Falling Skies and Fragile Containers:
The Impact of Cultural Upheaval on the Analytic Dyad

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Lee Rather Ph.D.

You can't go back home…. to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting, but which are changing all the time… The essence of Time is Flow, not Fix. The essence of faith is the knowledge that all flows and that everything must change. The growing man is alive, and his philosophy must grow and flow with him… his body of beliefs is nothing but a series of fixations.

-Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again*

Note 1: This essay was prepared at the invitation of the Psychoanalytic Center of the Carolinas in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in early 2020, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the intensification of the #BlackLivesMatter cultural conflict, the acceleration of tensions surrounding the approach of the November 2020 presidential election, and a host of accelerating cultural and climate anxieties. In the author's view, none of these factors has altered the psychological and cultural dynamics discussed herein, though all have been increasingly amplified since the manuscript was completed in its present form.

Note 2: In the interest of confidentiality, all case material has been fictionalized. It is constructed of composites of several patients and multiple real-life scenarios with details altered to ensure anonymity. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Introduction

In this essay, (completed *prior* to the events of the COVID crisis and the acceleration of the #BlackLivesMatter movement), I use the word "culture" as a shorthand term to signify the total agglomeration of the institutional, political, social, religious, economic, and ecological factors which press in upon us. My intention is to address the need for growth, and perhaps even a paradigm shift, in our psychoanalytic 'beliefs, philosophy, and fixations' in considering the influence of culture on structuring the individual psyche, the analytic dyad, and the communities in which both are embedded. This is a natural aspect of our on-going growth as a 120th year-old profession, but it is also made more urgent by the now ubiquitous appearance of ecological, technological, health, social, economic, and political anxieties in the presentations of our patients, all of which have

been further exacerbated by the 2020 global pandemic. As the world becomes smaller, fuller, faster, and more fractured, cultural turmoil is regularly taking its clinical place in therapy alongside the usual suspects of family, friends, and lovers.

Now more than ever, we are beginning to appreciate that to be a psychoanalytic professional in 2020 means to be immersed in particular cultures and sub-cultures which we must become aware of and self-analyze. However, as is often said, "the main problem with self-analysis is the countertransference". Judging from my professional life as a member of two institutes, attending scientific meetings, teaching and supervising, and reading the contemporary literature, many therapists today are struggling with how to think about and address socio-cultural trauma, social injustice, political polarization, and reactions to the rapid changes in American culture in their interactions with their patients. For therapists who are trying to get their minds around all of this, the boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside' the consulting room are increasingly subject to critical examination and deconstruction.

This leads to a heightened awareness of the psychological inseparability of the individual and the collective, which, in turn, brings many questions regarding psychoanalytic dyadic work: Where do we place culture in our theories of the individual? How do we listen to and address the external reality in analytic therapy, while being mindful of our mission to shed light on the inner world? How do we comment on cultural issues while sustaining analytic space through some degree of neutrality and anonymity? How do we manage our own opinions and emotions in the countertransference when aspects of the problems presented by our patients are simultaneously being experienced by ourselves? How do we preserve a non-judgmental posture and regulate our self-disclosures about the socio-cultural turmoil being presented? How do we differentiate our

roles as therapists as opposed to citizens with opinions? And while applied psychoanalysis, beginning with Freud, has sought to analyze culture from a bird's-eye view, how might we include culture in terms of clinical theory and attention?

Some years ago, the Kleinian school offered up the useful concept of the "total situation", arguing that analysts needed to extend their bandwidth of attention beyond the confines of transferences to the analyst, to track the analysand's reactions to the totality of the analytic setting itself (Joseph, 1985; Klein 1952). Nowadays, the contemporary analytic therapist must expand the bandwidth of attention even further to track what I think of as the 'total cultural situation' within which the analytic dyad is embedded. One's own total cultural situation can be as hard to see as water is to a fish, even if all the while we are swimming in it, supported by it, and swayed by its invisible currents. Employing another metaphor, one could imagine culture and the individual as woven together in a "social fabric" in which lengthwise threads (the warp*)* represent everything individual and subjective. and the crosswise threads (the woof*)* represent everything institutional and objective. Like a flag blowing in the wind, the warp and the woof are inseparable and constitute each other. As in M. C. Escher's paradoxical lithograph in which two hands draw each other into existence, (*Drawing Hands*, 1948), not only do we construct external reality, but external reality constructs us.

Regardless of metaphor, many of us are feeling overwhelmed by the way the wind is blowing, the currents are flowing, and the hands are drawing each other. My purpose in this paper is to discuss some theoretical scaffolding to serve as a conceptual support and as a containing frame of reference in the current socio-cultural turmoil.

Clinical Vignettes

I'll begin with several clinical vignettes that illustrate the way cultural concerns appear in day-to-day clinical work.

1) Bill, an executive trainer, starts his session with a familiar theme: "Have you read the latest? It's beyond what I can even believe and I'm a cynic already given my family history. The country's being led to complete craziness by a destructive group of political and corporate narcissists who are selling us out to serve themselves. I'm worried. My children are going to be in the generation that suffers as a result. Their schools already have emergency lock-down drills in case of a terrorist or school shooter! He's eight years old! My daughter's high school uses a metal detector at sports events! I don't know what difference my neurotic struggles make in a world like this. And, now in my own consulting work, I'm dealing with a conservative right-wing CEO, and I have to fight to keep my mouth shut!"

2) Jill, a self-described 'brown-skin-woman, makes her entrance removing her jacket with the air of a soldier just in from the front. She is involved in climate research in an ostensibly progressive setting, where she has nonetheless endured subtle racism and hostility as an immigrant with an H-1 Visa. She speaks with anger and despair: "I can't believe what this bunch of spineless politicians are doing in Washington. What was I thinking when I moved here? Haven't they noticed they're arguing angels on the head of a pin while Rome burns? America is sedated and the house is on fire! Opioid addiction indeed!"

3) James, a man in his late thirties is doing well in his career but is distressed that he is not doing even better. He says it's not about competition or gender so much as actualizing his full potential. Can I help him 're-boot' into James 2.0 he asks? Is there some sort of psychological MRI computer scan I have to identify the 'bugs' in his system and delete them? He tells me it's not enough to be good-enough, or even excellent. In his work culture, meeting high expectations is a starting place, but *exceeding* expectations is what's expected. As a perfectionist, James needs to be 'awesome' in everything he does as an employee, as a triathlete, as a son, as a devoted father, as an "enlightened modern husband", and, of course, as a patient. "Isn't that normal?" he asks, "Or did I drink the toxic Kool-Aid"?

In these vignettes, the patients' manifest concerns reflect accelerating and disturbing changes and ideologies in the socio-cultural matrix. How does one respond as a therapist? Do we trace the anxieties to personal histories? Should we listen to them as expressions of internal object relations? Should we listen to these as derivatives of the transference? Yes, of course. But what about the actualities of the socio-cultural matrix to which these patients are also responding?

Many of us have patients like "Jill" and "Bill" who are more frequently expressing worry, depression, grief, despair, and anger about living in and raising children with climate change, accelerating economic disparity and fragility, mass shooting, and attacks on the truth in politics and in the media. Many therapists have highly driven patients such as "James" and their presentations exemplify the pressure in our practices towards evidence-driven quick fixes, cost-efficiencies, tech-inspired models of emotional

reprogramming, and psychological perfectionism. Therapists are encountering more and more patients who confuse living a life with having a career in which titles are acquired like trophies, and measurable successes are the *sine qua non* of self-esteem. Therapists will have noticed that many patients are filled with notions of what the enviable life looks like based on images and narratives from social media and 'info-tainment' systems that present themselves 24/7 from every angle.

The commoditization of subjectivity in a socio-economic climate that privileges market forces, competition, and achievement, the extreme political partisanship and cultural wars of the red and blue tribes, and the fears of ecological and health disasters are everywhere now in our patients' lives.

Cultural Upheaval in America

Outside our journal, an extensive series of thought-provoking books has appeared to address the various aspects of cultural anxiety and malaise. From my own reading, I would cite just a few that have been helpful in understanding the historical moment in which we find ourselves: Andersen, 2017; Bollas, 2018; Bosco, 2017; Brill, 2018; Case & Deaton, 2020; Diamond, 2019; Gibney, 2017; Hedges, 2009; Hochschild, 2016; Knafo & Lo Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Lee, 2019; Lukianoff, G. & Haidt, J. 2018; McGowan 2016; Purser, 2019; Strenger, 2011; Symington, 2019; Vance, 2016; Whippman, 2016; Wilber, 2017.

Many of our patients look back to an earlier era when things seemed more solid, and there was a comfortable narrative of several centuries of progress, achievement, and opportunity. There were bad things to be sure: Slavery, The Civil War, the Great Depression, two World Wars, McCarthyism, the embarrassment of our civil rights

conflicts, the shame of the Vietnam war, oil shortages, 9/11, and the financial collapse of 2008. Still, it all seemed to be happening against a basic background of stability, especially if you were white and middle-class. But even classism and racism seemed to be improving however slowly and hope predominated. America's myth was more than the "American Dream"; it was a "Hero's Journey". Though often illusory, there was an American cultural mythology that served as a container and was transmitted at many levels including, family, school, church, and yesterday's more monolithic media sources, especially the home hearth of television.

Those days appear to be behind us. In an age of domestic, international, and ecological turmoil and crisis, there is a loss of trust and faith in institutions and leaders.

The reassuring container is collapsing. The gradual upward shift of wealth and America's changing position on the global playing field have shattered the vision that each generation will have a progressively better material life. 40% of adults don't have enough savings to cover a $400 emergency. 60% of those 18 to 34 are anxious about paying bills and keeping their family fiscally safe. While the rich are getting richer and able to afford such perks as concierge healthcare, private jet travel, private firefighters, VIP seating etc., there is a nagging sense that we are moving toward a caste system, with a kind of collective rot at the top amongst the elite (think Jeffrey Epstein, Harvey Weinstein, the college admissions bribery scandals, etc.). Furthermore, climate grief has entered our lexicons and in 2017 the American Psychological Association used the term 'eco-anxiety' to designate the creeping fear of environmental doom. And, just when it seemed things could not get possibly get more complicated, the COVID-19 pandemic threw a large and unexpected shadow over everything already underway, only to followed by the Black Lives Matter protests in response to police shootings and years of

personal and institutional racism.

The symptomatic response at the group level has included wide-spread disorientation, despair, and collective dysphoria. The Despair Index maintained by The United States Congress Joint Economic Committee keeps track of long-term trends in 'deaths of despair' (using data from the CDC). The index has doubled since 2010 due to suicides, drug abuse, and alcohol consumption (Case & Deaton, 2020). The Federal Centers for Disease Control indicate that the suicide rate for people ages 15 to 19 soared 76% between 2007 and 2017. For those 10 to 14, it tripled. A 2017 meta study of birth cohort differences from 1989 to 2016 demonstrated a steady increase in culturally driven anxious perfectionism, which in turn is implicated to a wide variety of disorders, symptoms, and psychopathology (Curran & Hill, 2017). The authors cite the impact of market-based systems of interpersonal evaluation and the Zeitgeist of neoliberalism as the chief factors leading to a waning collective spirit and a waxing of competitive individualism. The result has been an 'epidemic' of anxious narcissism, social comparison, and dissatisfaction wreaking quiet havoc on parenting and growing up (Twenge, & Campbell, 2009). A 2018 Pew Research survey of 13- to 17-year-olds found that 70% said anxiety and depression are bigger problems than bullying, gangs, or drugs. The 50,000 deaths due to addiction last year cannot simply be blamed on Purdue Pharma, nor can the 391 group shootings be blamed solely on gun control issues. When we conceive of the anxiety embedded in school drills in case of a shooting and when we conceive of a culture in which Tuff Packs (a company that makes bullet-resistant backpacks for children) report sales up 300%, we are witnessing a group mind-set that has shifted enough to makes all of this thinkable.

Even before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, the sense that America is declining in an ecological world that may itself be doomed has put a strong whiff of extinction anxiety in the air (Reed, 2009). In a 2017 survey by the APA, two thirds say they are stressed by the future of the nation. This is not a partisan matter: 76% of Democrats and 59% of Republicans believe this. It is registered on the left, and on the right, and in the center. The group processes of splitting and tribalism have reached new levels of intensity in bipartisan politics (Chrzanowski, 2019). Whatever your tribe, there is a collective sense that the things have gone haywire (Andersen, 2017). Taking the place of the reassuring container of the American dream is a fractured container. Its broken dimensions and coordinates are being sent out across the land by the tribal drumbeats of MSNBC, Fox News, and the plethora of pop-up pundits and shamans of all types ministering to those suffering as a result.

This is, of course, a dark view, and we must be mindful of the human penchant for catastrophizing due to what social psychology terms the *negativity bias* (Pinker, 2011). But anxiety is the most contagious of affects and it blows like a wind through the cultural fabric. It's reflected in the defensive aspects of escapist binge-watching, the pre-occupation with extreme sports, the endless triviality of social media, the spectacle of a political carnival barely one step removed from the histrionic drama of professional wrestling, and the dominance of an anti-intellectual celebrity culture in which the highest achievements are wealth, sexual conquest, and fame (Hedges, 2009).

Therapists' Response to Cultural Upheaval

How are therapists dealing with this state of culture? The majority of therapists tend to be liberal leaning, perhaps unsurprising given the profession's interest in social

justice, health care rights, and progressive causes in the context of helping others (2016 poll). In a recent study of 268 psychotherapists, 87% reported that they discussed politics in session; 63% reported political self-disclosure, whether explicitly or implicitly (Solomonov & Barber, 2019). Are such disclosures at odds with an ideal frame and optimal therapeutic posture? Are they even counter-transference enactments? While we have always paid attention to *conscious* thoughts, feelings, fantasies, daydreams, our defining turf is the deeper strata of *unconscious* psychic life. We pride ourselves on depth psychotherapy but are not always sure what to do with the rest.

Traditionally, psychoanalytic therapists are trained to focus on internal psychic reality as it is projected onto the external world, and then reinternalized in an endless recycling that impedes learning from experience and supports neurotic repetition. With regard to the binary of internal and external, I have sometimes noted while teaching that the analyst and the realtor share the same mantra when it comes to emotional trouble in the neighborhood: "location, location, location".

A well-read therapist might note here that psychoanalysis has actually spent much attention on culture. Culture was clearly of great interest to Freud, who posited a dialectical relationship in which culture develops as an outgrowth of repression on the one hand, and repression develops in reaction to culture on the other (Freud, 1930). His papers on civilization, art, war, and group psychology are beautifully evocative examples of applied psychoanalysis. On the other hand, the role of culture was not given serious attention in Freud's case studies nor in his technique papers. This trend continued after Freud, and it has been argued that the initial group of influential immigrant analysts, who had escaped the European catastrophe and needed to assimilate quickly to America, became somewhat conservative within their new countries (Jacoby, 1983, Litowitz 2003).

The result was that Anglo norms formed the unthought background assumptions exemplified by the 'average expectable environment' (Hartmann, 1939).

There are two theorists I would like to briefly acknowledge who for whom culture is given priority in considering neurosis clinically. The first is Lacan with his three registers of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic, the last of which is the register for the culture and language into which we are born, and which inscribes the psyche. The second is Pichon Riviere (2017) whose concept of 'the link' (el vinculo) promotes an approach to mental illness, not as a pathology of the isolated individual, but as a pathology of links that joins each person to the generations, their families, their communities, and the current social world (Scharff, 2011, p. 34; Losso & Scharff, 2017, p. 244). For both theorists, the collective precedes the triad, the triad precedes the dyad, and the dyad precedes the individual. While Pichon Riviere has only recently begun to be translated into English and Lacan has gained better traction in academia than in clinical work, at least in the US, both are well-worth studying. Before going on, I wish also to acknowledge the many contemporary writers who have made important observations concerning the relationship of clinical practice to American culture and society. These include Altman, 2010, 2015; Cushman, 2017; Knafo & Lo Bosco, 2017; Lemma, 2017: and especially Layton, 2020.

However, on different ground, I would like to consider the dynamic processes of conscious and unconscious interaction between individual, family, community, and socio-cultural world which come to us from Bion (1962a, 1962b, 1963, 1965, 1970). Specifically, his meta-concepts of container-contained and the basic assumption groups, can serve as solid conceptual scaffolding for therapists trying to understand the psychological group turmoil of contemporary culture.

Theory of Container-Contained

Bion's dense and sometimes obscure texts can make it difficult to see how his theory of the mother-infant couple allows for extension into the heart of adult cultural group life as well. A brief recap of the theory of container-contained will be helpful.

In Bion's model of psychic development, 'O' (which represents infinite totality of reality) presses in upon the infant and is registered as raw experience*, β–elements*, which cannot as yet be tolerated, symbolized, or processed. The mother's *reverie* allows for a state of receptivity in taking in the infant's raw experience and transforming it into *α-elements*, which can be re-ingested by the infant in a more tolerable form, suitable for dreaming, thinking, linking, and learning from experience. This process of *α-function* is the essential relation between container and contained. Through gradual internalization of this repeated sequence, the infant begins to develop the capacity for α-function, formulating a sense of an internal container which becomes the foundation for tolerating psychic frustration and digesting experience, capacities essential to learning from experience throughout the lifespan.

In simple terms, things come your way, from the inside and from the outside which frustrate the desire for well-being. They challenge comfort, safety, security, knowledge, and omnipotence and create what Bion terms frustration. It follows then that the best capacities to develop in a successful analysis, and in maturation generally, is the capacity to tolerate frustration, because, if you can tolerate frustration long enough, it buys you time to develop *α-function* and creates thinking. This means containing and processing those parts of truth (emotional truth or factual truth) that are difficult, rather than splitting

them off or evacuating them through psychotic processes. In the Bion lexicon, "thinking" is closer in meaning to the colloquial *grok,* which means to fully apprehend, comprehend, empathically feel, process, and then consider action. The fact that the term *grok* comes from a visiting extra-terrestrial in Heinlein's 1961 science-fiction novel, Stranger in a Strange Land, suggests how difficult it is for us as a species.

Psychotic function is what ensues when *β–elements* are not contained through α-function, but are instead evacuated through projective identification, somatization, and hallucinosis (Bion, 1957). In short, β–elements must run a gauntlet of truth as Bion illustrated in Column 2 of his Grid (1970). Bion notes that all thinking is an interpretive version or narrative of the ultimate true facts of O. It produces what Grotstein termed "truthful fiction" (2007, p. 161). What varies is the degree of falsification, though insufficient attention has been given to variations in the quality of α-function itself (see Bandera, 2005 for a useful discussion). Transformation of β into α is an emotional process fraught with many instinctual obstacles (avoidance of pain, splitting, the quest for omnipotence, the fear of dependence, the pleasure principle, etc.). So, avoidance, splitting, and extreme evacuations are at the opposite end of tolerance of frustration. In discussing Bion, Meltzer (1978) suggests that we are fated to desire and to seek truth (the epistemophilic instinct) without being fully equipped to handle it emotionally.

Clearly, this pertains to the development of α-function at the large level in culture and groups. The relationship between container-contained and the functions of culture now come into focus. The result is that we find avoidance, obfuscation, denial, fact-twisting, evacuation, splitting, and projection characteristic of culture norms, myths and narratives. Culture consists of more or less implicitly shared systems of meaning-making which

replicate themselves and in the minds of individuals making it possible for them to see and think about themselves and the world in a way that is recognized and recognizable to the collective or environment that holds them (Dajani, 2017). In short while the practical objective function of culture is the creating of institutions, laws, and customs, its subjective and emotional function is that of container-contained. But what happens if culture conveys a vision that everyone can and should feel like a winner, while simultaneously, the rules are blurry, the processes are suspect, and there is a corrosive crisis of faith in institutions and traditions? What happens if the coarseness of political discourse and feuding creates a national atmosphere like a family falling apart during a contentious divorce? This is the fractured container into which creeps the fear, dread, and anxiety that therapists are witnessing in our consulting rooms.

Theory of Basic Assumption Groups

A second relevant dimension of Bion's theorizing that grew out of his experience in groups as a wartime psychiatrist (Bion, 1961), is based on the observation (Trotter, 2016) that our evolution as herd animals necessitates that we form groups to survive physically and emotionally. Our phylogenetic equipment makes it inevitable that we will participate in groups at two entirely different levels, the *work group* and the *basic assumption group.* The *work group* is the consciously agreed-upon mission of the group. The *basic assumption group* is the *unconscious* mission of the group which is unconsciously transmitted amongst members, and its subsets can be characterized as *dependent*, *fight-flight*, or *pairing.* In the dependent group, the members put all hopes and responsibility on a designated leader who is felt to be omnipotent. In the fight-flight group, the group maintains cohesion by identifying an enemy that is hated or feared. The pairing group is a

bit more complex. The idea is that the group has a latent phantasy that two members of the group will get together and reproduce a messiah or a messianic ideal that will save everyone. Using British culture as an example, Meltzer suggested dependent, fight-flight, and pairing groups were exemplified culturally by the church, the army, and the aristocracy respectively (1978, p. 16). In contemporary American politics, perhaps the pairing mission is suggested by the Donald Trump and his sloganeering to "make America great again".

The problem however is not partisan but is human and inherent in the architecture of our brains, which have evolved over millennia for the sake of rapid, instinctive decision-making, rather than patient, introspective sifting of ideas and emotions. As Lakoff (2008, 2016), a professor of cognitive science and linguistics, and psychoanalytic psychologist and neuroscience researcher Weston (2008), have so persuasively argued, political life is only distantly related to rational life. Primitive regressive feelings always emerge and can be played upon, dictating how the group will think, feel, react, and behave in the collective processes of group think, fundamentalism, tribal partisanship, projection, contempt for others, and other forms of splitting. For better or worse,

splitting is a developmentally natural process, creating order out of complexity, and of course, the guilt-free projection of blame elsewhere, where it can be attacked and defended against. In this sense, the paranoid-schizoid sufferer is also a closet optimist preserving the hope for a more utopian existence. Unfortunately, as we see culturally, this leads to a collapse of the capacity to contain, to think, to grok, and to respond wisely. This will be obvious to those observing the current U.S. political responses to the urgencies of ecological science, immigration, and so forth. The consequent splitting, demonizing, and tribalism in the basic assumption groups in turn create the bi-partisan

cultural wars reflected in American governance. Insofar as there exists a parental transference to "the government", to live in a bi-partisan conflict in which the parents fight, not for truth and the well-being of all, but rather to win at all costs, further erodes the containing function of culture and creates a deep disturbance in the individual-group psyche.

Death and Annihilation Anxiety

There is one other emotional dimension that enters group unconscious life mobilizing anxiety at the level of fight-flight group dynamics. This dimension is characterized by the fear of death, the fear of extinction, and the fear of insignificance. The widespread concern that America needs to be resuscitated and 'made great again', the dreadful sense on the left that democracy is sick and dying, and the shared apprehension on both sides that American exceptionalism and potency are waning, add up to what might be termed extinction anxiety (Reed, 2009). Adding to this are the more basic fears about the ecological calamities ahead making human existence perilous, and concretizing all of this are the actual dangers (as of this writing) presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the root is anxious awareness of one's own mortality, a subject not usually attended to in mainstream psychoanalysis.

The anxiety Freud was most concerned with was "signal anxiety", anxiety that signals the ego to create defenses when there are threats of loss of self, loss of the object, loss of the object's love, and loss of self-love (guilt). However, a second broad class of anxieties are essentially existential in nature and revolve around the four ultimate concerns: freedom, isolation, meaninglessness, and death (i.e., Becker, 1973; Yalom, 1980). With regard to the examined life, psychoanalysis as a whole has tri-furcated, leaving questions

of teleological meaning largely to the Jungians, and questions of death anxiety largely to the Existentialist analysts. Mainstream psychoanalysis has taken neurotic conflict with regard to drive, ego, object, and self as its slice of the pie.

Freud explored the dread of death in several papers (1915b, 1916, 1919), but his most influential and enduring statement was:

> …at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing in another way, that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality. (Freud 1915b, p. 288)

With this, he essentially took death anxiety off the table, much as he later swept aside religion and spirituality (1927), setting a tone which still prevails within mainstream psychoanalysis. When concerns about death appear in free association, there is a tendency to hear them as metaphoric derivatives of more familiar anxieties such as the annihilation of the self, separation anxiety, castration anxiety, and other 'calamities of childhood'. We do often speak of death and dying of others when it is traumatic or when it involves the grief and mourning, but less often about the reality of personal mortality. It is ironic to consider the fate of Freud's speculations about the death instinct (1920) and the way they were transformed in the work of Klein. Freud originally termed the death instinct the 'nirvana principle' because he speculated that it was an innate inclination towards absolute quiescence totally free of unpleasure or pleasure (what we would today call homeostasis). When Klein concluded that we sense and defend against this threatening inclination by turning it outward towards others, anxiety about death was again marginalized in favor of its defensive by product, aggression.

Still, many theorists have positioned awareness of transience and mortality as an essential task of adult development (Colarusso & Montero, 2007; Jacques, 1965;

Kernberg, 2008; Lachman, 1985; Meltzer & Harris, 1988; Yalom, 1980, 2008). As my own denial has decreased, I have observed that my patients, both old and young, reference their own mortality far more often than I had allowed myself to notice, and that very often the avoidance of death anxiety can be implicated in a range of everyday narcissistic, obsessional, and hysteric ways of being in the world.

Parsons (2011) has beautifully described both the obstacles and benefits to being able to represent death to ourselves and Yalom (2008) uses the phrase, 'staring at the sun', to capture the difficulty we have contemplating our own mortality if we are able to represent it from time to time. Nonetheless, it has long been noted that the capacity for gratitude (Klein, 1957) and creative living depend in large measure on our capacity to do so. The ancient Latin aphorism, 'carpe diem' ('seize the day'), is poised against 'memento mori' ('remember you will die') with the latter classically depicted by a human skull placed next to a burning candle on the philosopher's desk. To return to Bion, death is part of 'O' (Bion 1965, 1970), not just the deaths of others, but also our own inevitable deaths.

I am suggesting, then, that along with attention to container-contained and basic assumption groups, contemporary therapists trying to make sense of cultural events today, would do well to consider death anxiety and its defenses. In addition to studying the existential analysts and their thinking, we would benefit from interdisciplinary study, in particular, evolutionary psychology (Buss, 2015), experimental existential psychology (Greenberg, Koole, S. & Pyszczynski, 2004), and terror management theory (Harvell & Nisbett, 2016; Routledge & Vess, 2019). Evolutionary psychology and experimental existential psychology demonstrate persuasively that the unique human awareness of mortality, an evolutionary by-product of the human capacity for self-awareness and self-reflection, has a massive impact on how we create and live within culture. Archeological

evidence, evolutionary research, anthropology, and modern cognitive neuroscience converge in support of the idea that we solved the problem by uniquely human cultural patterns including art, language, religion, and political ideologies. Terror Management Theory, one of the most prominent theories in social psychology research in the last 30 years, takes up the hypotheses of Ernest Becker's 1973 book, *The Denial of Death,* to present research that demonstrates that the awareness of death unconsciously impacts mental health, physical health, human sexuality, romantic relationships, parenting, group and individual goals and aspirations, social and cultural identities, and intergroup relations. In short, death anxiety and defense against it are ubiquitous, although generally moving below our cultural radar. Strenger (2011) has brilliantly used all of the above to describe what he terms "the fear of insignificance" which is closely tied to death anxiety and Becker's concept of symbolic immortality (1973). Strenger suggests that the two main results of the fear of insignificance are celebrity culture with it promise of fame, and fundamentalist tribal cultural trends with their promise of certainty and belonging.

The link between death anxiety and Bion's model and culture is the process of α-function. In the process of container-contained form the emotional deep structure of culture, the backdrop for the enacting of basic assumption groups, and the retreat into thoughtlessness and partisan combativeness are both the result of, and the defense against the anxieties of the modern age and its sense of ecological and biological mortality.

Implications for Practice and Training

With regard to practice there are a number of implications which emerge from the considerations above. First, we need to continue to study and learn about culture from sources outside our standard individually oriented psychoanalytic literature, thereby

creating and building a stronger position of “anthropological psychoanalysis” (Akhtar, 2018) in our own minds. I would specifically recommend readings on evolutionary psychology, experimental existential psychology, and Terror Management Theory to get a sense of the meta-background of the individual <> collective dialectic.

Second, with Freud’s idea of the ‘reality principle’ hovering in the background of our profession, we need to be careful of efforts, conscious and unconscious in the countertransference to help patients simply and only ***adapt*** to their surroundings as a goal. To do so, we must work to be as cognizant of your collective psyche and implicit invisible boundaries. If we don’t do this, what is culturally “normal” tends to be seen as “mental health”. The subversive aspect of psychoanalytic work needs to be continually reclaimed, so that we are able to help individual patients more deeply recognize and process cultural pressures that are part and parcel of what Bollas termed the ‘unthought known’ (1987).

Third, it is of critical importance to avoid psychoanalytic reductionism, reducing interpretations to reactions to the outside world simply as derivatives of the infantile neurosis.

And finally, while there is often much attention to the *destructiveness* of the death instinct at work in patients’ emotional dynamics, there is insufficient attention within mainstream psychoanalysis to the effects of death anxiety on symptom formation and defense.

While part of the energy behind this paper comes from my once-and-forever younger 1960's self that sought to question things conventional and taken for granted, it is also driven by the influx of a new generation of young therapists who have emerged into professional life at a time where questions of social justice, binary identities, gender fluidity, and political and technological questions are front and center. While wisdom may come with age, so may complacency and systematic blind spots. From the younger therapists' perspective, too much of the psychoanalytic practice by the 'elders' is conducted wearing conventional blinders. As a group, we have moved from the intrapsychic, to the object-relational, to the interpersonal and relational. But our training and clinical practices have mostly been concerned with dynamics of early childhood life and, of course, how these are enacted in the transference/countertransference matrix of the analytic dyad. So, the first implication for training, is the need to extend our explorations to the effect of the social collective on the psyche. We also need more training on group dynamics, not because we necessarily work with groups, but because we *are* groups. The idea that analytic work is dyadic is true only of you do a body count, not a psychic count. Finally, our didactic training needs to catch up to reflect the move from psychoanalytic anthropology to anthropological psychoanalysis that I discussed earlier.

Concluding Comments

My central point in this paper has been, paraphrasing Winnicott (1960), that there's no such thing as an individual without a culture and that we need to enlarge our professional paradigm to incorporate the importance of culture as a container for the psyche which has become fractured and fragile. The container is more vulnerable and

beset by anxiety now than ever due such factors as climate change, the global pandemic underway, the post-modern deconstruction of truth and certainty (Wilber, 2017), the decline of America's hegemony, and the pervasive fear of insignificance in a global world in which we realize what a small part we each play (Strenger, 2011). Under the current global intensity of socio-economic and ecological pressures heating up the container, it is perhaps surprising that things are not yet worse in fracturing the emotional security previously provided by culture and cultural institutions.

Psychoanalysis changes in response to cultural change. Freud's patients were suffocated by repressions due to the taboos of bourgeois European culture. Post-World War II ego psychology responded to the Zeitgeist of peacetime re-stabilization by focusing on adaptation to cultural economic and family norms. In the relativism that began to develop once stability had returned and prosperity was in ascendance, the next problem was the increased freedom of the self's subjectivity, and this forms the shared link from Winnicott to Lacan and Kohut (c.f., Bollas, 1987). In the decades since 1968, the old hierarchy of values has been deconstructed, many sacred cows are dead, and there is an increased freedom for self-definition and intersubjectivity in the sensibility of the relational school.

As far back as 1997, the American Psychoanalytic Association asked Enrico Jones (an African American analyst) and Salman Akhtar (an Indian American analyst) to develop a bibliography for culture studies by analytic candidates (see also Foster et al, 1996). A complete and updated list can be found in Akhtar's indispensable book, *Mind, Culture, and Global Unrest: Psychoanalytic Reflections* (2018). But the recent cultural turmoil I have been discussing has added a new layer of generational complication in an age of multiple anxieties, cultural fragility, and existential threats to existence. Our

training and practice need to catch up and, as we become more aware of the effect of culture on the psyche, we need to take a more active role in moving outside our narrow professional circles to address the broader public in order to counter the reflexive and anti-intellectual mindlessness that characterizes the historical moment.

This paper obviously raises more questions than it answers, but I take solace in Bion's embrace of Maurice Blanchot's aphorism, as told to him by Andre Green: 'La reponse est le malheur de la question" (**"**the answer is the misfortune of the question") (Bion, 2005, p. 30). My hope is that this essay will stir further discussion and creativity in the on-going psychoanalytic project of integrating the influence of culture into theories of the psyche as we proceed towards an uncertain future.

**References for this and all other presentations are listed on a separate PDF*