Grounding a Critical Psychoanalysis in Frameworks of Power

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ABSTRACT. This article outlines two frameworks of power to explore the relationship between consulting room practices of psychoanalysis and societal networks of power. First, focus falls on Habermas’s view of Freudian psychoanalysis as an emancipatory practice. Despite Habermas’s problematic rationalistic interpretation of classical analysis, he may have been correct in noting that it attempts to stand in external relation to the systems of power that it seeks to address. This is a problematic grounding for critique, which may lead to idealism and authoritarianism. The second framework is an internalist Foucauldian one, which proposes that the analyst cannot avoid participation in societal power dynamics even in the consulting room. This framework is preferred, but must take account of Habermas’s charge that Foucault’s position succumbs to relativism. Following some reworking, the internalist approach is used to generate three principles for critical activity in relation to which classical and other psychoanalytic practices are examined.

KEY WORDS: critique, Foucault, Habermas, power, psychoanalysis, resistance

This article uses two frameworks of power to examine the capacity of clinical psychoanalysis to function critically in relation to societal networks of power. The first is articulated by Habermas (1972/1987), who claims that psychoanalysis is an ‘emancipatory practice’. Others offer some support for this view by highlighting the potential of psychoanalysis to challenge systems of power, subvert dominant ideologies and unsettle normative prescriptions (e.g. Berger, 2002; Rustin, 2005). But while many authors use a psychoanalytic framework to understand power, it is significant that Habermas uses a framework of power to understand psychoanalysis. Such a framework is vital to understanding the politics of psychoanalytic practice, and to avoid a reductive reading of those politics—even the politics of the analysand—as the by-products of psychoanalytic processes (Blackwell, 2003).
But Habermas is important for a second, though more problematic, reason. While he misrepresents Freudian psychoanalysis in certain respects (Craib, 1989; Steuerman, 2000), his rationale for granting it the status of critique may reflect an accurate reading of a key aspect of its practices. He values Freud’s psychoanalysis for its attempt to stand externally in relation to societal systems of power. This external stance leads Habermas, as well as classical psychoanalysis by virtue of its attempted independence of power, towards idealism and authoritarianism, and is therefore not a sound basis for critical practice.

I contrast this externalist position with an internalist, Foucauldian view of power (e.g. Falzon, 1998; Foucault, 1976/1990, 1980, 1988; Ingram, 1994) within which to consider the possibilities of critical psychoanalysis. Here, power is considered immanent in social relations and so it becomes impossible to offer critique from outside of it. However, Habermas challenges Foucault’s tendency to refuse a normative position. Thus, while I support Foucault’s view that critique must emerge from within rather than independently of power dynamics, I suggest that Falzon’s (1998) dialogical reformulations of his work can move us towards answering this challenge, and enable a more meaningful and less authoritarian view of critique than Habermas provides.

This internalist perspective has implications for understanding what goes on in the consulting room. Lothane (2003) suggests that psychoanalysts tend to separate clinical from political matters, leaving aside studies of the politics of psychoanalysis for ‘dissidents and scholars in other fields’ (p. 85); indeed, for figures such as Habermas and Foucault. But such alleged shying away belies the extent to which psychoanalysts actively participate in the shaping of political belief and action through clinical practice. Psychoanalysts might not study the politics of psychoanalysis, but they inevitably participate in them. I aim to outline what this means from an internalist perspective. As Lothane suggests, psychoanalysts are indeed political beings. This is true not merely in the general sense that all persons are political beings, but also in the more specific sense that the consulting room is one of society’s many sites in which political objectives are rehearsed, reconstructed and potentially reoriented.

For the sake of convenience I will be talking about ‘psychoanalysis’, but it is more accurate to talk in the plural about ‘psychoanalyses’. I hope not to suppress its variable manifestations, but aim instead to recognize what Frosh (1987) argues is a fundamentally shared orientation to the idea of a ‘dynamic unconscious’ (p. 2). Thus, while Habermas focused specifically on Freud, I will consider different approaches as participants in an overall strategy of analysing the unconscious. This is not to suggest that a clinical convergence underlies theoretical differences (e.g. Wallerstein, 1992). Rather, I intend to demonstrate that these theoretical differences matter, both clinically and politically.
Habermas on Power, Critique and Psychoanalysis

Habermas’s (1972/1987) vision of psychoanalysis as critique arises from his dualistic model of society. He suggests that the human interest in emancipation emerges as a product of the infiltration of instrumental or means–ends forms of reasoning, which should be reserved for our ‘technical’ management and control of natural resources, into the ‘practical’ social domain of human communication. This produces what Habermas (1988/1994) termed ‘technocratic consciousness’, involving the ‘elimination of the distinction between the practical and the technical’ (p. 200) in self-understanding and interaction. In other words, this blurring of the two primary human interests—the technical and the practical—which should be fundamentally distinct, distorts consciousness and communication so that people can no longer competently orient to practical democratic engagements without degrading them by means of instrumental or strategic rationalities. Desirable and power-free ‘communicative action’ is thereby replaced by problematic, power-infused ‘strategic action’ (Habermas, 1984).

Freud’s psychoanalysis was considered uniquely positioned to reveal both the historical and current ways in which power distorts communication (via socialization and transference, respectively) and degrades it into strategic action; to clarify how power distorts the analysand’s understanding of self and other. This revelation enables the restoration of the practical–technical distinction, thereby permitting a competent, rational, mutually respectful and consensus-seeking orientation to human interaction. In overcoming repression, says Habermas, psychoanalysis facilitates a rational appropriation of unconscious contents, and so distortions no longer impede social engagements. For Habermas, this is what it means to be emancipated from power.

This externalist view positions critique, and hence psychoanalysis, outside of power relations and their distorting effects. At the local level, this means that the psychoanalyst analyses power’s distortions of the analysand’s understanding of self and other (e.g. in transference), but without succumbing to them. Thus, Habermas politically legitimizes the idea that the analysand’s manifest material is distorted and should not be taken at face value. The analyst questions and stands apart from these distorted knowledges; does not allow them primacy in the determination of meaning; and does not take sides on emerging issues. In Habermas’s scheme, side-taking and collusion with client knowledges converts the analyst from an emancipatory to a strategic partner, who thereby reproduces rather than resolves the problem of power. But in taking this external position, for instance via neutrality and a rule of abstinence, the analyst attempts to stand outside of—and not take sides in relation to—the societal power relations in which the client exists. The distorted consciousness and communications of the client mean that Habermas need not expect the analytic encounter to operate along the lines of communicative action—at least not in its early stages—and it need not approximate...
an ideal speech situation. But, and this is theoretically vital, it cannot be a form of strategic action.

A problem arises, then, as Habermas (1974, 1984) acknowledges the power difference of the analytic relationship itself. If power distorts communication, and also operates within analysis, then is psychoanalysis not an example of strategic action rather than emancipation? Habermas’s solution was to argue that some forms of power are more legitimate than others. The psychoanalyst’s exercise of power is thus reconstructed as the power of ‘therapeutic critique’ (Habermas, 1984, p. 21), the legitimacy of which rests both on its orientation to future—rather than within-session—communicative action, and on the consensual nature of the psychoanalytic relationship, in the form of the analysand’s prior consent (Giddens, 1982). It is therefore distinct from the power of strategic action.

This view of therapeutic critique as a legitimate exercise of power undermines Habermas’s insistence that critique is not a form of power but orients against it. We now have power not only distorting communication (i.e. strategic action) but also clarifying it (i.e. critical action, such as psychoanalysis). This broadening of power into critical action—and Habermas was to later concede power’s immanence in social interaction (Ingram, 1994)—is important because critique is now seen as internal to power’s operations. Emancipatory practices cannot challenge power per se, because they are examples of power’s exercise. The analyst cannot stand outside of power relations, but inevitably participates in them. His or her activities become exercises of power—albeit apparently legitimate ones—within a broader system of power dynamics. The externalist perspective does not preclude the possibility that the analyst’s words are as distorted as those of the client. But if we see critique as already a form of power, we can say instead that the analyst utilizes power to produce—rather than ‘release’—critical effects.

**Towards an Internalist Vision of Critique**

A critical psychoanalysis cannot be generated from outside of power. Rather, its critical functions must be related to the nature of its participation in a ‘field of force relations’ (Foucault, 1976/1990, pp. 101–102). If power is intrinsic to human interaction, then it shapes social realities rather than distorts them, and we have no choice but to engage with it. It then makes little sense to speak (as does Habermas) of being emancipated from it. Power’s immanence does not mean that the only options open to persons are to be manipulative and exploitative, or docile and manipulated, as implied both in Habermas’s version of strategic action and in Foucault’s (e.g. 1975/1977) earlier accounts. The observation of resistances against unwanted strategies demonstrates the emptiness of a docile account of human beings (e.g. Foucault, 1976/1990, 1980). Power’s immanence simply means that one has no choice but to play
the ‘games of power’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 298), and resistance forms part of those games.

I will discuss psychoanalytic notions of resistance below, but for now I wish to highlight the relationship between resistance and critique presented in Foucault’s later work. Foucault (e.g. 1984/1997) noted that resistances have their origins in a ‘No’—a refusal of some action or knowledge. But this refusal carries with it, implicitly or explicitly, developed or fragmented, an alternative set of knowledges. These resisting knowledges, which may be ‘naïve … low-ranking … unqualified … particular, local’ (p. 82; such as those of the patient), or more erudite ‘blocs of historical knowledge’, form the foundations of critique: ‘It is through the re-appearance of these … disqualified notions … that criticism performs its work’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 82). Thus, Habermas’s externalist vision can be contrasted with Foucault’s (1980) belief that critique emerges from resistances which ‘are formed right at the point where relations of power might be exercised’ (p. 142). For Habermas, resistances are not legitimate until they have been clarified by independent critical activity, whereas for Foucault they are already the kernel of critical activity. Here, resistance is still strategic action; not a distortion requiring interpretation, but an already legitimate practice that challenges, from within, the realities that power aims to produce. Critique, then, is a strategic and committed, rather than external and independent, practice, the momentum of which comes from those who are intimately invested in the shape of these realities, rather than from externally situated critical theorists.

However, Habermas points to the relativist underpinnings of the internalist position and challenges Foucault’s refusal to take up a normative stance. How do critical practitioners decide on which resistances to support in the first place? On the one hand, the attempt to clarify this matter from an externalist position—for example, with the critical psychoanalyst deciding on what counts as legitimate resistance—leans towards an exercise in government rather than critique. But this authoritarianism does not diminish the importance of Habermas’s charge that the failure to differentially and independently justify critical practices leads to relativism. We might counter by noting Foucault’s distinction between shifting power dynamics and the more fixed state of domination; a demarcation of ‘better’ and ‘worse’ interactions. But this distinction does not take us very far, considering that domination—where resistance is impossible—is rather uncharacteristic of modern power relations.

Habermas’s insistence on some ethical standard is useful here, as is his partial orientation to rationalities and intentions. His communicative action includes an interest in fair procedures and an investment in having space, and granting space to the other, to articulate opinions in an unhindered manner. A distinction can therefore be made between communicative rationalities, which are attainable, and pure communicative action, which is not. Habermas’s implication is that persons should think of each other or their interactions not in strategic terms, but rather in ways that afford a respectful airing of perspectives. In this respect, he points to something important, not developed by Foucault.
Falzon (1998) refines Foucault’s views in a way that might answer Habermas’s challenge, by absorbing this intentional feature of interaction. He promotes the notion of dialogical power relations, partly to allow Foucault’s work to make a positive contribution to political dynamics, rather than only to deconstruction. While acknowledging that Foucault’s work is not usually associated with dialogue, Falzon suggests that his views on power and resistance be reconstructed in dialogical terms. Thus, in a relational ‘dialogue of forces’ (Falzon, 1998, p. 43), discursive participants can cooperatively ‘move’ forces around, in line with their intention to respect, hear and discover the other. Falzon suggests that this respectful orientation enables a more dynamic than static power relation, and allows resistance to inform and possibly alter the relationship without being neutralized and incorporated into its existing power arrangements.

With Falzon’s elaboration, the interactive gold standard in Habermas’s theory of the power-free, consensus-oriented ideal speech situation is given a Foucauldian—though not Foucault’s—equivalent: an interaction of dialogical force relations in which consensus is not a condition for mutual respect, and in which disagreements can be aired and respected but without the requirement of convergence. The other is allowed to remain other and is not captured in one’s own discourses, which is the risk of Habermas’s consensus requirement. Dialogical engagement, albeit with idealized communicative intent, enables discovery of something about the other’s positions and perspectives that might be foreclosed by the internal adoption of a strategic attitude to disputes—even as strategic action continues to be in evidence. Thus, what I take from Habermas here is not the degree to which one approximates an ideal speech situation, which according to his idealism can to some extent be measured from the outside, but the intention to achieve something like it, which can only be appreciated on the inside.

It should be noted that while Habermas’s views on psychoanalysis were somewhat idealistic, Foucault’s views were more mixed and would eventually approach antagonism (Dolar, 1998; Whitebook, 1999). Briefly, we can note that he (e.g. Foucault, 1976/1990) challenged the ‘repressive hypothesis’ and the idea of the unconscious because they prioritize what power prevents, but ignore their own products. However, Foucault’s negative reaction against the classical understanding of the unconscious as a repressive force must be treated with caution, because it is not the only formulation of the unconscious available (to be discussed below). His later hostility to psychoanalysis need not stand in the way of examining certain developments within that field from an internalist perspective.

Towards a Critical Psychoanalysis

From the above, we can discern three overlapping functions for a critical psychoanalysis. First, if critique is to be relevant to the resistances that arise
in the context of power dynamics, it needs to respect the local knowledges associated with those resistances. Can the features of a dialogical power relation be detected within psychoanalytic practice? Second, if a critical psychoanalysis utilizes power to achieve critical effects, it must make plain its commitments—those avenues into which its use of power is directed. And third, if resistances are internal to systems of power, and if the landscape of power relations shifts over time and place, then the critical psychoanalyst needs to demonstrate a reflexive responsivity to the range of resistances he or she will inevitably encounter. In the discussions that follow, I will outline psychoanalytic practices that approach fulfilment of these tasks, and contrast these with practices that seem to aim at the kind of independence valued by Habermas.

But before doing so, I wish to clarify my use of the term ‘resistance’, as it occupies so central a place in this discussion. The resistances to which Habermas (1972/1987) referred, following Freud, seem to differ from those promoted by Foucault (1980) in his call for an ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’ (p. 81). In the former case, resistance is an intimately personal and intrapsychic phenomenon: the de-linguistification or removal from language of certain personal experiences and associated obstruction of the psychoanalytic process. But in the case of Foucault, resistance typically refers to a defiance, refusal or subversion of certain cultural, economic and institutional technologies of power (the ‘No’), and to the promotion of local ways of knowing about the self and the world which have been silenced or marginalized by these techniques (i.e. the development of alternative discourses emerging out of the ‘No’).

However, the distinction between psychoanalytic and political resistance is not so clear-cut. Certainly, some things known as resistance in psychoanalysis—due to the tendency to name anything impeding analysis as resistance—may not have the interpersonal element of refusal, and so there may be some conceptual slippage here. But I suggest that many intrapsychic resistances carry an implicit or explicit element of interpersonal refusal. If the personal is always political and the political always personal, there can be no definitive distinction between resistances against ‘macro’ or ‘micro’ techniques of power. Consider a client’s refusal of some analytic interpretation, on the one hand, and a woman’s refusal to be dominated by sexist practices in her home situation, on the other. In both cases we note: (1) a ‘No’ or a refusal; (2) a range of knowledges available to construct that refusal, many of which may be inconsistent with a particular analyst’s framework; and (3) a confluence of personal (micro) and political (macro) situations.

The intrapsychic aspects of resistance on which the analyst might focus also have both interpersonal and political correlates. For example, the analysand’s refusal may be seen to reflect a transference process, but at the same time allude to an alternative view of what is going on between himself and the analyst, and a questioning of authority in general. The woman’s
Refusal in her domestic situation may reflect anger at her father’s dominance during her socialization, as she simultaneously reacts against patriarchy and perhaps identifies with feminist positions. The resistances highlighted by psychoanalysis must inevitably have political implications, while political discontent must have intrapsychic correlates (e.g. Frosh, 1987; Rustin, 2005). The critical issue is how seriously the analyst can orient to the interpersonal and political aspects of the client’s conduct.

Resistance is both a micro and a macro practice; it is both personal and political. It can only occur in a local site—where else could it occur if not somewhere local?—and yet as it is put into narrative it becomes invested with meanings that link it up with broader discourses that interact strategically with each other at societal level to define social and institutional reality. In its initial moments it has power as its point of reference, as it refuses it. Indeed, we first recognize resistance—and, for that matter, the power to which it refers—through a ‘No’. It is here, argues Falzon (1998), that ‘the other or otherness makes itself felt, as that which does not just conform to the categories one imposes on it, but also eludes them, goes beyond them, and is able to affect one in turn’ (p. 45). But for Falzon, respecting the other requires more than hearing the refusal. Refusal is merely ‘the minimal form of resistance’ (Foucault, 1984/1997, p. 168). Part of the function of the critical practitioner is to respect resistance by facilitating the elaboration of knowledges associated with it. Resistance can usher in alternative discourses, through the gaps created by the refusal of existing knowledge or by calling forth forgotten ideas and practices from personal or cultural histories (e.g. as prioritized in White and Epston’s [1990] narrative therapy; and as alluded to by psychoanalyst Hoffman [1983/1994]). Resistance is simultaneously a refusal of what is and an implicit or explicit proposal of something else.

I will now examine the possibilities of a critical psychoanalysis with these points in mind.

Respecting Resistance

The analyst’s treatment of analysand resistances matters because resistance is a political phenomenon in three major respects. First, there is the risk that the local analytic relationship might involve impositions of meaning and failure to respect the positions of the other. This is a question about the kind of truth the analyst is after: is it an a priori psychoanalytic truth—an already constructed, externally based truth—or is it the truth of the analysand’s experience—an emergent, internal truth? These are not precisely the same thing. Second, the analyst’s engagements with resistance will say something about his or her capacity to hear—and not just interpret—critiques of him- or herself and of psychoanalysis. And third, the discursive shaping of resistances, whether in the language of the analyst or the analysand, contributes to the analysand’s political participation outside of the consulting room. The shape
of the analysand’s analytically developed narrative inevitably links it up with some culturally available discourse as it is distanced from or undermines others. I will focus on resistance within analysis, before considering the bearing of psychoanalysis on clients’ engagements with power outside of the consulting room.

The idea of resistance being related to ‘force’ is common in psychoanalysis (Freud, 1912/1962a; Greenson, 1994), but in terms of an intrapsychic rather than interpersonal field of power relations. Classical formulations tend to facilitate the reconstruction of interpersonal forces between analyst and analysand as internal forces, now lying within rather than between participants. Common ideas of transference perhaps exemplify this best. Here, interpersonal dynamics are obscured from view as the patient’s responses are seen as profoundly personal rather than interactional: as repetitions of past experiences that reveal ‘the kernel of [the patient’s] intimate life history’ (Freud, 1926/1962b, p. 141); as the enactment of ‘unconscious fantasy’ and a ‘disguised communication from the unconscious’ (Auld, Hyman, & Rudzinski, 2005, pp. 136–137); or, as Greenson (1994) puts it, as a ‘resistance to memory’ (p. 183) giving us ‘clues to what is warded off’ (p. 182) within the patient’s psyche. Such formulations undermine the integrity of the manifest contents of the analysand’s speech and create a rationale for the replacement of dialogical-communicative reflection (on what might be going on between analyst and analysand) with self-reflection. This is consistent with the externalist position of critique, and with Habermas’s vision of psychoanalysis. The problem is that the reconstruction of interpersonal dissent so that it points to something else entirely—in relation to which the analyst seems to have played no constitutive role—effectively masks the relationship between resistance and the power dynamics of a strategic interpersonal engagement.

But Freud (1937/1963) argued that ‘in some rare cases’ resistance indicates ‘legitimate dissent’ (p. 262), and advised that careful observation of analysand responses to resisted interpretations might facilitate clarity. The effect of this distinction, though, is similar to that of the difference between ‘real’ and transference responses, as promoted in classical psychoanalysis: it is ultimately left to the individual analyst to decide on what counts as justifiable dissent (e.g. Auld et al., 2005). Though distinct from the classical view, the Kleinian (e.g. Klein, 1952) analyst’s self-perception as a permanent transference figure—the ongoing receptacle of the client’s phantasies uninterrupted by the realities of the interpersonal situation—arguably creates even less room for a dialogical respecting and legitimization of interpersonal dissent.

However, other versions of psychoanalysis understand the interaction rather differently, with important consequences for understanding resistance. The Lacanian analyst, for instance, considers the relationship to be thoroughly infused with—and not independent of—cultural forces. Here, the person is seen as a decentred subject who is not a container of the unconscious. Rather, the unconscious is intersubjective or ‘transindividual’ (Lacan, 1977),
an essentially linguistic repository of cultural values that can nevertheless be
given symbolic structure by individuals. Culture enters into the consulting
room. Lacan goes on to specify: the interaction is anchored in, and must make
reference to—although it can question—the culturally authoritative signifier
of the ‘name of the father’ (e.g. 1977). It follows that to situate resistance in
some self-contained client process, attribute or intention is to mislocate it.
Resistance is always bound up with and given structure by the symbolic (lin-
guistic) realm, which feeds into the analytic encounter from the wider socie-
tal structure. It exists in the context of power relationships organized not by
the analyst—although they might be directed at that figure—but more funda-
mentally by cultural forces. The analyst’s role in this context is not to chal-
lenge or overcome these resistances, or to impose knowledge on them, which
in any case, along with imaginary identifications, furthers resistance. Rather,
she or he ‘plays dead’ and avoids suggestion, in order to promote free associ-
ation and uncertainty.

Lacan’s view of analysis as a culturally infused phenomenon is worth men-
tioning here, as it deviates from the attempted independence of the classical
perspective. But the Lacanian analyst who ‘plays dead’ cannot engage dia-
logically with the client’s dissent. Certainly, such reciprocity is not the aim of
Lacanian (or other) forms of psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, this radical non-
intervention, reflecting a belief that the relationship is based more on signi-
fiers than on actual social participants, undermines the analyst’s capacity
for—and perhaps even interest in—hearing and responding to the analysand’s
explicit and implicit critiques of their local power dynamic.

However, the local power dynamic is addressed more overtly in the interper-
sonal, communicative versions of psychoanalysis—associated with the work of
such figures as Ferenczi (e.g. 1933/2000; see also Dupont, 1988), Balint (1968),
Little (1951) and Langs (see Smith, 1991). In different ways, these authors bring
forward a conceptualization of the unconscious that enables analysts to situate
resistances within interpersonal power dynamics. There is an emphasis on
‘unconscious perception’ (Smith, 1991), in which the unconscious does not
merely conceal and deceive, but is a source of rich and nuanced observations
about the world. This in turn alters the meaning of transference (some reject the
concept altogether) and changes possibilities for the analytic encounter. A col-
laborative, ‘here-and-now’ approach is taken, and transference is seen as an
‘intensified slice of life, rather than a distortion of the present by complex phan-
tasies about which only the analyst had expert knowledge’ (Bateman & Holmes,
1995, p. 45). For example, Hoffman (1983/1994) argues that transference reac-
tions often contain astute observations by the client of rich and nuanced observations
about the world. This means, significantly, that the analyst’s behaviour does not simply facilitate
the revelation of the analysand’s unconscious dynamics, but also produces
responses. Ferenczi (as cited in Dupont, 1988) brings this out most clearly, rea-
soning that the analysand’s politeness causes him or her to avoid commenting on
the classical analyst’s disinterested, distant interpersonal conduct, and to seek the
cause of the latter’s odd manner ‘in himself or in the quality of the material he has communicated to us’ (p. 1). But in such a situation, says Ferenczi, the analysand’s unconscious perception conveys a critique of the analyst: ‘You don’t believe me! You don’t take seriously what I tell you!’ (Dupont, 1988, p. 1). Ferenczi (1933/2000) advises analysts to listen to such critiques inherent in the local knowledge of the analysand: ‘You will hear much that is instructive’ (p. 167). The point made by Ferenczi (1933/2000), Balint (1968), Little (1951), Langs (as cited in Dupont, 1988) and others is that an analysand’s resistances—those points at which an objection or refusal arises—can be seen not merely as pointers to intrapsychic processes, but as simultaneously referring to the analyst’s conduct or the dynamics of the analytic situation itself.

Clearly, there is a capacity within psychoanalysis to recognize resistances as internal features of the power relations in which they arise. Some respond to this recognition by engaging more actively and disclosing their counter-transference responses in the analysis, thereby granting the analysand room to ascertain their meaning for him or her (Smith, 1991). But problems remain. There is still considerable interpretation involved within an imbalanced encounter, and so the analyst’s disclosures might carry more interactive force than the client’s perceptions. There is also the associated risk of identification with the analyst. As transference develops, the analyst might thereby step into a knowing position, and thus undermine analysis. This issue will be discussed below, but the point here is that psychoanalysis need not use the concept of the unconscious to perpetually doubt the analysand’s manifest knowledges, but can use it to legitimize, clarify and develop the analysand’s meanings: to ‘loosen their tongues’, as Ferenczi (1933/2000, p. 167) put it. An ideal speech situation cannot be approximated and power cannot be removed from the relationship. But it is possible for the analyst to use his or her intentions to respect and hear the analysand as having something different and valuable to say in order to make possible the dialogical interplay of force relations to which Falzon (1998) refers: in Habermas’s (e.g. 1974) terms, to adopt a more communicative than instrumental rationality, although within the context of an inescapably strategic situation. For example, the classically fixed roles of analyst and analysand are relaxed somewhat (in Ferenczi’s case, sometimes even reversed) and the analyst not only allows him- or herself to be affected by the client’s knowledge, but also communicates this impact back into the relationship. Perhaps here psychoanalysis is not a fixed, external technology standing over resistance, but is shaped into the task of understanding the relationship between local power operations and analysand experiences.

What of psychoanalysis’ facilitation of critical activity outside of the consulting room? After all, this was what Habermas (1984) was interested in when he noted that the communicative benefits of psychoanalysis would be realized only after analysis had finished. This question concerns the client’s challenging of power operations lying external to the analytic relationship, but which enter into the ‘discussion’: the woman who discusses her intimidation by men;
the man who does not want to take medication; the woman who is concerned about the destruction of the rainforests. Let us consider this last case to clarify the issues involved.

The woman concerned about the rainforests is an example briefly described by Bateman and Holmes (1995). In this case, the analyst interprets her concerns as a defensive acting out of an internal conflict. He notes that the client’s mother died recently, and that the client cut herself and attempted suicide. According to Bateman and Holmes:

… the analyst acknowledged her environmental concerns but stated that he believed her preoccupation with them in the session was an avoidance of her sense of personal devastation following the loss of her mother, which made her feel like cutting herself down and killing herself. (p. 169, italics added)

This example is interesting for the explicit juxtaposing of an overt political position and intrapsychic processes. What is significant, however, is that the interpretation does not in any way support the client’s face-value concerns. Instead, it suggests that she has misunderstood her interest in the rainforests: the unconscious conceals her true experience. The phrase ‘cutting herself down’ rhetorically strengthens the association between the client’s self-harm and her interest in the environment. It deepens and concretizes the interpretation itself, by constructing her observable behaviour as an expression of internal dynamics. But the two features—political interest and intrapsychic process—are not evenly managed. They are not presented as genuinely co-existing possibilities, and so it seems that the client must choose: reject the interpretation in order to remain faithful to an environmental concern for which much of the world’s scientific community would commend her; or accept the interpretation and see the environment—though ‘acknowledged’ by the analyst—as merely a stand-in, a symbol, for her internal experiences. The person–politics relationship established within the interpretation undermines the validity of the political and reifies the personal by making the former a by-product of the latter.

Perhaps surprisingly, a similar unevenness is demonstrated in the interpersonal and communicative forms of analysis discussed above. The notion of unconscious perception is not systematically applied to patients’ perceptions of concerns that lie outside of the consulting room. While the analysand is deemed capable of making astute observations about extra-analytic interpersonal situations, Smith (1991) maintains that their expression within analysis must be seen as referring to analysis itself. Thus, analysands’ discussions of environment themes in analysis ‘almost always unconsciously depict the state of the therapeutic frame’ (Smith, 1991, p. 202). This reductionism is unfortunate and politically significant. While the analysand’s meanings are shifted from the intrapsychic to the interpersonal domain, they can go no further. It might be argued, for instance, that the client’s environmental concerns refer to the analyst’s fear that he cannot contain her self-destruction, but their
potential to develop into a critique of some extra-therapeutic reality is curtailed. Meaning is once more reduced as one boundary (the intrapsychic) is merely replaced by another (the local interpersonal).

If the intensity of the analytic encounter makes it possible for the client to notice—even unconsciously—the analyst’s ideas, problems, prejudices and so on, then the intensity of that person’s involvement with the external world must enable valid recognition of ideas, practices, prejudices and problems in that broader domain. It is surely reasonable to suggest that the woman concerned with the rainforest has indeed perceived something important and problematic about the world. And while this recognition might parallel her personal distress as well as her experience of the analyst, it need not be reduced to either of these. Such symmetry between internal and external experience need not be resolved by the either/or thinking associated with the proposal of linear causal links between these domains. Surely, in other words, it is possible to ‘loosen the tongue’ of the client on such issues. Opportunities for such exploration appear in abundance if we consider that the client’s discontent on any number of issues—including questions of identity, gender, authority, family, relationships, childrearing and so on—plays directly or indirectly into relations and institutions of power beyond the consulting room. These emergent explorations need not exactly replace analysis of intrapsychic or interpersonal phenomena, but can certainly deepen and be deepened by them. It may therefore be possible for the analyst to permit an ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’, in which respect is afforded the analysand’s experiences of and insights into the world of power relations that lie outside of the consulting room.

In order to do so, however, analysts need to be aware of their own positions on the political issues involved. This moves us to the second task of a critical psychoanalysis.

Taking a Stand

In a society constituted as a ‘field of force relations’ (Foucault, 1976/1990, pp. 101–102) one must either take a position on certain political issues, or be invested with positions indirectly from alternate sources. Indeed, one can interpret the range of strategic forms psychoanalysis has taken—from, for instance, the homophobic, sexually prescriptive practices that dominated its practices during the 20th century, to the increasingly popular pluralist and non-prescriptive forms—as telling us less about psychoanalysis itself than about its flexible capacity to become integrated into any number of culturally available strategies of power. Foucault (1976/1990) showed that truth can be used to support a variety of strategies: even expert discourses can have strategic or ‘tactical polyvalence’ (p. 100). And so while a psychoanalytic practice attempting to position itself—as per Habermas—externally in relation to power systems will inevitably have political effects, these effects are likely to
be indeterminate and unpredictable in the context of society’s strategic heterogeneity. Psychoanalysis can be attached to any number of political strategies made available to it; it can be integrated into diverse political agendas.

For instance, the practices of analysts convinced that ‘homosexuality’ is associated with pathology (e.g. Bergeret, 2002; Socarides, 1996) align with broader movements that marginalize or exclude persons so categorized; and activities of analysts who are committed to the disqualification of this idea (e.g. Domenici & Lesser, 1995; Frosh, 1997) become directly or indirectly aligned with corresponding cultural strategies. The analyst does take sides in the consulting room, even as at the same time—and on both sides—the strategic nature of these practices is concealed as they are constructed in terms of the quest for apolitical, non-strategic personal ‘truths’ about the analysand. But what is striking is that such side-taking is frequently seen to be ‘un-psychoanalytic’. The analyst is supposed to suspend pre-judgement. Thus, it seems there is typically a non-declaration of strategic interests supporting analysts’ actions. Indeed, some who object to the pathologization of homosexuality give the impression of lacking political commitments in this regard. Here, there may be a reliance on scientific and ‘proper’ psychoanalytic methods to reveal the truth. For example, some highlight methodological problems associated with psychoanalysis’ pathologization of particular forms of sexuality (e.g. Frosh, 1997; Meyers, 1999; West, 1977). But this surely is a risky business. There appears in some cases to be a reliance on scientific psychoanalytic methods to tell a particular truth about gay and lesbian sexualities. What guarantee do we have that science, or psychoanalysis, will tell the truth we feel—at this moment—is the ‘correct’ one? (It should be noted that some psychoanalysts appear to resolve this problem by simply pathologizing everything, including all forms of sexuality [e.g. Chodorow, 1992])

The problem with a reliance on independent methods to tell the truth, which can then be delivered into the consulting room (e.g. Bateman & Holmes, 1995), is that scientific knowledges can only speak into specific historical and cultural contexts; they are themselves given shape by the relations of power in which they are inextricably bound. So, the issue of today is not that psychoanalysis—even a scientific psychoanalysis—can or cannot tell us who is mad and who is not, but that in pluralist and tolerant societies it is not considered appropriate even to ask, let alone attempt to answer in any systematic way, certain questions whose very posing is imbued with connotations of intolerance or discrimination. For instance, homosexuality per se—and it is in principle obviously the same with any culturally constructed form of sexuality, heterosexual or otherwise—is no longer pathologized in ‘correct’ analytic circles. This is not because science and psychoanalysis have uncovered its real status. Rather, it seems more likely that scientists in general, and psychoanalysts in particular, know that this is no longer a legitimate question to ask. Thus, while discrimination against self-identified gay and lesbian persons continues to be a culturally available political strategy, it is increasingly
deemed an illegitimate—and in some cases illegal (Twomey, 2003)—strategy for the analyst to adopt. Nevertheless, it should be noted, exclusionary and divisive psychoanalytic practices continue to be sustained (e.g. Bergeret, 2002) by their normative ‘homing’ within discriminatory discourses and practices that remain available in the broader culture.

The commitment to a pure psychoanalysis obscures the manner in which psychoanalysis is invested with particular political strategies that are not inherently its own. The psychoanalyst cannot practise independently of these strategies. In some cases the attachment to truth seems to belie an undeclared a priori commitment to certain ways of thinking about and acting towards (for example) persons of a range of sexual orientations (e.g. in anti-homophobic ways). This is not psychoanalysis guiding the analyst, but the analyst’s undeclared strategic utilization of psychoanalysis. To take an earlier example, the analyst of the woman interested in saving the rainforests both conceals and reveals his undeclared utilization of psychoanalysis to promote internalizing discourses and (perhaps unwittingly) challenge the validity of ecological commitment in that case. How many other environmental advocates might be found to be acting out some internal conflict? What implications would this have for the ecology movement? This is not to suggest that this analyst is against environmental concerns per se, or even that he has a singular perspective on these issues, but that his actions nevertheless enter into a strategy by which those concerns are undermined. He thereby participates in political action in a non-transparent manner. Such political intervention (e.g. the non-pathologization of homosexuality; the promotion of internalizing discourses; the condemnation of child abuse; even the idea of analytic neutrality) in the consulting room inevitably participates in the shaping and reproduction of much broader cultural strategies. These cultural strategies are thereby incrementally reinforced in their opposition to other (e.g. homophobic, systemic, abusive or constructionist, respectively) discourses and practices that circulate in the culture. But it is disingenuous to suggest that certain commitments that have been seemingly legitimized and removed from the domain of opinion (e.g. by scientific findings) move us towards a practice that is increasingly grounded in external truths, and is thus not strategic in nature. An analyst’s recognition of his or her internal location with respect to relations of power requires a strategic commitment to the development of specific but in many ways predetermined, culturally specific and politically salient versions of truth.

Such declaration of strategic interests can take many forms, and—as discussed with regard to competing views on sexuality—may well be couched in objectivist language. To take another example, Rustin (2005) uses an object relations perspective to argue that government policies in the UK and USA are associated with a prevalence of manic defences, which at present are ‘organized around fear of enemies and the daily amplification of threats from them’ (p. 376). Rustin’s is an example of a politically strategic vision that can permeate local practices of psychoanalysis, which in turn can help clarify the
impact of ideology (as concretized, for instance, in foreign and domestic policy) on the person.

However, Rustin brings us to the necessity of a careful balancing of the first two tasks thus far proposed. I am not suggesting that the analyst’s political stance— for instance on homosexuality, foreign policy, the environment—should be imposed on the analysand. This is the risk of Rustin’s manic defences theory (not all analysands will agree with the implications of his views for foreign policy) as well as those numerous contributors on both sides of the debate on homosexuality. The facilitation of insurrected knowledges is not to be confused with political conversion under the guise of truth. But merely following the client’s narrative lead is equally problematic: we could not suggest, for instance, that the analyst help develop and legitimize the account of an abuser who ‘detects’ desire on the part of the abused and thereby justifies his abusive activity. Perhaps, however, as noted in the work of Ferenczi (1933/2000) and others, and consistent with the notion of a dialogical power relation, disclosure of one’s own position on issues emerging from the analysand’s narrative would be a useful entry into the analytic relationship.

Transparent declaration of strategic interests is vital to a critique that conceives itself as internal to—as already participating within—power relations. For instance, gay and lesbian clients may need to know from the outset, if not even before analysis, whether or not their sexuality will in itself be pathologized through psychoanalysis. These clients need to also know that there are other psychoanalysts who orient differently to the issue; that there exists a universe of positions on the issue, not only at a cultural level, but also within psychoanalysis. Similarly, can the analysand concerned about the environment be given the benefit of the analyst’s personal thoughts on the matter, at least so that any internalizing tendencies, and any clear attitude to environmentalism one way or another, can be mutually recognized as the tendencies of this analyst, and not of psychoanalysis?

This is a complex task considering that the analyst’s formal speaking position is so different from that of the analysand. One might point to the risk of identification, and to concerns that analysis is thereby reduced to a process of political conversion. But while the powerful analyst’s politics might influence, they clearly cannot do so in deterministic fashion. A position—and here I have in mind the analysand’s internalization of the analyst’s perceived stance—is never total, and the discourses in which it is constructed are never fully encapsulating. As already noted, the concept of unconscious perception (though I do not suggest this is the only view of the unconscious with critical potentials) enables a critical assessment of the analyst and of the relationship. Thus, even in the midst of significant identification and analyst suggestion, dissent or ambivalence may be discerned in the client’s presentation, and subtle references to alternative positions may be heard, even though these alternatives might not be clearly or unambiguously preferred. An analyst who interprets away the client’s concerns about the rainforest, for instance, can...
discern at least residual, fragmented or inchoate allegiances to this and other stances in the client’s presentation, even as she accepts the analyst’s interpretation. Her ‘working through’—the production into reality of the interpretive discourse—will likely be broken up by such subtle or explicit irructions. What matters, however, is how one deals with these interruptions; whether they can become part of a dialogue that encompasses clear and conscious positions as well as vague and gradually emerging unconscious positions, rather than be seen as apparent obstacles on a monological path.

Despite the uncertainty with which they might be considered, these alternative positions—and the intra-analytic identifications they relate to—point to the client’s growing awareness of a universe of identificatory possibilities. These possibilities are not immediately destroyed by interpretive activity, or via identification with the analyst, although their conscious appeal might gradually diminish. It is not merely the interpretation which has rhetorical force; the context of discursive activity that surrounds it can erode or cultivate participants’ visions of alternative possibilities. In this context, perhaps the task of a critical analyst might not be to guard against identification, but to see it as a contextually and temporally limited process located within a gradually unfolding world of positioning options. The concept of unconscious perception can press analysts to hear the client’s allusions to this larger world, which might relate to but also extend beyond intra-analytic identifications, and which may initially be only minimally represented in manifest contents or conscious intentions. Such situating of intra-analytic identifications within a consciously and unconsciously perceived universe may give way to a rich and densely populated uncertainty as the issues generated are examined. But because the analysand must live in this densely populated world of power relations, she or he might move towards finding, creating and inhabiting places within them.

Thus, while power cannot be removed from the encounter, it is possible to manage its operations in more dialogical than monological fashion. This is a dialogue not merely between analyst and analysand as self-contained entities, but also between the analysand and the multiple positions that become visible to him or her—only some of which might be invested in the analyst via transference processes. Open disclosure of political standpoints inherent in one’s work is one means for facilitating such dialogue; and it could make prior consent, which Giddens (1985) suggests might to some extent redeem Habermas’s retention of psychoanalysis as critique in the face of its internal power imbalance, a more meaningful defence of that power relation. For Habermas (e.g. 1972/1987), it is precisely the analyst’s neutrality that makes psychoanalysis critical. However, prior consent becomes problematic when such neutrality involves the analysand not knowing, since they are undeclared, the strategic orientations inherent in the analyst’s practices. Such an externalist position promotes not critique, but disavowed or denied strategism. But the analyst’s acknowledgement of strategic inclinations can at least
assure the analysand of some of the political terms and even mutually agreed limits under which consent is given.

Such willingness to step a little further beyond the communicative psychoanalytic focus on the analysand’s perceptions of the relationship might allow the analyst to respond more sensitively to changing political and cultural dynamics that matter to analysands, and thereby overcome the profession’s tendency to lag behind cultural and political developments. This brings us to the third task.

**Reflexive Responsivity**

Resistance can only be effective to the extent that it is intimately bound up with *specific* relations of power. Only in this way can it be considered a constituent part of a particular dialogue of forces; as dialogically internal to the power it refers to and opposes. But the multiplicity of power’s sites and techniques in modern Western societies yields multiple resistances, each of which is necessarily local in nature. Having argued that critique recognizes resistances internally, in the specific, local experiences and knowledges in which they arise, I now consider what this means in the context of changing relations and techniques of power. Local resistances are acutely responsive to the particular situations in which they are expressed. Any critique aiming to highlight and support resistances must be equally capable of sensitivity and situation specificity: it must be reflexively responsive to the particular power relations it seeks to address.

In the context of multiple and diverse power operations, we can distinguish between a reflexively responsive critical practice and what might be termed an ‘accidental’ critical practice. The latter refers to critique (such as that of Habermas and perhaps of classical psychoanalysis) derived from blocs of knowledge constructed prior to the specific power relations they address that aim to be independent of them, but which in particular situations *happen* to have resistance-supporting effects. The idea of discursive strategic polyvalence means that almost any institutional, professional or common-sense knowledge can be used to critical or conformist effect in certain circumstances. When it is argued that psychoanalysis is a critical practice, this cannot be what is intended. So we must ask: what capacity does the analyst have to conceptually re-align with the range of resistances she or he will encounter, so that emerging critiques are not merely accidental analytic products?

On the one hand, that person is heavily weighed down with concepts that must be subscribed to if the practice is to remain ‘psychoanalysis’: the unconscious in particular. The strategic reproduction of psychoanalytic theory and practice is its default first priority. This tendency makes it difficult for psychoanalysis to attend to resistances without first distancing itself from them, doubting them, translating them, and rendering the legitimacy of their struggles conditional upon their psychoanalytic congruence. I have suggested that
even the communicative paradigm does this. It might expand client meanings from the intrapsychic domain to the interactional analytic frame, but it confines these meanings to that limit. Thus, while resistances or refusals against the analyst can be heard and respected, when they are targeted at external matters (such as the environment) they are translated back into the already established theoretical framework. In this way, this version of psychoanalysis attempts to remain external to the power relations in which its analysands and analysts are embroiled outside of the consulting room. Such predetermined limiting of meaning seems to limit the analyst’s capacity to respond sensitively to a range of client resistances against societal or cultural forces. Psychoanalysis’ orientation to its own truths over and above political participation seems to render it strategically sluggish, lacking the dynamic reactivity and capacity for rapid self-transformation that is required for meaningful critique. Thus, while psychoanalysis can have critical effects, it tends to lag significantly behind socially emergent resistances (Blackwell, 2003; Blechner, 1995). Once again we must note that it is this seeming independence that made psychoanalysis an exemplary candidate for inclusion as critique in Habermas’s theory of human interests. But from the perspective of those seeking support in their resistances against societal power operations, it is this very feature that slows it down, makes it prone to authoritarianism and to accidental critique, and limits its ability to sensitively orient to power’s multiple and diverse manifestations.

However, a more optimistic possibility arises out of the elasticity of psychoanalysis’ concepts (Sandler, 1983). Psychoanalysis is able to speak to situations in numerous ways (as is evident in the conflicting psychoanalytic accounts on sexuality). Perhaps the shift in conceptualization from the concealing unconscious towards unconscious perception offers one possible pathway through which the analyst could become sensitively attuned to the multiple political arenas in relation to which analysands construct their experience. The expansion of this concept to take account of issues outside of consulting room, but which clients bring into it, might grant the analyst access to a range of spontaneously emergent resistances that have the potential to become critiques. This would amount to the analyst’s utilization of psychoanalysis in the context of recognition of his or her inevitable strategic situation; not in the service of psychoanalysis per se, but in the interests of challenging the diverse systems of power of which psychoanalytic practice is an internal part.

Conclusions

If the psychoanalyst is to be critical, she or he cannot achieve this in the way that Habermas intended: not by standing independently of power relations; nor by thinking the analysand deceived by the unconscious and therefore
incapable of competent communication; nor by locating his or her concerns in a self-contained, intrapsychic space. While Habermas’s rationalistic reformulation of psychoanalysis has led some to argue that he fundamentally misrepresents Freud’s project (e.g. Steuerman, 2000), his detection of its attempted independence of societal power dynamics seems more accurate. But if we accept that critique emerges from within power relations, an alternative vision of psychoanalysis may be needed. To that end I have briefly explored the possibilities of a communicatively oriented psychoanalysis. I suggest that a critical psychoanalyst needs to recognize his or her immersion in power dynamics: to engage in deliberate reflection on his or her position within them, both inside and outside of the consulting room; to see analysands as competent and perceptive communicative partners whose unconscious perceptions reveal valuable insights, both into the local relationship and into the power-infused worlds in which they live; and to avoid confining these insights to either intrapsychic or local interpersonal domains.

Psychoanalysis is important because it is probably the most powerful tool available for thickening accounts of subjectivity. Its depth orientation has the potential to allow for a thorough grounding of a client’s sense of identity in a way that integrates it fundamentally with the social and political domains. It is partly for this reason that the analyst’s political inclinations and interests should be closely examined, not in order to remove them from the encounter, but to question the extent to which they should transparently inform it. The study of the politics of psychoanalysis need not be handed over to the ‘dissidents and scholars’ whom Lothane (2003) mentions. It must also be undertaken internally, within the local and intimate places where these politics are discussed, played out and become available for re-shaping. These politics are intricately tied into the analytic relationship and call upon the analyst to consider how he or she thinks the world should or could be. Perhaps, then, it is via transparent commitment that the psychoanalyst could move a little more towards being the participant—rather than the authority figure—that Habermas ultimately wants him or her to be: not a fully communicative partner but a strategic participant with communicative intentions; not in an ideal speech situation but in a dialogical field of power relations. This might go some way towards deepening what it means for the client to give consent, and what it means for psychoanalysis to be critical.

References


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