

IFPE 2022 President's Address:

Psychoanalytic Thinking and Having an Impact in a Divided World

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I want to start by telling you about a research experiment (Egyed K., Kiraly, O., Gergely C., 2013). There are two toys in front of a toddler. There is an interesting blue one and an interesting red one. An experimenter walks in and says, "Hello," and really spends time trying to connect with the toddler. He tries to attune to the toddler's experience. If the toddler seems fussy, the experimenter says, "Oh, you look worried." If the toddler smiles, the experimenter smiles back and says, "You seem happy." Once the experimenter feels like he and the toddler are connected, then the experimenter says, "Wow, look at those toys. This blue one is wonderful; I really like it! This red one, I don't like it at all — yuck!" The experimenter says goodbye and walks out. Then a second experimenter walks in and says, "Hello. Can you show me a nice toy?" And the toddler points to the blue one, indicating the child learned which one is the nice toy.

They do the experiment again with a different toddler. The adult comes in and does not focus on the toddler but instead focuses on the toys, saying, "I really like this blue toy; it is really wonderful! This red one is awful — yuck!" The first experimenter says goodbye and leaves. The second experimenter comes in and says, "Can you show me a nice toy?" The toddler looks at the toys and is not sure; most of the time, he or she does not indicate they have a preference. OK, so it appears the first child learned what a nice toy is and the second did not.

This experiment suggests that what took place is that the experimenter connected with the toddler, and the toddler felt seen by the adult: understood, thought about, etc., or what some of might call “mentalized.” This led the toddler to become invested in the experimenter’s perspective. It is through the experience of feeling seen or mentalized that led the toddler to develop trust in the adult. And as a result of the experimenter connecting with the toddler, a learning highway is opened. This has been referred to as epistemic trust. Social psychologists Gergely and Csibra have theorized that what allows the recipient, in this case a child, to learn requires relaxing our innate, natural epistemic vigilance: the instinct to be cautious about others as a way to protect ourselves.

Humans have evolved to both teach and learn new and relevant cultural information, and this information is successfully passed on when there is the development of what is called epistemic trust. Epistemic means knowledge, so trust in knowledge. Gergely and Csibra call this the *theory of natural pedagogy* (Csibra & Gergely, 2009). They say it allows knowledge to be passed on quickly, and this ultimately enables humans a short cut to new knowledge rather than having to reinvent the wheel each successive generation through trial and error learning.

This is what I want to talk about today. On what basis do we learn to trust the information coming from others is valuable and worthy of believing? And if we understand this, can it then help us in thinking about how to approach others with divergent points of view, whether this be in psychoanalysis or even politics?

Over the past few years, I have been focused on this concept of epistemic trust in a way that I had not done before. I find myself noticing this in a lot of situations. For example, I was watching a story on the news magazine show *CBS Sunday Morning* about developing healthy school lunches. The segment was about top chefs coming into a school district to develop healthier school lunches. They wanted to offer more nutritious meals than chicken nuggets and French fries with ketchup qualifying as the vegetable. But the challenge was, could they make something nutritious, within the school budget, and something the kids would be interested in eating? In this piece, they had several chefs make food for the kids. Items like hummus and celery sticks. They showed one chef talking to the kids and taking an interest in them, then introducing the food. And gosh darn, when the kids tried his food, they said things like, “Huh, pretty good. I like it.” Whereas, with the chefs who were not focused on the kids, the kids looked at the food suspiciously, and when they tried it, they said they were either indifferent or outright didn’t like it. And I thought, “Wow, there it is! There is epistemic trust in action!”

Relatedly, I think I can look at myself and see that the reason I gravitated toward analysis — and developed a preference for a certain school of analysis — is because I felt seen and understood by my analyst. I then gravitated toward psychoanalytic theories that I felt matched that experience. As a result, I felt strongly that the way my analyst was doing therapy with me was the right way to do therapy. For example, my first analyst really focused on negative transference. He would focus on how the things I struggled with were coming up in our

relationship, and that I needed to be able to confront him with my feelings, the feelings he felt I needed to keep out of my awareness when I was growing up. Therefore, when I would read psychoanalytic articles that had this theme, I would think, “Now this is a good article.” When I would read articles or listen to presentations that had no reference to negative transference being vital in the analysis, I would think, “Wow, they are missing it.” I think this is parallel to the experiment I started with. My analyst connected with me around the blue toy, so I learned the blue toy is the good toy.

Here is another example. I had one teacher who said the main point of the Dora Case was in the postscript when Freud (1905) realizes he failed to recognize the transference, and that he can now use that realization as a tool for imparting understanding to the patient. And I thought, “Fantastic, here is the origin of the work that has helped me and that is essential for psychoanalytic therapy.” But then I had another teacher who felt the most important point to take away from the Dora case was that Freud had failed to empathize with Dora. And I remember thinking, “Oh my, he is missing the most important takeaway about the Dora case.” In this situation, my experience of my own analysis predisposed me to thinking the first teacher was right and the second teacher was wrong. Maybe if my analyst focused mainly on understanding misunderstandings, and his main effort was about attuning to differences, I might have felt the second teacher was right and the first was wrong.

I think this is how we develop our psychoanalytic preferences. We observe this all the time in psychoanalytic discourse. We watch our friends and colleagues go, “Ooh, that is good,” or

“Yuck, I don’t like it.” I know I have done this. It’s the adult version of preferring the blue toy over the red toy.

We mostly talk like it’s the intellectual argument that determines whether we agree or not. We want to talk about the superior cogency of the theory we believe in. But maybe that is not why we actually believe in it. Rather, I am suggesting it is because we feel understood, or it reminds us of the kind of understanding we have received. I think we see this in politics as well.

This can be looked at as an explanation for why people don’t seem to change their minds as a result of being confronted with facts. We see people denying that the South seceded from the Union to protect slavery, or we see people who support Trump in his denial of the results of the 2020 presidential election. I am suggesting that there are powerful emotional bonds and experiences that are involved in the positions we hold.

I sit at home watching someone like Lawrence O’Donnell on MSNBC and think, “So clear, so grounded, so obvious, case closed.” Yet as we all now know, case not closed! Instead, we are deeply divided and naively expect rational arguments to change minds. At least, I am guilty of that.

I have read psychoanalytic papers explaining why people might follow a despotic leader, unconscious factors that may contribute to tyranny, etc. (Silverberg, 2020). Where I would like

to add to the dialogue is to consider what we might do in such a divided world where we seem to change very few minds.

I will begin with a couple anecdotes. Several years ago, I was asked to present an article I had written. And at this event, they asked someone from a different psychoanalytic school to be my discussant. I was a little worried about listening to what he was going to say about my work, expecting him to disagree and shoot holes in my ideas. But here is what happened instead: He spent the first 10 minutes of his presentation reviewing what I was trying to say and the points I made. I felt quite understood in that first 10 minutes, so then when he said that he had a different way of thinking about certain aspects of my paper, I was open to listening to him and learning from him. I was open to it because, in being understood, I now trusted him, and this opened a pathway to learn from him.

Most of us have been to a psychoanalytic event that devolved into an argument. This happens because the participants do not end up feeling understood by one another. And in the effort to convince someone of our own perspective and be understood, no new learning actually takes place. By learning, I mean something that alters your perspective, something that leads you to see the matter differently. I think no learning takes place because it replicates the second part of the original experiment I talked about. It's the experimenter explaining why the blue toy is better than the red toy rather than mentalizing the other to enhance trust.

In the past few years, I have been doing a lot of family therapy as an outgrowth of my training in a mentalization-based treatment perspective. As a consequence of my shift in technique, I find family therapy a fun challenge. I want to give you an example of a clinical situation that will help you understand how we might proceed in the broader and deeply divided world.

I was doing family therapy for a college-age student and his parents. The parents said they hoped they could open up communication with their son, who did not speak to them, with the exceptions of discussing the logistics of his living situation and school, and asking for money.

In the first session, the son shared that he did not speak to his parents because he did not find their responses to him helpful, and that this had been true for many years. His father then asked for examples. The son talked about the time when he was younger and got really frustrated about having lost a soccer match, and how that frustration came out in his complaints about the referee. His dad then gave him a talk about the importance of being a good sport rather than a bad loser. In response to this, instead of the dad responding to my prompting questions to try and help him understand his son (and help the son feel understood), the dad defended himself and explained why he does not feel like what he did was wrong. I eventually said to the dad, "If your goal is to have your son become more open with you and you want to have a relationship where he talks to you, you might want to consider listening and understanding him from his perspective, especially considering you are receiving this rare opportunity where he is talking to you." Well, this did not work at all! The son appreciated what I said, but to use a sports metaphor, that was not going to move the chains. My comment got

nothing but more explanation from dad as to why he was correct, and furthermore, I could see he felt picked on. So, instead, I started to empathize with his experience, how misunderstood he felt, and how unfair it felt to him because he was only trying to be a good dad who could teach his son an important life lesson. It was then that the father was able to become vulnerable and talk about how much it hurts to hear that his son is so unhappy with him. It is through this process that he started to make a space for the son's feelings and the impact that his words had on his son.

I have come to think of this situation as parallel to what Robin DiAngelo calls "white fragility." White fragility, from my perspective, is the narcissistic vulnerability liberals feel when told that their behavior or thoughts carry racist sentiment. And it's about how white people become defensive when this is brought to their attention. What I am talking about in my previous example could be called parent fragility. The father defends himself and can't listen to how the son has felt impacted by the father's words.

Yet I have a disagreement with Robin DiAngelo (DiAngelo, 2022). When I listen to her, I hear her saying something parallel to what I originally said to this father. "If you want to have a better relationship with the Black folk, you might want to stop defending and listen." In essence, she is saying, "Stop doing that, white folks. It's awful." And this is where I part with DiAngelo. I don't think this is the best way to go about helping people to change. Just like in the family therapy, my suggestion that the dad get with the program of understanding his son did not work. Now, some folks love DiAngelo and feel she really gets it, yet the people DiAngelo is supposedly

trying to reach are fragile white folks. She says that when she has been met with resistance and defensiveness, she confronts people with how defensive and resistant they are being by not accepting what she is saying (DiAngelo, 2022). We know that from a psychoanalytic perspective, telling patients that they are resisting is not helpful. Instead, we have to become curious as to why they are resisting, providing a sense of safety to explore themselves further.

In an aside, this is where white affinity groups (white people meeting with white people) can play an important role in racial justice work. This way, we avoid asking the aggrieved party to take care of the person they feel mistreated by. Otherwise, it's kind of like asking the person who got run over to first understand the driver's pain. In the same way, I did not ask the son in that moment to understand his father's pain. Rather, I did.

So, let's go back to my main point. To trust information from another person and learn from them, you have to have felt that this person gets you, that you feel mentalized by them, and that your concerns and needs are held in mind.

I do want to bring up something that happens on occasion. One of these occasions was documented in the book and the movie, "Best of Enemies." This is the true story of the head Klansman of Durham, North Carolina, having a change of heart and casting the deciding vote on a special council to integrate the local high school. What is documented is that this Klansman, who originally joins the Klan to feel a sense of belonging and purpose as a poor white man, develops a relationship with a Black woman who is the head community organizer in Durham.

Now she very much disagrees with him and publicly argues with him. But what happens is that in the course of working on this council together, they come to understand that they have similar concerns about their kids, about putting food on the table, etc. They come to see each other's humanity. And that leads him to make the socially and financially perilous choice to cast the decisive vote to integrate the high school and leave the Klan. For some, it may feel wrong to make room in their heart for a Klansman. Yet what I am trying to share with you is the mechanism that leads us to have an impact on another, the mechanism by which minds are changed.

At this point, some of you might be thinking about Steve Bannon or Ted Cruz. In no way do I expect that this approach will have an impact on all people and, in particular, I do not think it will work with people who are sociopathic or have a type of malignant narcissism where people only have value in how they can be used. Many TV hosts and politicians are experts at exploiting the worries of viewers and constituents to gain influence and power. These public figures are not looking for understanding; they are looking for power.

For this approach to work, it requires someone who has a longing to feel understood by another person. The person has to allow you to have some authentic contact with their vulnerability. The characteristic that I think can be used to assess this possibility is genuine worry. If someone can identify that they are genuinely worried about something, whatever that worry is (whether it's about having their guns taken away, that they will be replaced, that their kid will become trans, or that they'll be made to feel bad for being white), I think there is

potential. This potential is imbedded in the wish to have their fear understood. And if it does get understood, a pathway for learning can open up.

I think when I am watching CNN or MSNBC, or reading The Atlantic, I am not only soothed because I feel understood and am having my own perspective elaborated, I am living in a fantasy that facts and logic will win the day. I think to step out of my fantasy is much harder and more emotionally draining. It's difficult to empathize with those that have such radically differing views. And even when we can do that, it is oftentimes a slow slog that might not even be successful.

I think the greatest obstacle to doing this kind of work, at least for me, is that I get triggered and lose my ability to compassionately hold another person's perspective in mind when it sounds so crazy or cruel. What we need to do in these situations is lean on each other for help, so we can return to being able to understand each other and why we see the world so differently.

I am sharing this with you today because I was trying to think about possible ways to address an alternative to a civil war. Because, at times, I find myself going there and I know I am not alone in that sentiment. What gives me some hope about my perspective is that we don't need to change everyone's mind. Imagine the impact we could have if we could just change 5% of the electorate. Or even if we could just move a few more people toward having a more civil dialogue, one where we recognize our common humanity, the effort would be worth it. And

finally, I think that the scheduling committee had the idea to begin the conference with my presentation because IFPE seems to have an ethic where we try to understand one another, and that my paper is a good reminder of this perspective as we embark on our three-day community experience together.

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