
BOOK REVIEW

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND PSYCHOANALYTIC THERAPIES: Theories of Psychotherapy Series, by Jeremy D. Safran, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2012, 227 pp. (paperback), \$24.95.

Reviewed by

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Books about psychoanalysis tend to be either vast and indigestible or uncritically simplistic. Often they appear to emanate from an arcane pre-21st Century world in which patients luxuriate indefinitely on analyst's couches and where the notion of evidence-based practice is seen as the work of the devil. There is also the perennial theory–practice gap: psychoanalytic theories abound, but bear a tenuous relationship to what goes on in the consulting room, and what is distinctive about psychoanalysis as a therapeutic method.

Jeremy Safran, a leading psychodynamic psychotherapy researcher and teacher, and former chair of the International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy, deftly avoids these and other pitfalls in this laudable, readable, and reliable introductory text.

The bulk of the book, and its accompanying DVD, is devoted to an exposition of the techniques, achievements and problems of real-life psychoanalytic therapy as exemplified by his work with “Simone” (? someone/everywoman), an African American young woman suffering from depression, bulimia, and relationship difficulties. This is buttressed before and after with a brief history of the psychoanalytic movement and consideration of its evaluation and possible future developments. Safran adopts throughout an enquiring, unpartisan, clinically oriented, social–relational perspective.

He starts by locating the origins of psychoanalysis in its historical context of alienated Jewish intellectuals at the threshold of the modern world. He argues that their marginal social status gave Freud and his followers a vantage point from which to critique the dehumanized post-Enlightenment environment they encountered. This countercultural vantage point is one of the guiding threads of the book. Safran sees the reflective psychoanalytic stance as a counterpoint to the emphasis on speed, superficial goals, and fragile search for “success” that permeates Western culture, including nonpsychoanalytic therapies.

He goes on to trace the evolution of psychoanalytic theorizing from the classical intrapsychic model to the relational perspective which he espouses. Outcome and process goals, no longer focused on negotiating ambivalence and drive management, are now the

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mutative quartet of (a) new relational experience, (b) containment, (c) affective communication, and (d) affect regulation. Safran's own particular contribution—the role of affective rupture and repair—plays a significant part: Honest acknowledgment by therapists of their mistakes can strengthen the therapeutic alliance and improve outcomes. He develops the idea of “metacommunication” as the defining characteristic of the psychotherapeutic relationship: “the role-conferred sanction to break the rules of normal social discourse.” Both of these aspects come out clearly and convincingly in the account of his work with Simone and communicate with painful honesty the realities of clinical work (especially when there is an American Psychological Association camera team breathing down one's neck!).

Safran's relational perspective leads him to see psychotherapeutic dialogue as “bidirectional”; he advocates negotiation and respectful “exploration” as opposed to “interpretation” of defenses, “tactfully, sparingly, judiciously.” Although the search for meaning—the implicit meanings of the patient's communications and those generated from the therapist's perspective—is important, “affective nonverbal exchange” outweighs clever analytic comments. In line with the Boston Change group and the relational shibboleth of the Winnicottian “third,” he advocates “bisubjectivity,” in which therapist and patient's unconscious realms are both brought creatively into play.

Safran is admirably evenhanded in his treatment of differing psychoanalytic schools, including, for me, a first: a brief comprehensible account of Lacanian ideas. Despite this disinterested stance, his attitude is underpinned throughout by a number of strong humanistic convictions. He sees the need for a “rekindling of the socially progressive and politically engaged roots of psychoanalysis.” Harking back to Adorno and the Frankfurt Institute, and their legacy in the radical psychoanalytic ideas of Erikson, Fromm and Langer, he champions:

“psychoanalysis” fundamental recognition of the limits of human rationality, and pervasiveness of self-deception, and the long-standing interest in broader social and cultural concerns. (p. 183)

Flowing from this, he calls for psychoanalysis to reach out from its White middle-class ghetto to ethnic minorities and the dispossessed. Second, his wide-angled perspective and background is essentially integrative and antielitist. He advocates dialogue between psychoanalysis and systems theory, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and the humanistic disciplines (if the latter phrase is not an oxymoron!). He calls for analytic therapists to acknowledge that most therapy patients today are seen once or twice weekly, sitting up; and that five-times-a-week couch-based therapy is largely a status-inflated myth, the majority of such patients being fellow professionals in training. Psychoanalytic theory and education should, he argues, take that shift into account, rather than cling to a nostalgic vision from psychoanalysis' 1950s heyday.

Finally, although mentioned only once in the text (p. 188) the tenor of the book is permeated by Safran's Buddhist background. He discusses the tension between the meliorist American dream of unlimited possibility of psychic change and unbounded optimism, with Freud's rational pessimism and stoicism. From a Buddhist perspective, the paradox is that the more one can come to accept oneself and the world as it is, the more one is in a position to change both. The resolution of the paradox lies in the notion of permanent revolution, or flux—Freud's transience. Depressed states cannot and do not last forever, any more than ecstasy can ever be eternal.

If it is to regain some of its former glory, psychoanalysis might seem to need more passion that is sometimes evident here. However, rather than luke warmness, I suspect in Safran's case this equability is an expression of Buddhist nonattachment—even to one's love objects, and he clearly loves relational psychoanalysis. That, in turn, means that he fails at times to muster the full arsenal needed to strengthen his case. True, he endorses the positive findings of psychoanalytic outcome research, but this section is all too brief. Neuropsychoanalysis fails to get a mention, and neither do current cutting-edge epigenetic findings. These show how early relational adversity can inscribe itself on the genogram, yet, through neuroplasticity, be reversed by the long-term relational good experiences of which Safran sees as the main vehicle of psychic change. However, overall, these are but mild caveats. This is a most admirable, likable, learnable-from, and recommendable text. No aspiring psychoanalytic psychotherapy student, or teacher of psychoanalysis, should be without it.