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The Analytic Couch and Power

Between Tradition and Method: Examining Power Asymmetries in Contemporary Psychoanalytic Practice

With a foreword by Gabriele Cassullo

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Leuschnerstraße 40
30457 Hannover
Germany / Deutschland
info@ibidem.eu

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Summary

The couch is regarded as one of the most well-known and symbolic elements of psychoanalysis, yet its role in the therapeutic process is not without controversy. This book subjects its function within psychoanalytic treatment to critical examination and explores a possible connection to problematic therapeutic dynamics. The asymmetry inherent in psychoanalytic treatment has prompted considerable skepticism, with critical voices suggesting that patients are disadvantaged. These concerns raise questions about the potential for abuse, therapeutic malpractice, and the impact of a more rigid, theory-driven approach that may prioritize psychoanalytic tradition over the well-being of the patient. How justified are these concerns? What do the available research findings reveal about misconduct, abuse of power, and the clinical application of psychoanalytic theory? This book brings the topics of therapeutic power in psychotherapy and the psychoanalytic couch into critical dialogue.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, couch, malpractice, transgressions, power

The Couch and the Bathwater

by Gabriele Cassullo

According to Hegel, we serve our servants. In psychoanalysis, we might say, we all serve the couch, a stern idol we seem unable to do without. For this reason, Mattisseck's book is more than welcome: it is a necessary book, one that challenges the automatism of thought, routine, and imaginary fascination that leads us to identify psychoanalysis with the couch. Yet it is not iconoclastic; it does not want to throw out the couch with the bathwater. By bathwater, I mean the therapeutic function of the traditional psychoanalytic setting: holding, gathering, and containing parts of the self that are not yet born, damaged, dead, or in various ways dissociated, and freeing one's thoughts from the seductive or threatening gaze of the other.

Furthermore, Mattisseck's book is also important because it brings the issue of abuse, whether potential or actual, to the fore, and specifically abuse within a relationship of dependency. The theme is the exposure of a mind in need to the influence of another: the trusted person in whose hands and arms—which, according to Alice Balint and Winnicott, are symbolically represented by the analytic couch—we place ourselves in order to obtain care, satisfaction of basic needs, and a distinction between these and the accessory, non-vital needs that make us ill. This issue calls for psychoanalytic work in the area of basic trust, where failure that is not responsibly acknowledged by those in authority, especially those who present themselves as therapists, is intolerable because it causes a wound at the root of the self that continues to produce iatrogenic effects in the person's life.

The last topic I would like to touch on briefly in this grateful foreword is power. We do not usually associate power with psychoanalytic thought, yet it has been present from the beginning, both in the power dynamics among the first psychoanalysts and in

reflection on the opposite theme of sexual impotence as a metaphorical correlate of existential powerlessness: feeling powerless, or, as we would say today, lacking agency, the ability or possibility of having an impact on others, on oneself, and on one's own life.

Personally, I believe that removing a piece of furniture from a psychotherapist's office is not enough to get rid of the dirty water of the abuse of power that prevents people from developing their own personal voice. But this book by Mattisseck certainly has the merit of making us reflect on how reducing the other to a means rather than an end in our actions is a permanent risk, hidden under all our couches. So we must be prepared to move the couch as a professional fetish if this is necessary to produce the authentic encounter that alone can allow us to find the patient's true potential.

Contents

1. The Couch: Its Opponents and Critics

The couch may be regarded as an integral part of psychoanalytic technique and of the analytic setting (Aruffo, 1995). Various reports have described its potential benefits, including the establishment of an environment of trust, the creation of personal space, and the facilitation of a sense of security (Hill, 2010; Intelmann, 2003). Despite its prominence, there is a surprisingly weak theoretical foundation (Kravis, 2017/2018) and a lack of empirical research on its effects (Lable et al., 2010). Some critics argue that the couch serves as a defensive position for the analyst (Schachter & Kächele, 2010), while others suspect that the patient's supine position inherently entails a pronounced power imbalance (Hafke, 1995). At the same time, the topic of power asymmetry in the psychoanalytic setting is rarely addressed in the psychoanalytic community (Patsalides Hofmann & Perret, 2018). The use of the couch by many analysts might raise concerns about whether its implications for power dynamics and therapeutic practice receive sufficient critical scrutiny. However, before addressing the core subject, it is necessary to consider the broader context in which the couch functions.

The couch holds an iconic status in society (Friedberg & Linn, 2012) and is embedded within the broader framework of psychoanalysis, encompassing its history, training analysis, as well as ongoing debates and criticism (Guderian, 2004; Schachter & Kächele, 2010). Reactions to psychoanalysis range from measured discussion to outright rejection of the field as a whole. Contextualizing these controversies not only helps to underscore the significance of examining the couch setting in relation to power but also lays the groundwork for understanding the broader relevance of power dynamics in psychotherapy. Accordingly, it is also valuable to consider the perspectives of prominent critics of psychoanalysis, some of whom have undeniably shaped the field of psychotherapy. Many of the concerns they have raised will play a role, to varying extents, in this examination. Exploring these critiques also sheds light on how a certain perception of psychoanalysis has persisted over time—an image that must, at some stage, be addressed.

1.1 Rejection of Psychoanalysis and Doubts about Effectiveness

The reception of psychoanalysis has shifted over the decades, with its role in both scientific and social contexts undergoing significant changes (Páramo-Ortega, 1997). Historically, psychoanalysis moved between periods of wide acceptance and times of sharp criticism and decline. The generation of 1968, for example, was notably more open to psychoanalytic thought. In contrast, later decades saw interest wane and skepticism rise (Ermann, 2017b). One ongoing concern in the field is the declining number of new candidates entering training. Psychoanalysis has had increasing difficulty appealing to younger therapists, and questions about its legitimacy have become more common in recent years (Lebiger-Vogel, 2015). As of 2018, only around 15 percent of members of the American Psychoanalytic Association were under the age of 50, pointing to a marked generational gap within the profession (Schachter, 2018). Over the years, psychoanalysis has drawn repeated controversy and provoked considerable debate. Many of the arguments made by contemporary critics seem to echo those voiced decades ago (Hale & Hölscher, 2002). Freud (1914/1924) himself described the recurring and fierce resistance to psychoanalysis during his lifetime.

It is not uncommon for critics to categorize psychoanalysis as an ideology rather than a scientific discipline (Pohlen & Bautz-Holzherr, 1995; Zimmer, 1986). Freud is often denied recognition as the founder of an empirical field and is instead accused of establishing a sect (Hale & Hölscher, 2002). In line with this critique, institutional structures are described as sustaining themselves through rigid hierarchies and an authoritarian framework (Cremerius, 1995b). Pohlen and Bautz-Holzherr (1995) argue that, although psychoanalysis claims to serve the ideals of enlightenment, it ultimately withdraws from applying enlightenment principles to itself. This withdrawal, they suggest, finds expression in the reverence accorded to Freud's authority, where disagreement is resisted and denounced as an act of betrayal.

Strong opponents, such as Zimmer (1986), reject the idea that psychoanalysis has a scientific basis, equating its theories with esoteric doctrines. Others, like Eysenck (1985/1985), regard it as propaganda that repeatedly shatters patients' hopes for healing and recovery. Some of Freud's opponents even suspect that he manipulated data to make his findings fit an inconsistent theoretical framework (Hale & Hölscher, 2002), an issue exemplified by the criticism directed at the structural model of the psyche. For example, Zimmer (1986) contends that id, ego, and superego, each conceived as a distinct and self-contained unit with its own characteristics, constitute a fundamental tripartite division of the psyche without empirical evidence, noting that various experiments have failed to confirm the existence of such a structure. While cognitive psychology attributes certain phenomena to mere inattention, he maintains that psychoanalysis interprets parapraxes as evidence of unconscious conflicts without empirical validation. Zimmer likens the structural model to medieval views presented as psychological science. Similarly, Eysenck (1985/1985) argues that psychology should be objective and independent of the researcher's personal perspective, in clear contrast to psychoanalysis, which he criticizes as subjective. He insists that such subjectivity should not be tolerated in psychology.

A well-known and comprehensive meta-analysis by Grawe et al. (2001), originally published in 1994, concluded that cognitive-behavioral therapy yielded better outcomes than psychoanalytic therapy. Given the broader pressure to legitimize psychotherapy and the debates over the most effective therapeutic approach (Jacobi, 2020), this comprehensive assessment had a considerable impact on the scientific community. Some perceived its findings as a declaration of the failure of psychoanalysis (Fäh, 2006). Particularly in German-speaking regions, the research findings were met with tension, as concerns arose among psychoanalysts that these conclusions might be used by insurers and medical associations to challenge the legitimacy of psychoanalysis (Schleussner & Klar, 2003).

According to Grawe et al. (2001), while psychoanalysis is generally intended for more severe cases and aims to address underly-

ing causes rather than merely treating symptoms—whereas cognitive-behavioral therapy tends to focus on milder cases—their conclusion suggests the opposite. The authors place particular emphasis on an earlier study of long-term psychoanalytic treatment in which 17 out of 42 patients experienced unsatisfactory outcomes, including 11 cases classified as failures. Of the 42 patients, 22 underwent classical psychoanalysis. Those who completed therapy in a relatively regular manner attended an average of 1,017 sessions. A second group of 20 participants received a shorter, less intensive form of analytic therapy, completing an average of 316 sessions under regular conditions. The treatment failures occurred at similar rates in both therapy groups, with most of the 11 patients not only showing no improvement but also experiencing adverse effects. Grawe et al. maintain that the extended duration of long-term therapy, already burdensome for many patients, makes these unsatisfactory outcomes even more concerning. They conclude that there is no positive indication for long-term psychoanalysis, arguing that comparable outcomes in quality, quantity, and stability can be achieved in a face-to-face setting of shorter duration rather than in the traditional couch setting. Moreover, they contend that long-term psychoanalysis should be considered contraindicated for severe disorders due to its relatively high risk of harm.

The work of Grawe et al. (2001) serves as just one example. Another prominent case is a report published in France in 2004 by the French National Institute of Health and Medical Research (INSERM Report), which itself provoked debate regarding the researchers' motivations and methodological concerns. This report similarly stated that there is no conclusive evidence supporting the effectiveness of psychoanalysis (Visentini, 2021). Eysenck (1985/1985) had already expressed a comparable view. After reviewing the literature on approximately 10,000 cases, he judged that there is no substantial evidence that psychoanalytic treatment is effective.