

Training at Midcentury:

The Tension Between Individual and Group in the Psychoanalytic Institute

Jason Royal, PhD<sup>1</sup>

I'll begin with a brief chronology of the training institute, from 1920 to the early 1950s. I'll then focus on the theme, relevant for today, that the history of training outlines an ongoing tension, between the group and the individual within the development of the institute. To highlight this theme, I'll briefly discuss critical reflections on this history by three authors—Michael Balint, Siegfried Bernfeld, and Thomas Szasz.

A history of the training institute should begin with Max Eitingon, who, in 1920, founded the first institute, in Berlin (Reeder, 2004; Schroter, 2002). Eitingon was a Zurich-training psychiatrist who was in analysis with Freud around 1909. As George Makari recounts, Eitingon was dismayed by the cacophony of views on psychoanalysis when first visiting Freud's Wednesday evening discussions in 1906 (Makari, 2009). So it's interesting that by 1920, Eitingon himself was to be a prime agent for establishing institutional orthodoxy.

Eitingon's Berlin Institute was inspired both by his experience treating war neuroses (Reeder, 2004), and by Freud's post-war injunction that psychoanalysis prepare to treat the "masses," including the poor. The Berlin Institute would train analysts to meet this rising demand, while also fostering further research (Balint, 1948).

At first, Berlin's training program was loosely structured: course curriculum, for example, followed the interests of instructors. Course content focused on a

---

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence to: jroyal50@gmail.com

general psychoanalytic theory of the mind—a still exploratory theory difficult to teach in any systematic way and not yet fully linked with clinical application (Reeder, 2004). By later standards, training analyses remained brief (Balint, 1948).

But, this soon changed. In 1923, the Berlin Institute founded the first committee on training standards and activities (Reeder, 2004; Tardits, 2010), and Eitingon's tri-partite model of training was officially established (Schroter, 2008), including specific course work, supervised control cases, and the training analysis—whose minimal length was now determined by institutional requirements (Balint, 1948). Moreover, graduation from the institute was made requisite for admission to the psychoanalytic society—effectively closing the community to anyone but approved practitioners, a situation differing drastically from Freud's original society, which was, if anything, multi-disciplinary (Makari, 2009; Schroter, 2002).

Freud himself was ambivalent about the activities of Berlin (Schroter, 2002). Nevertheless, in 1924, Vienna established its own institute along Berlin lines (Reeder, 2004). London and other European, and American, cities followed (Schroter, 2002). The IPA Congress of 1925 then decreed that all local societies should form training committees, which would in turn combine to form an international training committee, the ITC (Schroter, 2002, 2008). Individual analysts were strongly discouraged from training activities outside of the institute (Reeder, 2004). By around 1927, a training curriculum had been standardized (Reeder, 2004; Tardits, 2010). So within a few years, psychoanalysis had been fully organized into a network of institutes, with training itself standardized and controlled by central authority. The capstone

to this process occurred in 1934, when the ITC decreed that any changes in local training rules required its approval (Reeder, 2004).

Of course, the battle over lay analysis had begun by the mid-1920s, leading eventually to the secession of American institutes from the IPA in the late 30s (Knight, 1953), followed, after the war, by the effective end of the ITC (Balint, 1948). The fight over lay analysis is interesting in that it showed how apparent questions about the training and qualifications of the individual psychoanalyst served as a proxy for underlying group conflicts around institutional power, control, and identity (Schroter, 2002). By the 1950s, the center of gravity for psychoanalysis had shifted to the US. Here, a marriage with mainstream psychiatry solidified psychoanalysis' success as a cultural force and the preeminent mode of treatment for mental illness. The number of training candidates in the US surged after the war (Knight, 1953).

But, some analysts at the time began to see another through-line within this history of apparent success, one that traces out how the standardizing of training requirements ran into direct conflict with basic psychoanalytic principles.

The Hungarian analyst Michael Balint, himself an early trainee at Berlin, first voiced such concerns in a paper titled "On the Psychoanalytic Training System," read to the British Society in 1947 (Balint, 1948). Citing Freud's deep concern that theoretical heresies, such as those of Adler and Jung, would threaten the survival of psychoanalysis itself, Balint argues that the original *modus operandi* of the analytic institute was to contain threats to the group's identity and to its influence posed by the heterodoxy of individual group members. Balint suggests that the prime lever of this containment policy was the creation of *training* conditions that aimed to limit students' freedom for

critical reflection on the nature of psychoanalysis. Moreover, Balint argued that a group superego of sorts was transmitted specifically through the training analysis, ensuring orthodoxy—even as it subverted the supposedly psychoanalytic principles of the analysis itself.

So Balint saw the institutional organization of training as a response to perceived dangers that were internal to psychoanalysis. On the other hand, Siegfried Bernfeld, addressing the San Francisco Institute in 1952, saw institutionalized training as a response to *external*, or cultural, forces that threatened the analytic group (Bernfeld, 1962). A bit about Bernfeld: he trained as a psychologist and educational theorist, and was active in the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society from the mid-1910s through the mid-1920s. He himself worked at the Berlin Institute in the late '20s. Bernfeld eventually settled in San Francisco after the war, where he continued to teach and practice until his death in the early 50s (Hoffer, 1955; Reider, 1954; Zilboorg, 1953).

Bernfeld notes that, after WWI, psychoanalysis gained prestige, in part, because of its insights into war trauma. And in turn, psychoanalytic ideas spread with increasing influence. To their surprise, analysts who'd joined the movement before the war no longer found themselves in a fringe group. And according to Bernfeld, this read as a danger, because the mere holding of psychoanalytic ideas would no longer serve as the mark of a specifically psychoanalytic identity. Thus, analysts came to use institutional power and structure, particularly in the form of training requirements and exclusions, as a means of securing the gates, as it were.

But, Bernfeld saw the costs of this security in its effects on learning in the institute, which at the time, he found to be authoritarian rather than

exploratory and creative. Moreover, he says that analysis itself already “tends to infantilize the analysand temporarily,” but with the analytic candidate, this state is intensified because of the pressures of institutional authority. Bernfeld believed that under these conditions, it becomes increasingly difficult for the trainee “to see psychoanalysis for what it really is—a tool to strengthen one’s intellectual, emotional, and social independence.”

Thus Bernfeld points directly to the conflict between the psychic effects that psychoanalysis ideally offers the individual—the “independence” he refers to—vs. the compliance to authority demanded of the student in the context of institutional power dynamics. And he worries that the exercise of power itself becomes a part of the ego ideal that candidates internalize. Bernfeld goes on to detail his vision of a training structure that is looser, less formalized—he likens it to pre-institute training—in which students were welcomed and engaged by the analytic community depending on the student’s interests and aptitudes. The idea is that trainees would eventually integrate into and play an active role in that community, without the exercise of rules and requirements.

In the midst of his argument, Bernfeld comments on the effects of institutional power dynamics on the capacity for critical reflection, saying that “in psychoanalysis, as elsewhere, institutionalization does not encourage thinking.” This question of power and its effects on critical thinking leads to my third author, Thomas Szasz.

Szasz was born in Budapest in 1920 and emigrated to the US in 1938. He trained in psychiatry and psychoanalysis, and went on to be a high-profile critic of mainstream psychiatry and its conception of mental illness (Carey, 2012). In his 1958 paper on the status of psychoanalytic training (Szasz, 1958), Szasz looks at power in institutes in the 1950s, when analytic training

was key to advancement in psychiatry, and when psychoanalysis itself was at the peak of its influence.

Szasz begins by questioning the nature of the training requirement. What is the real purpose, he asks, of imposing requirements on those who want to learn, and want to engage in the experiences needed to learn? Szasz goes on to argue that the effect of the requirement itself is to introduce the elements of “force” and “restriction” into training. Requirements thus realize a power structure, in which, to access training, the student must submit not primarily to the greater knowledge of institutional teachers, but rather their power. In exchange, the student gains the chance to win what Szasz sees as the group’s “trophies”—the final one being the designation “psychoanalyst.” But along with this exchange, the student has to give up an active stance of learning and critical thinking, and adopt a stance that Szasz views as one of increased powerlessness and dependence on the good graces of authority. Szasz felt that this kind of power structure within training shifts the purpose of the teaching institute toward a central aim of perpetuating the power structure itself. He believed that this, in turn, stunts the development of the field, because no constructive disagreement is possible.

Szasz also says that analytic training has to be understood as a form of *adult* learning, and that it cannot be taught as if its students are children. For him, adult learning entails what he calls an inverse relationship between power and learning: the more power and coercion exerted over adult students, the less they are free to learn through critical inquiry. Szasz ends his paper with a plea for psychoanalytic training in which teachers actively relinquish power, saying that “free inquiry needs freedom above everything else.”

So the visions of these three may seem utopian. How can you know training has happened without measures of its completion? How can you ensure competence without benchmarks? But—one might also ask: do benchmarks work in analytic training? Do they ensure competence, even as they cut against the grain of what is supposed to be learned? And if not ensuring competence, then what do benchmarks and requirements actually accomplish for students who already want to learn, to engage, and to do the work.

Still, though these authors are critical of institutionalized training, none of them argues against the institute. In fact their arguments assume that an individual who wants to become an analyst must have a group, within which to learn and be recognized—a group that will actually allow for creative inquiry.

In the end, it seems that psychoanalysis may itself be intertwined with this tension between individual and group. So what about this tension that seems to emanate from the free inquiry of the individual? What if this does disturb the group, because it disturbs an illusion of shared, fixed knowledge, of clarity, of identity? Here seems to be the location of the danger, but what is the danger exactly?

The irony is that, as clinicians, we spend our days listening for, well, *the tensions that disturb*. Our patients can fear this kind of tension because it seems to threaten the stability that they believe orients them in their lives. We try to find ways to make it possible to listen to those disturbing tensions, holding open the possibility that they lead to a trail that might be followed, to a communication that might be heard, or to a vitality that might be reclaimed.

The authors I've discussed were writing about psychoanalysis a half century ago, but I think what they say remains relevant. They're telling us that we too,

can be, and have been, terrified by these tensions that disturb, and they suggest that standardized training in its current form evolved, at least in part, in response to this fear. Maybe this *was* necessary when psychoanalysis, as a group and a profession, was fighting for a place in society.

But these authors are also telling us that the cost has been a loss of vitality: lost both to psychoanalysis as a field and to the individual student who wants not only to learn to be an analyst, but also to learn in the spirit of psychoanalysis itself at its best. Maybe there is a risk here, maybe a danger. But these authors point to the need to uncover this risk, this tension between the individual and the group that occurs around becoming an analyst. They're telling us to reclaim it, to foster it, and to use it. How to do so, is a question that I think lies quite close to the title question of this conference—what makes a psychoanalyst?

## References

- Balint, M. (1948). On the Psycho-Analytic Training System. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 29, 163–173.
- Bernfeld, S. (1962). On Psychoanalytic Training. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 31, 453–482.
- Carey, B. (2012, September 11). Dr. Thomas Szasz, Psychiatrist Who Led Movement Against His Field, Dies at 92. *New York Times*. Retrieved from [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)
- Hoffer, H. (1955). Siegfried Bernfeld—1892-1953. *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 36, 66–71.
- Knight, R. P. (1953). The Present Status of Organized Psychoanalysis in the United States. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 1, 197–221.
- Makari, G. (2009). *Revolution in Mind: The Creation of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Reeder, J. (2004). *Hate and Love in Psychoanalytical Institutions: The Dilemma of a Profession*. New York: Other Press.
- Reider, N. (1954). Siegfried Bernfeld—1892-1953. *Bulletin of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 10, 378–379.
- Schroter, M. (2002). Max Eitingon and the Struggle to Establish an International Standard for Psychoanalytic Training (1925-1929). *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 83, 875–893.
- Schroter, M. (2008). The Dissemination of the Berlin Model of Psychoanalytic Training: A Sketch of the International Training Commission 1925-1938. *Psychoanalysis and History*, 10, 205–223.
- Szasz, T. S. (1958). Psycho-Analytic Training—A Socio-Psychological Analysis of its History and Present Status. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 39, 598–613.
- Tardits, A. (2010). *The Trainings of the Psychoanalyst*. (M. du Ry, Trans.). London: Karnac.
- Zilboorg, G. (1953). Siegfried Bernfeld—1892-1953. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 22, 571–572.