Beyond Plurality - The IPA Committee on Conceptual Integration: Werner Bohleber, Peter Fonagy, Juan Pablo Jimenez, Dominique Scarfone, Sverre Varvin, and Samuel Zysman

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For me, attending an international congress where presenters approach differing versions of concepts that are seemingly familiar to me is a continual stretch. First I must listen, then I must attempt to understand, and then compare what I think I understand with what I think myself. Needless to say, doing this with many presentations over the four days of the congress was an intellectual and emotional feast. I am therefore grateful to have discovered a model for approaching my listening and comparing. Creating such a model and using a concept to demonstrate was the focus of this committee. The work they presented was a summary of four years of research and collaboration.

This committee on conceptual integration has created a method for analyzing psychoanalytic concepts across psychoanalytic theories. The steps of this methodological model are:

1. The history of the concept, which included a literature review;
2. The phenomenology or how it presents clinically;
3. A methodological analysis of the construction of the concept;
4. The main dimensions of the various meanings of the concept so as to compare different versions of the concept;
5. A determination if the various meanings of the concept can be integrated.

In an IJP article (June, 2013) the committee used the concept of enactment to elaborate their methods of comparison. At the IPA congress in Prague, the committee, minus Fonagy and Varvin, used the methodology to analyze the concept of unconscious phantasy (fantasy).

In both instances, the committee used the model to explore psychoanalytic concepts that are used and understood very differently from theorists and clinicians of different viewpoints. They asked themselves if integration of these very different versions of the concepts was possible.

Samuel Zysman gave a detailed history of the concept, tracing the idea of unconscious phantasy from Freud through Klein to Bromberg. The areas examined consisted of the nature of
unconscious phantasy: whether it is derived from the instinct or from developmental experience, and whether the concept was in fact about something that was previously present or continually evolving within the relationship of the analytic dyad.

Dominique Scarfone wondered, “Whether the these differing conceptualizations of unconscious fantasy belong to the same conceptual “family…. or whether differences in meaning, context, and construction of psychic reality make integration impossible.” He attempted to put together a developmental chart that explored the “origins” of unconscious phantasy from intrauterine to now. Clearly what one believes about the origin will affect one’s technique when working with a patient. I also think the committee raised really important questions about whether or not being an “eclectic” clinician is theoretically “best practice”.

What is the clinical evidence for this concept? Juan Pablo Jimenez discussed how the concept presents in clinical practice. He reported the committee’s review of the literature supporting clinical evidence of the concept of unconscious phantasy, noting that practically all classical texts take for granted that the concept describes a phenomenon “that emerges in the analyst’s mind.” The phenomenon is thus connected to projective identification and is discovered in the countertransference of the analyst. However, it is more than identification or introjection. The analyst plays an active roll, creating a mental image of her patient, according to Paula Heimann. In the clinical hour, it is the chaos of the unknown that that demands that patient and analyst together find a language to describe what has been unknown and to approach what is unknowable. It is difficult to describe the “here and now” reality of such experiences from any theoretical vantage point.

In a diagram presented by Bohleber, but agreed upon by the committee, “the versions of unconscious fantasy was [sic] placed on a continuum of the dimension reality factor.” That continuum allows us to see the Kleinians at one end of the spectrum and the Relationalist Bromberg at the other.

Phantasy as endogenously generated/total imagination

External reality/accurate representations of actual events

Isaacs  Segal  Britton  Arow  Sandler/Sandler  Ornsteins  Bromberg

The links between the inside and the outside, between biology and environment, between unconscious and conscious and what one believes to be true, are all aspects that influence which theoretical version of a construct one chooses.
Although the panelists discussed these topics together and used the model to compare versions of the concept of psychoanalytic phantasy, each member presented a section of their own individual thoughts for the audience to consider. Their finished article will be printed in a forthcoming issue of the IJP.

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