

Review

By Kenneth Meyer

ADVANCES IN CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOANALYTIC FIELD THEORY:

Concept and future development

Katz S.M., Cassorla R., Citivarese G., Eds. (2017)

When I wish to explore something in depth I often read two versions -- different editions of a biblical passage or two translations of the same text -- thus getting a three-dimensional view of the subject matter, as when one looks through a stereoscope at two slightly different pictures. It is with this anticipation that I approached this book describing psychoanalytic field theories, not only to learn about developments in contemporary psychoanalysis, but for what it might reflect regarding our own understandings and use of field concepts.

There is not a single approach that carries the label “psychoanalytic field theory.” This book grew out of an effort to bring together several different analytic field theories that share a “family resemblance,” and explores in depth both their commonalities and differences. As a newly emerging viewpoint within contemporary psychoanalysis, this school of thought and practice is still forming; the book is in fact the second in a series attempting to delineate the contours of what might coalesce out of these overlapping approaches. As such, several chapters recount the myriad influences, lineages and seminal papers that have led to the development of this perspective. What is striking about these accounts is how these ideas have now gone back and forth across the Atlantic, from South America, the United States and Europe, most lately Italy. The conference that these papers grew out of was a conscious effort to transcend “regional concepts.”

Several remarks of Freud’s are unearthed to point out that, while his theories are presented within the positivist paradigm of his day, Freud was aware from the beginning that the analyst’s subjectivity is an integral part of the process. Kurt Lewin is acknowledged as a major inspiration for his understanding of the importance of context and environment, as well as being a major influence on H.S. Sullivan, who is also noted as an important precursor.

For several of the presenters, however, this approach to understanding and conducting analysis begins with Madeleine and Willy Baranger and their 1961 paper, “The Analytic Situation as a Dynamic Field,” in which they introduced the idea that the analytic situation has to be considered in its totality -- that a change in any element effects not only all other elements but the organization and structure of the situation itself. It is this understanding of “field,” that accounts cannot be understood by the usual chains of cause and effect, that these papers hold in common.

However, still immersed in the drive-theory and structural approach of classical psychoanalysis, the Barangers’ emphasis on the co-dynamics of the situation was mainly by introducing the idea that “bi-personal unconscious fantasies” of each participant in the analysis influenced the other and the field itself.

Such unconscious fantasy

...cannot in any way be considered to be determined by the patient's (or the analyst's) instinctual impulses, although the impulses of both are involved in its structuring. More importantly, neither can it be considered to the sum of the two internal situations. It is something created between the two, within the unit that they form in the moment of the session, something very different from what each of them is separately.

Baranger and Baranger, 2008 (quoted on p. 123)

Thus the Barangers did not extend their concept of the field beyond the consulting room and did not consider the larger social, group and political fields. While some contributors to this volume mention other fields in passing, most still refer only to the “bi-personal field” of the analytic situation, or alternatively, the “analytic field” or the “analytic third.”

However, this concept of field does lead inevitably to an understanding that what emerges in therapy is co-created; the two concepts are intertwined. The clearest description of this, by Donnel Stern, could just as well be taken as a manifesto for the relational perspective in Gestalt therapy:

A fully interpersonal conception of treatment is a field theory. The psychoanalytic relationship, like any relationship, takes place in a field that is defined and ceaselessly redefined by its participants. ...The field is a unique creation, not a simple additive combination of individual dynamics; it is ultimately the field that determines which experiences the people who are in the process of co-creating that field can have in one another's presence.

Stern, 1997 (quoted on p. 176)

So this is not your grandfather's psychoanalysis, or to be precise, Paul Goodman's; it is only distantly related to the counterpoint that Goodman used to contrast with the Gestalt approach. But just as we have had to distinguish between our various uses (and misuses) of the field concept, this volume contains thorough and nuanced discussions of the variations among the analysts, discussions that that can shed valuable light on our own theorizing.

The same is true for our relational concepts: there are three main psychoanalytic schools of thought described, but within these are several variations that challenge us to sharpen our conceptualizing what all the “relational turn” can mean.

The most irritating aspect, for someone steeped in Gestalt psychotherapy, is still the frequent reference to the “unconscious,” and particularly to the key concept of “unconscious fantasy.”

Despite the fact the Barangers and subsequent theorists were making the point that both the analyst’s and analysand’s unconscious fantasies contribute to the dynamics of field, I found that my ears closed every time I saw that phrase. (This is not a mixed metaphor; it is a phenomenological description of my experience reading through several discussions heavy with psychoanalytic jargon!)

But then I ran across the following quote cited from an earlier work:

It would be erroneous to think that enactment acts out a fantasy existing prior to the act itself. What the analyst calls the unconscious fantasy is rather the articulation of an unsymbolized affective experience. Consequently, the illusion that the fantasy exists prior to the affective shared experience, or prior to the act itself, would belong to the phenomenology of unconscious fantasy. The concept of unconscious fantasy can thus be thought of as a metaphor....”

Bohleber et al., 2015 (quoted on p. 132)

An illusion? A metaphor? Considering this possibility, that the “unconscious” is no longer a place in a structural theory but a phase -- a not-yet-articulated felt-sense -- of an emerging gestalt, affect or action, they are perhaps describing something much closer to id-functioning than the words “unconscious fantasy” conveys to us.

Donnel Stern, again:

There is a link in psychoanalysis between the unconscious and the quality of emergence. This is not a well theorized link; in fact, it is not at all clear exactly what we are referring to when we invoke it, as indubitably as I think its existence is to most psychoanalysts. The quality of emergence is itself no better defined than the link that connects it to the unconscious.

Stern, p. 176

Embracing this new-found key to the psychoanalytic code, I re-read passages that had been opaque to me on the first reading. Descriptions of encounters did not seem as foreign to me now, particularly those that referred to modes of listening that put into relief the relative reality of the session, bringing into the foreground the metaphorical and fantasy level of the communications.

While we are quite accustomed to encouraging metaphor and evoking fantasy in our work, the description of a session as a “dreamscape” highlights the plastic nature of history and remembrance in a way that can embolden us to allow our own intuitions and fantasizing to deliberately enter the field.

It was this delineation of various “listening modes” that I found the most valuable and practical aspect of the book. There are chapters describing listening as if to a dream, or attempting to see the world through the client’s eyes, or to feel out how the client might impact an Other, or using our bodies to listen. We probably do all of these at various times, but the careful descriptions and rationales in these chapters can be a source of guidance as to which listening mode to enter and when.

In summary, this is a collection of papers that will help us be more precise about our own concepts of field theory, co-creation of the therapeutic endeavor and ways of attending to both ourselves and our clients. In the long run, its most important contribution of this family of psychoanalytic approaches will be to re-introduce us to long estranged cousins.

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