

## TICK THE BOX IF THE PROBLEM SHIFTS

Bernard Burgoyne

PSYCHOANALYSIS is not an easy field to explore. There are many modalities in the field - each of them is complex - and their relations to each other are not easy to describe. Concepts in the field are not easy to formulate, and to put these concepts in relation to each other is difficult. The relation of any single one of these concepts to issues of clinical technique is at best a weakly tested hypothesis, and at worst – *and in fact this is generally the case* - an unsolved problem. Much remains to be done, in other words, in order to be able to constitute psychoanalysis as a serious science. Even whether or not a scientific form is appropriate for this field, is itself in dispute. All of these issues are difficult, and they demand work. Nevertheless, there are agencies – usually administrations and bureaucracies – which aim to trivialise these issues, by giving them a mock simplicity.

So since I am claiming that many complex issues in this field remain unresolved, let me just focus for a moment on one of them – one that has been in the news. What does it mean to work scientifically as a psychotherapist? Now this issue of there being unresolved questions, and the theme of working as a science are not antagonistic: it is in fact characteristic of a science to focus on unresolved issues.

Science is organised around a particular kind of doubt. It is not structured, in other words, by any supposed evidential base, but by sceptical method. Science works by trying to investigate what might be wrong in accepted views of the world; and if its notions survive this kind of interrogation, well and good – they can continue to claim the plaudit of well-tested knowledge – *for the time being*. Montaigne very clearly set this out: any proposition that purports to be knowledge should be regarded with suspicion.

But with respect to the State, this attitude – of critical testing – disappears; so there are even stronger reasons for actually taking it that any knowledge *that purports to give power* should be subject to suspicion. The defence of psychoanalysis against dogmatism emanating from external – and administrative – interests is therefore an important cause; we have fairly recently had experience of this with the proposals for State registration.

Bill Wedderburn – in speeches he made in the House of Lords – helped this cause greatly: his recent death is very much to be lamented. He helped greatly in the fight against the imposition of uniform standards in psychoanalysis. Here are a few sentences from his speeches in the Lords -

This is from Lords' Hansard, 19<sup>th</sup> January and 21<sup>st</sup> February 2001:

“There is no point [he said] in choosing a form of regulation which loses something which has been built up in the past ... or in [the work of] more recent analysts than the masters such as Klein, Lacan, or Winnicott. We must be careful not to lose what is a precious historical oddity; namely the freedom of groups to find new ways to practice and to introduce new concepts in the field”

The issue here is power, and the antagonism between the single vision preferred by the powerful, and the more intricate vision that keeps open a plurality of possible solutions. In fact, what is at play here would be present within any administrative elite, and in any bureaucracy. And that is what we are faced with in the question we are addressing today. Administrators – for no better reason it seems than it would seem a “fittingly professional thing to do” have decided to go ahead with another form of standardised orthodoxy – a register of supervisors. I say “administrators”, but it is not administrators alone: all of this happens in the shadow of the State – and there is a greater idealisation of the State.

More recently than 2001 – I think in 2008 – the British Government asked a number of “Expert Readers” to advise it on proposals to introduce what they called “National Occupational Standards” in psychoanalysis. I think that of the twelve or so opinions that they sought, only the reports by Andrew Samuels and myself were firmly against the proposal. Here is a small excerpt from my Report.

On “PROPOSED NATIONAL OCUPATIONAL STANDARDS IN PSYCHOANLYTIC and PSYCHODYNAMIC THERAPY”:

“I have looked at these proposals from several sides now. Their partiality is a major cause of concern, and their exclusion of many styles of work means that they would only constrain and hinder the practice of psychotherapy. I have tried repeatedly to envisage reformulations that would avoid this outcome. I do not think it is possible, for reasons that I will now go into.

(i) Freud’s famous comparison of psychoanalysis to a game of chess indicates that some regulation of the opening might be possible; but not too much, and even this prospect very soon disappears as the work reaches the middle and succeeding stages. That seems to me to be a fair comparison: the problem of how to find National Occupational Standards for playing chess. In psychoanalysis as in chess, the detail of the actual work goes well beyond the possibility of any series of stipulations as to standard practice.

And later ...

(ii) The shifts brought into being in the fifteen or so paradigms of practice described earlier were produced by practitioners within the profession, and not outside of it. The proposed National Occupational Standards represent only a small and partial selection of modes of psychoanalytic intervention, and do not represent an adequate basis on which to regulate practice in this field. Indeed it

would seem that any attempt to improve on these – short of having forty or fifty different sets of NOS [NOS - *as they call them*] would fall foul of these difficulties. In the meantime, these currently proposed standards for this field produce criteria the adherence to which would constrain and undermine practice.”

... and many more pages in the same vein.

So this threat of the standardisation of the field, of the trivialisation of its problems, of the impoverishment of clinical work, is not new. But in the field of supervision? There is a CPJA draft on the construction of a supervision register. I very much appreciate the work that the CPJA has put into it – it shows in almost every paragraph the effort that has been applied to avoid this being a *very, very* much worse document. But even such a document has at an even cursory glance at least ten to twelve arbitrary things placed in it. *Such things will be used*: at first by a number of organisations – then by many more, following pressures to universalise the new standard. But see the arbitrariness; see the precedent; see the future uses of curtailment to which it will be put; see the deflection it introduces into the central currents of clinical investigation in psychoanalysis. And the problem remember, as I’ve posed it, is the question of the subtlety and the richness of a science against the poverty of externally imposed standards, usually of administrative origin. So what does it mean then to talk of “science” in relation to supervision? There is a very rich paper on the College’s web site that addresses this question – it is by Darian Leader, and here is a sample of it -

[Helene] Deutsch's supervisory method, likewise, might seem peculiar in terms of the later history of supervised practice. She would ask her supervisees to write down their ideas about a case, and then free-associate. Theoretical intervention, she thought, was best avoided and the dynamic principle of her supervisory sessions was analytic, relying on speech and association.

Deutsch also implemented a practice in the Vienna training that had its own institutional logic. A supervision seminar was introduced, in which two cases would be tracked over time, one presented by a trainee, the other by an experienced analyst. This would have the effect of allowing not only new perspectives on the cases in question, but also challenging the received separations of analytic generations. The experienced analyst, it might turn out, was committing errors just as staggering as the neophyte, while the neophyte could be showing a clinical agility that was nowhere to be found in the senior's practice. The seminar, indeed, put dialectic rather than hierarchy in the Institute's training programme

There are real tests proposed here – what is put forward constitutes a BRIDGE towards science. And the alternative is to allow bureaucracies and administrators to impose a routine on the profession – I'll call this alternative therefore 'taking the profession into administration'. There are many fairly clear reasons why this is a deleterious road to follow, but they all amount basically to this: what the administrators want is impossible. The judgements – and the gradations that follow from them – about the quality of work, are best done from within the profession: that is from the clinical base of the profession, not from its executives. This is the central reason, but it has many further problems attached to it. One is that the administration of the field is rarely aware of its own shortcomings: they say that the Civil Service was an exception to this –in the old days. But being unaware leads to the apparatus devised by the administration being inappropriate – this is in addition, by the way, to it's being inadequate, and banal. A serious field of work becomes taken over by wooden language, by boxes to be ticked, and by questionnaires drawn up by people who have not the slightest awareness of how people relate to each other. The ignorance involved I think is as wide as that – ignorance of the complexities, the nuances, the styles, the desires at play in the demands that people put to each other in everyday life. This is a field too complex to be fitted into the boxes and tables that are to be drawn up as the profession is taken into administration. This situation is now much worse than it

was some years ago. Political Philosophy used to be taught extensively in this country's Universities – at one time all undergraduates in most of the Social Sciences could be expected to encounter a programme of political philosophy in their first year - Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Sophists, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Kant, Hegel, Marx and Mill all give an orientation to the complexities of social interaction that is missing in today's administrative and executive circles. And such political philosophies are now *rarely* taught in our Universities, and certainly not in the first year – they have been replaced by courses in Microsoft Word, and by remedial courses that attempt to remedy the lack of what has been cut out of the A-level syllabus.

So what has gone wrong in this modern mania? It stretches all across Europe, this attempt to impoverish professions, to cut them off from any real access to science. There is a long tradition of philosophy of science being produced in *Vienna*, and we have lost some sense of it. From the time of herbartian work within the Austrian Empire to the notions of Popper and Wittgenstein, Vienna was a stronghold of the investigation of scientific methodology; and in March 1973 Imre Lakatos took this particular backcloth of theories and problems a little further. In a series of lectures delivered in the London School of Economics, he proposed taking the notion of a *problem-shift* as a fundamental variable in the study of scientific method. The idea itself is quite classical. Theories are attempted resolutions of problems – so problems give rise to theories. The theories, if they are taken seriously, then give rise to new problems. So the development of science goes from theory to theory – a better theory hopefully replacing an old one. The movement is equally a movement from problems to problems – from the old problems to better ones. This already is counter to the fashionable view in England today that a science grows from evidence – from evidence that it is supposedly based on, and which guarantees its validity. Now while this latter view is fairly trivially false, the deeper tradition that Lakatos works with contains within

it all the serious problems of the philosophy and the history of science.

I have used the phrase “from problems to better problems”. So what constitutes “better”? Lakatos spent much time trying to find criteria that would differentiate progressive problem-shifts from their opposite – *degenerating programmes in science*. In our field this is a question of the nature of progressive shifts of problems within the work of the clinician. If Lakatos had had today’s administrators around he needn’t have bothered to formulate his problem– they would have rushed in to resolve it for him: *the first step they would say is to* – “observe and see if the problem shifts – and *if it does*, tick a box: this ticking of a box is supposed be the first step in making a scientific record of what is going on. Ticked boxes of this kind flood through Whitehall, and deluge the bureaux of administrators. So, while the psychoanalysts have a serious problem – what are the progressive problem shifts in psychoanalysis – administrative interests move in to trivialise it. They do more than trivialise it – the translations that they give to it are idiotic. This, in itself, is catastrophic – a ‘going down’ I think is the Greek word – a going down of clinical work in the therapeutic field. But there is an even more serious area of shift that is involved. Analytical work aims to bring about a shift in the subjectivity of the analysand; so we are faced now with two series of shifts –and both of them important. How many times in recent years have practitioners been asked to reduce such problems of subjectivity to ticking a box?

One central theme in the ability to work analytically is the perception of there having been a shift; and not an arbitrary shift, but one that the work has been moving towards for some time. A shift in the subjectivity of the analysand is a complex thing, and it is something, I think, that a supervisor would probably want to bring into the supervision. But there is pressure on administrators to eliminate such complex things. I remember the first draft of a

questionnaire constructed by the Home Office in order to determine the abilities of psychotherapists: it was constructed on the basis of: *tick the box if the therapist has the following quality*. The first quality that they had put on the list was – the ability to sit still in a chair for 50 minutes. And this drive to imbecility has continued – sometimes in more nuanced ways – in more recent years.

So we have this: in any field of work – in any science for instance – the work on the problems in the field at some point brings about a shift – a shift in the field. And this, just as in the case of a subjective shift, is crucial. But it is also a very complex thing – and one poorly judged by people external to the field – even when they have the best of intentions. And “being taken into administration” is not done with the best of intentions. This move into the field of the administrators is followed by a series of further constraints. The next step, that we have so far thankfully managed to avoid, is that of the administrators finding the actual concepts of the field too complex, and moving to by-pass them entirely. “Never mind the theories” becomes the next slogan in such a rake’s progress of imposed control; “never mind the theories, they’re irrelevant, just judge the technique”. And in such reductions of technique all kinds of banalities come into play. Well, we are better off without such “improvements to the field”. All these forces of administration are distractions. The strong forces, like that for State registration, and the weak forces, like that for a register of “supervision of an appropriate level” are distractions. They are distractions from an analysis of clinical work, distractions from the motive force that constitutes psychoanalysis, distractions from the central concerns of working with people within the analytical protocols. They are distractions that badly damage the field; they are banalities that deskill the professionals; and they are intrusions of power that have the effect of stultifying the most active people in the field. I’ll stop there.



THE COLLEGE OF PSYCHOANALYSTS – UK:  
[13<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2012].