

Article

# THE CITIZEN PSYCHOANALYST AND THE PSYCHOANALYTIC SOCIAL ACTIVIST

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## Abstract

*This paper proposes a distinction between the psychoanalyst who, as a citizen, is socially active, and a psychoanalytic social activist. The former is a concerned citizen who is also a professional, while the latter understands and acts psychoanalytically in a social sphere. I suggest that the former occurs anyway, and that the latter needs to be better defined and carefully implemented. I offer a simple example.*

## Keywords

action; activism; groups; fundamentalism; intelligent design

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I think there is a dilemma in the idea of psychoanalytic social activism. I will pose it this way: there already is a lot of psychoanalytic social activism, but the people doing it don't think of it that way. It may even be that their activism retains its psychoanalytic orientation better because they don't think of it as activism.

I will give an example from my local experience. The Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies at Essex has set up a collaborative programme with local residential care and educational institutions for young people. The aim is to introduce psychodynamic thinking about relationships and groups, and the way group defences undermine the therapeutic aims of staff, especially in



residential institutions. These residential care centres accommodate young people who have come to the end of the line at home, at school and in the community. Centre staff are working with employers and managers at these organizations to train their staff and develop a career structure for them, partly to overcome the haemorrhage of staff by recognizing their therapeutic strivings and the frustration that they feel when they are undermined; partly to implement a psycho-social approach to helping these young people to overcome their seemingly inevitable exclusion. There are other examples of similar dedicated programmes. But the staff who do this work do not think of themselves as a special type: a social activist.

I doubt that I have said anything contentious, and that everyone could come forward with similar examples; and we would have a long list of socially active programmes. My question is, “What else are we after when we speak of ‘social activism’?” Is there a difference between a socially active psychoanalyst (a citizen who has a professional expertise) and a psychoanalytic social activist (a citizen who identifies an activism with a psychoanalytic attitude, approach, process)?

This is an important issue because:

- (a) In involving people as *psychoanalytic* – and I am not distinguishing between clinicians and academics – it might be better to work out how they would do it in line with what they, as psychoanalysts, *uniquely* offer, as opposed to what they offer, more broadly, as concerned citizens.
- (b) My proposal is consistent with Mark’s second category: “the types of activity that would be productive for these groups to engage in (e.g., consultation, collection and dissemination of information/knowledge, event organizing, etc.)”. But I think the specific issue – what would be psychoanalytic – needs to be addressed.
- (c) The idea of doing more than talking is a good one, but we need also to remember that psychoanalysis is a talking cure. I am reminded of Peter Gay’s characterization of Freud as unexceptionally bourgeois on the outside and a revolutionary on the inside: inside his consulting room and inside his head (1976/1978, pp 60–71). How can we make sure we do not lose a psychoanalytic moment? Psychoanalysis is a talking cure, and it is central to our work to be concerned about the nature of action, including *talking as an action*.
- (d) The formation of task forces or action groups under the headings of abstract issues (I am not assessing their importance) carries the dangers that permeate and follow from homogenization, which Freud (1921/1955) analyzed in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. In this sense, we need to keep under discussion the forces that we are mobilizing and subjecting ourselves to. What happens when we organize ourselves into task forces that are self-consciously active, as opposed to persevering as citizens with actions already going on?

- (e) Talking as a defence also needs to be addressed, and, in general, the psychoanalytic character of whatever activity we engage in needs continually to be considered.

I would like to find a way to recognize and psychoanalytically inform the work that people do, rather than address head-on a large-scale object such as violence, poverty, war, inequality. The venue for intervention would, in the first instance, be the APCS conference itself. I have reviewed many papers and presentations and had my own appraised as well, yet I think we don't talk to each other; and we take very little interest in each other's work, despite the masterful composing of panels by Marilyn and the editing of the journal by Lynne and Simon. I would like to propose a way to begin this process of working together psychoanalytically.

To begin with, my own interest is in fundamentalism (Figlio, 2006), not so much the fanaticism of religious sects, but the fundamentalism that is surfacing in multi-cultural Western societies, such as France, the UK and the US, which are unsure how to balance individual, sectional (ethnic, religious, racial) and social aspirations; and also the fundamentalism of everyday life. I have, for example, been reading and admiring the US court decisions in their repudiation of intelligent design. I would like to team up with people working in the field, to add a psychoanalytic dimension. One venue would be wherever educational policy was formulated, because fundamentalism in schools is insidious and dangerous.

One reason for concentrating on fundamentalism is that, not only is it a very destructive force, but also it corrodes the very form of thinking and dialogue that psychoanalysis depends upon and promotes. Fundamentalisms put the engagement around differences beyond the reach of reason and dialogue. Psychoanalysis is, in its essence and its method, a thinking and talking process. It is opposed to fundamentalisms – both the forms of large-scale extremism and the fundamentalisms of everyday life: in science education, in dress and other cultural forms of self-presentation, and in ethics.

Psychoanalysis has theories of self and other and of schismatic *vs* integrative group dynamics. It also has a method, an attitude, a frame of mind. In my view, a psychoanalytic intervention should try to maintain and make use of this psychoanalytic attitude. Not to do so could collude with fundamentalisms.

I would like to propose that we try a different sort of conference.

### **Different sort of conference**

1. We try with a few panels to get the members to circulate their papers to each other ahead of time and revise them in the light of each other's papers – explicitly incorporating reactions to them. On the day, one person from the

panel presents his/her revised paper, which is discussed by the panel, then the audience. The other papers are made available.

2. Each panel contains at least one clinician and one academic.
3. Each author makes explicit why he/she is writing it.
4. Each panel proposes a way to continue its work (perhaps projects could be taken on, or more research and writing for further presentation the following year).

### **About the author**

Karl Figlio is Director and Professor, Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies, University of Essex, UK; and a member of the London Centre for Psychotherapy.

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