is important less because of its factual characteristic than because of the fact it shows Peter's way of exempting himself from functioning realistically. This denotes his inability to deal with his mental world, as can be seen in the extract of the session reported above. The disaster is more extensive than he can perceive and began before he believes it to have started.

On another occasion, Peter said he had received a gift from his mother: the *Aurélio* Portuguese dictionary: 'My God! I can't stand wasting time on this race.' I think that, in part, the function of his bringing me this material was to show me the extent to which he is capable of causing an impact, like a boy stamping his foot on the floor ('I exist'), then looking round for people to order to assure such a claim. Bringing the conversation to the narrow circle of the analytical session, Peter (who is actually not a child) did not seem willing to investigate any possibility (perceiving the existence of cruelty in his ways of functioning, for example), which showed poor ability to make a real reflection about himself.

Although I was still available, I began to realize that potential reverberations of a more 'permeable' mental world, in contrast to an inability to allow a beam of light to interrupt the emotional opacity we experienced, seemed a very long way from our experience. When I shared with him these feelings, his response, 'Hum, so what? Patience!' denoted little capacity of tolerating frustration and pain, leading to a diminished capability of evoking curiosity.

Near the end of our experience bitterness prevailed: the few sessions he attended were perceived by him as unhelpful. At the same time support was only felt to be available through self-help books, which he increasingly read and finally he 'sensed' there was no room available for analysis.

Notes

¹ The source is actually indirect, as it is from an analysand who states that Freud had said this to him. After each session Joseph Wortis went to a café, where he noted everything he could remember about the sessions.

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