

The experience of analysis and psychoanalytic modes of thought

by Martha Harris (1979)

edited by Meg Harris Williams

The following passages are extracted from Martha Harris' paper 'Training in observation and application of psychoanalytical concepts in personality development and interaction', published in The Tavistock Gazette 1 (1979), pp. 10-16. The paper focuses on the problem of how to properly assess and develop psychoanalytic qualities, both in students of psychoanalysis and in other related fields. It begins by outlining the history of the Tavistock training in Child Psychotherapy and its place within the Tavistock Clinic. It describes the structure and elements of the first part of the course: the Work Study Seminar; the Mother-Infant Observation Seminar; lectures on Personality Development; Theory; Written Work; the place of Personal Analysis. It concludes with a plea for developing the usefulness of psychoanalytic ideas in other professions and workplaces, and for expanding training opportunities within the psychoanalytic profession itself.

Detailed descriptions of her development of the Tavistock course may be found in Martha Harris' Collected Papers (1987 - new edition The Tavistock Model, 2011). See in particular: 'The contribution of observation of mother-infant interaction and development to the equipment of a psychoanalyst or psychoanalytic psychotherapist' (1976), 'The Tavistock training and philosophy' (1977) and 'The individual in the group: on learning to work with the psychoanalytic method' (1981).

Qualities desirable in workers in the field of human relations, and in practitioners of the analytic method

Having talked of the difficulty of assessing what candidates are like and how they are likely to develop, I would suggest that it is difficult to formulate what one is looking for when assessing suitability for work in this field, in general, as also in the narrower and more concentrated area of working with the psychoanalytic method.

I would venture to say that there are certain qualities that are essential for workers who hope to be beneficial in the field of human development: qualities (of course never absolute but present in varying degrees) which in some people may be developed through work, but which in others may be worn away in the strains prove too great. These are: a certain tolerance and kindness towards others; a fellow-

feeling for their weaknesses and vices; an eye for possibilities of growth in others and a capacity to enjoy seeing them grow; patience and perseverance. A modicum of intelligence, talent and perceptiveness are no doubt essential, but without these qualities of character do not lead anywhere in this field where brilliance without strength and kindness can be positively harmful. The kind of strength people need is probably related to tenacity in struggling with, rather than trying to bypass the more difficult and destructive aspects of one's own nature.

Anyone who is interested in human development must be concerned with studying the thrust for development, learning and enjoyment in the individual child, but also in the family and environmental conditions which allow, promote or distort that thrust. He must also be concerned with the factors within the personality which militate against it, or produce spurious growth. People vary in the extent to which their interest becomes invested in the social or organizational aspects: the interaction between children, young people and the society in which they live; or to which it becomes more narrowly focused on the exploration of the internal world and upon the unknown, unrealized aspects of the individual personality which interfere with the utilization of what is offered. The course in observation which I have described would help people to select themselves to work in the area that suits them best. Not everybody is suited for the loneliness of working with the psychoanalytic method; a paradoxical loneliness because one is also working most intimately with another person. One is attempting to bear and take a degree of responsibility for parts of the patient's personality which no-one has been able to bear before, yet having to realize that ultimately one cannot do anything to relieve him of those parts – that in the end each individual is alone and has to bear his own pain.

The experience of personal analysis

This course hopes to give students some better equipment of a type of work which must be something of an emotional adventure if it is not to remain merely an academic study of human nature. The most penetrating aid to exploring one's own emotions and motivations is a personal analysis. The analytic method is one which can enable people to come into contact with hitherto unknown, split-off or repressed parts of themselves, linked with areas of feeling which cannot be used because of the pain attendant upon them. One could view the analytic situation as one of privileged sequestration within which, presided over by the receptivity of the analyst, the patient feels sufficiently contained or held to bring, and to experience, parts of himself which no-one had been able to help him to manage before. The analyst pays attention to signs of the least communicable infantile aspects of the patient's material so that these may be projected and transferred to him, and

experienced and thought about clearly, and when introjected, may strengthen the patient's personality. In this way the patient may have a new and fuller experience of himself which, hopefully, may help him to be more imaginative and to have deeper feeling for his fellow creatures.

Wilfred Bion in his work following *Learning from Experience* (1962), most notably in *Attention and Interpretation* (1970), distinguished between having an experience of oneself ("becoming O") and learning *about* oneself ("transformations in K"). In making this distinction he is clearly drawing upon years of work within the consulting room; but also, no doubt, years of observation of candidates, analysts and teachers within psychoanalytic institutes, and noting the increasing skill with which we tend to use "learning about" to avoid the new and alarming experience of change (of becoming O) which threatens the established order.

The new experience of oneself which one has, if truly involved in the analytic process, and which a personal analysis should help one to think about as well as to undergo, can help one to become more available to having new experiences in work with people. It should enable one to be able to attend more closely and to bear the anxiety which proximity to pain, anxiety and emotionality in others tends to arouse. For Bion clearly views personality development as essentially emotional growth:

Learning depends upon the capacity for [the personality] to remain integrated and yet lose rigidity. This is the foundation of the state of mind of the individual who can retain his knowledge and experience and yet be prepared to reconstrue past experience in a manner than enables him to be responsive to a new idea. (Bion 1962, p. 93).

Container and contained are susceptible of conjunction and permeation by emotion. Thus conjoined or permeated or both, they change in a manner usually described as growth. When disjoined or denuded or emotion they diminish in vitality, that is, approximate to inanimate objects. (Bion 1962, p. 90).

For the students following the Tavistock training in observation, and who wish eventually to follow Part 2 of the course – the specific training in child psychotherapy – a personal analysis is essential. We do not require people to have a personal analysis when they begin the observation course, and it is not required at all if they do not intend to change their profession to become child psychotherapists. It hardly needs to be said that without any analysis people vary enormously in their capacity to contain and use their intellect and emotions, and in their ability to be open to receive and learn from new experiences. Yet it is rare for a worker who is deeply motivated to extend his capacity to understand and to work closely with people, not to seek some analytic experience to help him to struggle with blocks in his thinking or with difficulties in managing his feelings or lack of feelings.

The personal analysis starts on a better footing if the analysand seeks it, not as part of a training that will lead to some qualification or advancement, but in order to understand better difficulties he has come up against in himself which impede work or personal relationships. To begin analysis in order to be like others, to be part of an elite group, is the worst possible motivation - comparable to that of the child who looks for some status or possession that will make him just like the grownups. And as the child is fairly active and unintegrated in most of us under stress, nursery attitudes are bound to come to the fore in a course in which some students are in analysis and others are not: when some perhaps are waiting for an analyst to be available; when some *require* analysis in order to enter a new profession; when others are not under this strain. Difficulties arise when some students have not yet settled down to work in their analysis, and may for instance – as a substitute for achievement – be flaunting the superiority of their analytic pedigree, according to whatever the current pecking order of the analytic establishment is supposed to be.

I think that the best way of mitigating these infantile attitudes that arise in any student group in which people are in analysis, is to concentrate upon the work they present, and to treat them as adults who are expected to be responsible in their work and studies. This involves treating their presentations with the respect due to an adult colleague. Over-didactic, omniscient instruction and overstrict supervision (rather than consultation) inevitably accentuate infantile attitudes, with the tendency to encourage submission, placation, competitiveness, and fabrication of material. Alternatively – or simultaneously – they promulgate rebellious attitudes in groups who then set about discrediting the grown-ups. An attitude of self-questioning among the teachers and a readiness to reconsider accepted assumptions encourages an atmosphere of adults studying together, and makes a more interesting situation for the teachers, who may find that sometimes the more experienced have something to learn from the naïve questioning of the novice.

It is easier to create this atmosphere between teachers and students if the latter can genuinely feel that analysis is a private matter between each person and his analyst.

Who is eligible to give students an experience of personal analysis?

The immediate response to that question is: members or associate members of the British Institute of Psychoanalysis. The definition of a psychoanalyst would be: a graduate of the training of a Society which is recognized by the International Psychoanalytical Association. Currently and for some time to come, those who are eligible to analyse students of a course are likely to be trained via this well-tried and accepted route.

Yet certainly in Great Britain where there is after so many years only one Institute – in London – the demand for education in psychoanalytic attitudes and for experience of personal therapy by the psychoanalytic method is fast beginning to outstrip the resources which that Institute provides. The establishment of a national profession of Child Psychotherapy – one in which people are trained in the analytic technique and required to have an experience of personal analysis, where they are needed, and where there will be posts for them in towns far from London – is going to encourage the organization of trainings on a similar basis to the one described here in a number of different places: trainings in observation and psychoanalytical modes of thought, as well as specialization in psychoanalytical psychotherapy.

A number of the current group of child psychotherapists have later trained at the Institute of Psychoanalysis, and most of those have proceeded to work mainly with adults and in private practice. A number of other senior psychotherapists have gone on to do further work with adult patients for which they have received unofficial training and supervision from psychoanalysts. It seems timely to consider formalizing a further training in psychoanalytical psychotherapy with adults for suitable graduates of the Tavistock course in Psychoanalytical Psychotherapy with Children, Parents and Young People, in order to help psychoanalytical modes of thought travel among professional people in other parts of the country where the need is felt; but also perhaps in areas where the need will not be felt until the possibility of meeting it to some extent is already in view.

Training and experience – future developments

There are from time to time, from colleagues within the Tavistock and within the Institute of Psychoanalysis, criticisms of the greatly increased numbers in this Course, usually made with the assumption that if one cut down greatly one would be left only with the stars and would be able to develop a high quality elite profession. My experience over the years has made me extremely sceptical of that assumption, or for that matter of the aim that it implies. Membership of an elite, and quality, are not synonymous. Reliance on selection procedures, intended to be rigorous, have in the past failed to detect a number of people who turned out to be unsuitable for working closely with others in distress – who became too disturbed or too rigid as the years went on. For it is difficult to form a reliable judgement - even during training – of how students will or will not be able to continue to develop in the future. And who forms these judgements? Teachers, who in Freud's words may only “see what they have learned to see” and may have given up the struggle to remain open to a new experience.

The acquisition of experience in the field of human relations and development poses a great problem for teachers in this field: how to use one's experience to help younger people to have and to make better use of theirs, without pre-empting or curtailing their thinking, and without making up one's mind too quickly about their quality or the quality of their work. I think that the focus of attention should be on work that needs to be done, and how best to help people to do it. There is room and need for many workers in the field of human relations - for a variety of professions, or for somewhat specialized roles in different professions in which workers are required to have close contact with children or families in need of specialized attention. Psychoanalytic modes of thought have something uniquely valuable to offer to these. If we (the analytically trained) cannot find some way of sharing our thinking to make it more available, then either we are failing to make a generous use of our psychoanalytic training and need to reconsider our own premises; or the people to whom we are addressing ourselves are too impervious or too disturbed to be doing the type of work that they are doing with other people.