



Where is psychoanalysis today? Sixty-two psychoanalysts share their subjective perspectives on the state of the art of psychoanalysis: A qualitative thematic analysis¹

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Abstract

Today it is still necessary and useful to deal with the empirical foundations and cultural dimensions of a discipline such as psychoanalysis that has played a vital role in shaping the contemporary world, on both sociocultural and clinical levels. This study aimed to describe and summarize the perspectives of experienced psychoanalysts on important aspects of psychoanalysis today. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 62 psychoanalysts. The interview data were processed using a theory-informed thematic analysis. There were 12 macro-themes: important aspects of psychoanalysis, important authors in psychoanalysis today, “contemporary psychoanalysis,” the proliferation of psychoanalytic “schools,” psychoanalytic identity and psychotherapy, psychoanalytic training, the Oedipus complex, dreams, the relationship between psychoanalytic theory and outcome and process research, the relationship between psychoanalysis and research in the neurosciences, empirically validated psychoanalytic concepts, and the marginalization of psychoanalysis. Our study revealed the image of a pluralistic psychoanalysis that the participants interviewed show they have, with various schools/definitions/sources, where Freud and the classical model are contested by numerous other approaches.

Key words: *psychoanalysis, psychoanalytic psychotherapy, crisis of psychoanalysis, psychoanalytic pluralism, research on psychoanalysis.*

Introduction

Background

Psychoanalysis provided the source of the talking cure and, until half a century ago, had a great influence on training and practice in psychiatry and psychology (Norcross, VandenBos, Freedheim, 2011). Nevertheless, the scientific standing of contemporary psychoanalysis is unclear (Paris, 2017, 2019; Salkovskis & Wolpert, 2012), probably due to the epistemic difficulties that it started to face in the context of twentieth-century psychiatry (Fonagy, 2003, 2015). It is also less present in the general culture and arts of the age of postmodernism, except for the stereotypical image of psychoanalysts in films (which is sometimes essentially pre-psychoanalytic; Trichet & Marion, 2017). However, psychoanalysis can still offer helpful insights and improvements within modern mental health practice

(Fonagy & Lemma, 2012; Stefana, 2017; Ulberg & Dahl, 2018; Yakeley, 2018), as long as there is awareness that the implementation of empirical and conceptual research is the keystone to assure its future as a science and a profession.

Although psychoanalysis – as a *corpus* of theories on, and derived therapeutics for, human mental functioning – should dwell in the academic world (Wallerstein, 2009), historically there is a clear split between, on the one hand, psychoanalytic education and practice and, on the other hand, research community and universities (Wallerstein, 2011). Training in classical psychoanalysis is a long process usually provided by private psychoanalytic institutes instead of universities, so most of the trainers are clinicians belonging to private associations and unfamiliar with the contemporary educational methodologies and scientific research culture that characterizes universities (Dimitrijevic, 2018;

¹The original data analyzed in the article are included in No. 3, Vol. 50, 2016, of the journal *Psicoterapia e Scienze Umane* (see www.psicoterapiaescienzeumane.it/2016.htm#speciale).

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Gonzalez-Torres, Fernandez-Rivas & Penas, 2016). This kind of monopoly of the private institutes and their members in providing a recognized qualification to psychoanalysts is something particularly harmful for scientific progress (Makari, 2010), does not facilitate overcoming the educational and research inadequacies of traditional psychoanalytic training systems (Kernberg, 2011a, 2011c, 2016; Wallerstein, 2009), and might restrain the improvement of therapeutic efficacy and effectiveness of psychoanalysis.

Among the many reasons for the current widespread misunderstanding between psychoanalytic therapists and academic researchers (Buchholz & Kächele, 2018; McWilliams, 2013), a particularly important one is that researchers who try to do systematic in-depth research on psychotherapy are in a paradoxical situation: funding agencies do not give grants for psychological treatments with no or limited empirical validity, and analytic researchers cannot demonstrate such validity without being funded to do such empirical studies. Consistently with this, a few years ago one of the present authors (A.S.) developed a psychoanalytically oriented interdisciplinary research project aiming to investigate the relational aspects of the assessment and treatment process in the care of mood-disordered patients and submitted it for an international grant. The project was not funded, and among the weaknesses identified by one of two reviewers there was the following: “The new competences (e.g., neuroscience and technology) are important, but their integration in a psychoanalytical framework is unlikely to be highly competitive.” It was not the only, or even the most important weakness reported by reviewers, but nevertheless it was based on aspects of competitiveness in academic and research environments rather than on scientific reasons.

Additionally, not enough scientific discussions take place among analysts belonging to different schools and/or orientations (Gonzalez-Torres *et al.*, 2016), not to mention the discussions between analysts and other mental health specialists (Eizirik & Foresti, 2018; Imbasciati, 2017). Such a dangerous attitude seems to be reflected in the otherwise scientifically inexplicable deficit of recent citations in psychoanalytic articles and books compared with psychiatric and clinical psychology publications. As shown by a recent pilot study, the percentage of recent (i.e., not older than 10 years) citations in nonpsychoanalytic journals was double that in psychoanalytic ones (Gonzalez-Torres *et al.*, 2016). It should be also noted that many psychoanalytic journals have strong ties to specific institutes or societies, and some of

them require that the author is a member of this or that society (Gonzalez-Torres *et al.*, 2016). Often, this is an unwritten rule (i.e., it is not reported in the authors’ guidelines of a specific journal) that sometimes can be made explicit via e-mail in response to a rejected (without being reviewed) submission, as happened to one of the present authors (A.S.). It must be noted that the journal involved in this latter personal anecdote was at the time indexed in both the Scopus and Web of Science databases. This indicates an exclusionism more related to religious sects rather than scientific communities (Stepansky, 2009).

In order for psychoanalysis to continue being useful, and indeed for it to survive (Buchholz & Dimitrijevic, 2018), facets of psychoanalytic knowledge need to be discussed, synthesized (Cena & Stefana, 2020; Cena, Lazzaroni, & Stefana, 2021; Willemsen, Inslegers, Meganck, Geerardyn, Desmet, & Vanheule, 2015), and subjected to empirical tests to be confirmed, revised, or abandoned (Eagle, 2011, 2018; Luyten, 2015). However, the efforts made thus far have still not yielded the desired results. Moreover, it remains a dilemma which principle(s) to use for synthesizing. It is easy to agree that it is better to be focused than scattered, but still it does not seem possible to agree what to focus on and what to leave out, or how. In a perspective that places clinical practice at the heart of the psychoanalytic research enterprise, the primary goal must be the good of the patient – this would open access to a specific attitude towards scientific research that helps to overcome any ambivalence.

A large group of psychoanalysts, inspired by David Tuckett, “has tried to develop ways to describe and compare different methods of practising as a psychoanalyst” (Tuckett, 2008, p. 5). Their 10-year project supported by the European Psychoanalytical Federation has attracted considerable attention (it was quoted 224 times when this paper was in revision), but it is still unclear what major results it has yielded so far. It is worth mentioning, in this regard, the study of Blagys and Hilsenroth (2000), which identified empirically the process and technique of manualized psychodynamic therapy in order to reliably differentiate it from other manualized techniques, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (see Shedler, 2010).

To better understand the current status of the psychoanalytic field and, more importantly, to try to foresee how it could develop in the near future, we conducted an initial survey with those who deal with these questions daily, as clinicians, authors, and researchers. Sixty-two collaborators of the

Italian journal *Psicoterapia e Scienze Umane*, prominent names in the world of psychoanalysis, from different countries and backgrounds, helped us sketch a map of this world. This is not a definite map as it lacks many details and nuances, and does not portray some large areas and groups. But it is the first attempt of its kind and may provide a useful introduction on which future exploratory missions can be based.

Brief presentation and history of Psicoterapia e Scienze Umane

Psicoterapia e Scienze Umane (Psychotherapy and the Human Sciences) is an Italian interdisciplinary quarterly journal founded in 1967 by Pier Francesco Galli, MD. It is one of the most widely circulated journals of this field in Italy, and has always been published without interruption. Its main areas of interest are the theory of psychoanalytic technique, the history of ideas in psychotherapy, the training of mental health professionals, and the interface between psychotherapy and other disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, sociology, history, etc. It is independent of any association or institution, never receives external financial support, and never publishes advertisements, that is, it challenges the market (it is supported solely by subscriptions and sales in bookstores). It is indexed in various databases (it is the only psychotherapy journal in Italy indexed in the Web of Science and is also in the Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing [PEP] Web archive).

The cultural project of *Psicoterapia e Scienze Umane* begun in the early 1960s within the Milan Group for the Advancement of Psychotherapy, led by Pier Francesco Galli (a group that in the early 1970s took the name *Psicoterapia e Scienze Umane*), that was already characterized by two book series: the Library of Psychiatry and Clinical Psychology (founded in 1959 by Pier Francesco Galli and Gaetano Benedetti with the Milanese publisher Feltrinelli, with 87 volumes; www.psicoterapiaescienzeumane.it/CollanaFeltrinelli.pdf), and the Program of Psychology, Psychiatry, and Psychotherapy, founded in 1964 by Pier Francesco Galli with the Turin publisher Boringhieri, with about 300 volumes; www.psicoterapiaescienzeumane.it/pppp.pdf). At that time in Italy there were no university courses in psychology, and psychiatry was not yet autonomous from neurology, so that these book series constituted the backbone for the training of some generations of Italian psychoanalysts and mental health professionals. Later, other book series connected to the journal were founded, such as the Bollati Boringhieri book series The

Psychoanalytic Observation (24 volumes), and the Einaudi book series Traces from Psychoanalysis.

Since 1962, the group of *Psicoterapia e Scienze Umane* has organized a series of seminars and continuing education courses in order to update Italian mental health professionals in psychiatry, psychology, psychotherapy, and psychoanalysis. These seminars have been given by European and US colleagues, for example by, among others, Nathan Ackerman, Silvano Arieti, Michael Balint, Gustav Bally, Franco Basaglia, Gaetano Benedetti, Medard Boss, Hilde Bruch, Johannes Cremerius, Franco Fornari, Ronald Laing, Eugène Minkowski, Christian Müller, Cesare Musatti, Gisela Pankow, Paul-Claude Racamier, Marguerite Sechehaye, Mara Selvini Palazzoli, and many others.

Over the years, the members of the Advisory Board of the journal have included Johannes Cremerius (Freiburg), Morris N. Eagle (Los Angeles), Lawrence Friedman (New York), John E. Gedo (Chicago), Merton M. Gill (Chicago), Robert R. Holt (New York), Paul Parin (Zürich), Paul Roazen (Boston), Howard Shevrin (Ann Arbor), Frank J. Sulloway (Berkeley), Helmut Thomä (Ulm), Paul L. Wachtel (New York), Jerome C. Wakefield (New York), Joseph Weiss (San Francisco), Drew Westen (Atlanta), Peter H. Wolff (Boston), and many others.

For more information on the history of the journal and the group of *Psicoterapia e Scienze Umane*, see Galli (2013) and the journal's website in English: www.psicoterapiaescienzeumane.it/presentaz-engl.htm.

Objective

The current study aimed to describe and summarize the subjective perspectives of experienced psychoanalysts about some aspects of contemporary psychoanalysis.

Method

Participants

The participants (Table 1) were highly experienced psychoanalysts affiliated with the editorial board of *Psicoterapia e Scienze Umane*, or had published papers in that journal, given seminars organized by it, or been in contact with the editorial board. According to the editors (Pier Francesco Galli, MD, Marianna Bolko, MD, and Paolo Migone, MD), each participant had a good insight into the situation of psychoanalysis at that moment; this survey was conducted for the Special Issue No. 3, 2016, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the journal.

Table 1. List of participants' names

Massimo Ammaniti, Jacques André, Simona Argentieri, Marco Bacciagaluppi, Jessica R. Benjamin, Sergio Benvenuto, Werner Bohleber, Christopher Bollas, Philip M. Bromberg, Wilma Bucci, Fred Busch, Luigi Cancrini, Giacomo B. Contri, Mauricio Cortina, Heinrich Deserno, Antonio Di Ciaccia, Jack Drescher, Morris N. Eagle, Antonino Ferro, Anna Ferruta, Peter Fonagy, Allen Frances, Sophie Freud, Lawrence Friedman, Glen O. Gabbard, Roland Gori, Jay Greenberg, Pedro Grosz, Ita Grosz-Ganzoni, André Haynal, Bob Hinshelwood, Horst Kächele, Otto F. Kernberg, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Joseph D. Lichtenberg, Vittorio Lingiardi, Giovanni Liotti, George Makari, Nancy McWilliams, David Meghnagi, Silvio Merciai, Robert Michels, Emilio Modena, Francesco Napolitano, Thomas H. Ogden, Massimo Recalcati, Christa Rohde-Dachser, Berthold Rothschild, René Roussillon, Jeremy D. Safran, Dominique Scarfone, David Shapiro, Jonathan Shedler, George Silberschatz, Michael H. Stone, Frank J. Sulloway, Mary Target, Thomas von Salis, Paul L. Wachtel, Jerome C. Wakefield, David L. Wolitzky, Luigi Zoja

The sample comprised 62 participants (84% male), who were from the USA ($n = 27$), Italy ($n = 16$), Switzerland ($n = 6$), Germany ($n = 5$), the UK ($n = 4$), France ($n = 3$), and Canada ($n = 1$). Their replies were originally written in English, French, German, and Italian (some quotations in this article are translations by the current authors). Just under half of the participants ($n = 30$) were members of the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA). The percentage of respondents for each survey question varied between 58% and 90% (mean = 72, standard deviation = 9).

Procedure for data collection

Participants were contacted by e-mail and asked to answer in writing a series of 12 questions concerning the central issues of psychoanalysis (Table 2). The instruction given to the participants was as follows:

We would like your answers to be, as much as possible, brief. It is not necessary to follow the sequence of the questions; some of them may be skipped in light of the respondent's areas of interest. What is important is that the answers be concise. The questions to which you should respond, or that you can use as starting points for your considerations, are the following . . .

Survey protocol

The survey questionnaire consisted of 12 questions (see Table 2). It was developed by Bolko and Migone based on issues they identified within the existing psychoanalytic literature and debates. The survey was semistructured but remained broad to allow participants to describe what was relevant to the specific topic from their perspective.

Data analysis

A theory-informed thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was carried out separately for each survey question. This inductive approach was used to describe and summarize the range of responses to a particular topic of discussion, making it possible to point out shared meaning as well as disjunctions or contrasts in meaning. The themes are defined as "a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon" (p. 161).

Results

Twelve major themes were identified (i.e., one theme for each open-ended question): important aspects of

Table 2. Interview schedule

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1. Which aspects of psychoanalysis strike you as especially important, or would you like to comment on?
 2. Is there an author you find particularly important in psychoanalysis today and, if so, why?
 3. What are the main characteristics of so-called "contemporary psychoanalysis," and when approximately do you think it began?
 4. What is your attitude toward the proliferation of psychoanalytic "schools"?
 5. Psychoanalytic identity and psychotherapy: how would you set the problem?
 6. Psychoanalytic training is surely an important and much debated issue. In the history of organized psychoanalysis, do you think that some aspects of training have changed? If there have been no major changes, do you think that some changes will be possible? Which changes would you welcome?
 7. Does the concept of the Oedipus complex still have meaning? If so, can you elaborate regarding the meaning it has?
 8. What is left of Freudian dream theory and, in general, which role dreams play in the therapeutic process?
 9. How do you see the relationship between psychoanalytic theory and outcome and process research?
 10. How do you see the recent developments in the neurosciences, and in general in neurobiology, vis-à-vis psychoanalysis? And what about the relationship between psychoanalysis and research in psychology and, in general, other disciplines?
 11. Which central concepts and formulations have retained their validity? What is the evidence for them?
 12. How do you understand the increasing marginalization of psychoanalysis?
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psychoanalysis, important authors in psychoanalysis today, “contemporary psychoanalysis,” the proliferation of psychoanalytic “schools,” psychoanalytic identity versus psychotherapy, psychoanalytic training, the Oedipus complex, dreams, the relationship between psychoanalytic theory and outcome and process research, the relationship between psychoanalysis and research in the neurosciences, empirically validated psychoanalytic concepts, and the marginalization of psychoanalysis. [Supplementary Table S1](#) online provides illustrative quotes for each theme or subtheme that occurred.

Important aspects of psychoanalysis

Discussing which aspects of psychoanalysis struck them as especially important, the participants’ contributions were characterized by a high level of heterogeneity of content. However, almost all the respondents (91% of 56) talked about some aspects belonging to at least one of the following three macro-thematic categories: theory (e.g., Freudian, trauma, or theory of mind; $n = 33$), method ($n = 22$), and clinical practice ($n = 22$).

Important authors in psychoanalysis today

In total, 68 authors were indicated as being particularly important for psychoanalysis today. The most mentioned were John Bowlby and Donald Winnicott (six votes each), Wilfred Bion (five votes), Peter Fonagy and Sigmund Freud (four each), Philip Bromberg, Morris Eagle, Otto Kernberg, Melanie Klein, Heinz Kohut, Jacques Lacan, Hans Loewald, and Stephen Mitchell (three votes each). Five participants responded that nobody in particular could be indicated, while 17 participants did not respond to the question.

Additionally, we categorized the above-mentioned authors into two different groups: (1) authors who had published all their articles (indexed in the PEP-Web archive) before 2010, and (2) authors who had published at least one original article in the previous 10 years (2010–2020). Eighteen participants (41% of 44) indicated authors who published all their articles before 2010, 11 participants (25%) indicated authors who published at least one original article in the last decade, while the remainder (34%) pointed out at least one author from each of the two groups.

“Contemporary psychoanalysis”

When participants talked about the so-called “contemporary psychoanalysis,” about a third of them pointed out that it is represented by the relational

(23% of 44) and the intersubjective (11%) models. A further third (30%) indicated that it is characterized by theoretical pluralism; five of these respondents, however, underlined that the relational ($n = 4$) and intersubjective ($n = 1$) approaches are the most common. Three participants (7%) maintained that psychoanalysis has always been “contemporary.” Finally, five participants (11%) offered responses that could not be aggregated into common themes.

The proliferation of psychoanalytic “schools”

Related to their attitudes toward the proliferation of psychoanalytic “schools,” participants’ replies were divided into three groups: favorable (22% of 51), adverse (35%), and those (18%) pointing out a complex position (i.e., the simultaneous presence of positive and negative aspects) related to such proliferation. The remaining 25% showed responses that could not be traced back to a common theme.

Additionally, six participants (12% of the entire sample) found this phenomenon unavoidable, and eight participants (16%) wished for a greater dialogue between “schools.” Overall, only four participants (8%) mentioned empirical research as a way to settle disputes between schools.

Psychoanalytic identity and psychotherapy

The majority of the participants (77% of 47) thought that psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic psychotherapy could be traced back to the same continuum. According to this subsample, the position on the continuum seems to vary depending on three main aspects: technical parameters (14 of 36), treatment objectives (13 of 36), and a wider concept of method (9 of 36).

Overall, some of these respondents (17%) advocate that considering the identity of psychoanalysis as distinct from psychoanalytic psychotherapy is a false problem. Furthermore, a proportion of the participants (17%) maintain that differentiation is likely linked to political issues.

Psychoanalytic training

When asked about the issue of psychoanalytic training, just under half of participants (46% of 42) noted the importance of training analysis (i.e., the personal analysis of candidates), and almost all of them (17 of 19) highlighted that such training analysis should be conducted outside of institutes in order to be undisturbed by external influences. Furthermore, five of these respondents described

the “classical” tripartite model of psychoanalytic education (the so-called Eitingon model) by adding the importance of seminars and treatment of control cases under supervision. Overall, only a few participants suggested that the training programs should include the teaching of some nonpsychoanalytic theories and techniques ($n = 7$) and the use of empirical research methods ($n = 4$). Five participants wished for the fostering of critical thinking skills in the candidates. Finally, it must be noted that seven participants agreed with Otto Kernberg’s (1986, 1996, 2000, 2011c, 2012, 2014) critiques regarding structural aspects of psychoanalytic training institutes and his recommendations to promote positive changes. Eighteen participants gave responses that could not be traced back to a common theme.

The Oedipus complex

When asked about the Oedipus complex, almost all the participants (93% of 46) expressed an opinion that the concept is still meaningful. However, some of these respondents seemed not at all convinced of the usefulness of the concept. Four participants specified that it is not a ubiquitous and universal phenomenon. On the other hand, a minority (7%) was very critical towards the concept of the Oedipus complex (e.g., Wakefield, 2016). Additionally, 12 of 46 respondents described it in terms of a transition from dyadic to triadic relationships, triangulation process, symbolic triangulation, thirdness, or third position.

Dreams

Discussing the dream theory, the majority of the participants (57% of 37) maintained that currently it is modified compared to the original Freudian formulations. It is interesting to report that there was a unique, strong, and scientifically motivated critique of Freudian dream theory (e.g., Sulloway, 2016). On the other side, a minority (13%) considered that the validity of Freudian dream theory remains substantially unchanged to date, especially for what concerns the basic assumption that a dream is the fulfillment of a wish.

Additionally, with regards to the role of dreams in the therapeutic process, the majority of respondents (77% of 39) argue that dream is a window into unconscious processes. However, only for three of them is the dream *the* “royal road” to the unconscious. Finally, 18% of participants explicitly described the dream as a form of unconscious thinking.

The relationship between psychoanalytic theory and outcome and process research

Almost half of the participants (47% of 43) found the relationship between psychoanalytic theory and outcome and process research possible and useful. On the other hand, a minority (16%) considered such a relationship impossible. Thirteen participants (30%) maintained that although this relationship might be useful, current outcome and process research methodologies are not suitable to verify complex psychoanalytic assumptions. The remaining 9% of participants gave responses that could not be tracked to a common theme.

The relationship between psychoanalysis and research in neurosciences

The vast majority of respondents (86% of 43) found that the dialogue between psychoanalysis and neuroscientific research is or could be possible and fruitful. Overall, 22 of these respondents (about a half) suggested that the utility of this dialogue lies in the possibility to validate or falsify psychoanalytic theories. Furthermore, 11 of the respondents underlined the existence of significant epistemological differences. The remaining 14% believed that although research in the neurosciences and psychology can be interesting, a dialogue is useless due to different epistemological levels.

Empirically validated psychoanalytic concepts

When asked about which central concepts and formulations have retained their validity until today and what is the evidence for them, some agreement existed only related to the following few concepts: the unconscious (58% of 36), defense mechanisms (39%), transference (31%), conflict (22%), countertransference (14%), and trauma (14%). Other concepts were mentioned by not more than two or three participants: attachment (8%), dreams (8%), therapeutic alliance (6%), and the critical influence of early childhood experiences (6%). With regards to the empirical evidence in support of these concepts, only a few respondents provided evidence to support their assertions, and even those were impressionistic and scientifically not convincing.

Marginalization of psychoanalysis

Concerning the increasing marginalization of psychoanalysis, the respondents identified internal factors (30% of 44), external factors (25%), and a combination of the two (30%) as being mainly responsible for it. The most commonly reported

internal factors were non-integration of some concepts and theories, openness of psychoanalytic training exclusively to mental health professionals, isolation, bad marketing, a crisis in psychoanalytic institutions, and the lack of empirical research. Frequently mentioned external factors included the spread of a neoliberalism culture, limited economic resources, increased competition from other psychotherapies and drugs therapies, and the economical side of health systems.

A minority of participants (16%) maintained that there was no marginalization of psychoanalysis; however, five of them suggested that some factors (internal, external, or both) presented obstacles.

Discussion

This qualitative study is the first attempt to describe and summarize the opinions of a group of psychoanalysts about some important theoretical and methodological aspects of psychoanalysis. This enhances our understanding of the real situation, revealing the image of a pluralistic psychoanalysis without one dominant doctrine or one charismatic author followed by a creed. Below, we discuss the main findings in more detail.

We found a very high level of heterogeneity of content reported by our respondents when discussing which aspects of psychoanalysis struck them as especially important. Similarly, 40 respondents chose 68 different “lead” authors, 13 of which received three or more votes, and none of which received more than six. Winnicott and Bion shared the first place with six votes each, twice as many as Freud, with three votes. This is also reflected by the list of top 10 most read and most cited papers on PEP-Web. Mid-twentieth-century British authors heavily dominate both lists, and Freud is most often completely absent (see also Miller, 2015). These two findings show a fragmentation of the field, where there is no clear consensus on important issues and sources. At the same time, there seems to be a great freedom of choice and independence among our sample of experienced clinicians. Twenty-two participants did not respond to the question on the important authors in psychoanalysis today, or responded that nobody in particular can be indicated, letting us hypothesize that, according to them, the preoccupation with this issue should perhaps be diminished.

Consistent with what emerged regarding the currently important psychoanalytic authors, the answers about “contemporary psychoanalysis” indicate that it is characterized by a pluralism of theoretical perspectives, even if a relational/intersubjective model seems predominant. These findings are

consistent with the increasing communication and exchange within and between the major psychoanalytic regions (i.e., Europe and North and South America), which has profoundly changed the psychoanalytic world during the last few decades. One must also bear in mind that non-IPA-affiliated analysts gave and still give a fundamental contribution (Migone, 2019).

A further important finding is that our participants do not define psychoanalysis. However, maybe as a consequence of the above-mentioned increasing communication within and between the major psychoanalytic regions, they broadly agree in conceptualizing the difference between psychoanalysis and psychotherapy as gradient on a continuum. According to our results, the position on the continuum varies depending on technical parameters, treatment objectives, and a wider conception of the method. Any distinction between psychoanalysis and psychotherapy based on extrinsic criteria (Gill, 1984; Migone, 2000, 2020), such as the frequency of sessions or the use of couch versus vis-à-vis position, appears to be a political statement (whose unique result is to hinder the development of psychoanalysis). As Fonagy (2016) underlines, the mechanism of change of the mind cannot heal differently in once- or four-times-weekly therapy. Technique and method should be modified in the interest of the specific patient. For this reason, all analytically informed treatments are positioned at all times on a certain (mobile) point on the above-mentioned continuum, which should depend mainly on the patient’s specific needs, capacities, and wishes, and this was also Gill’s (1984) position.

Analysts’ interventions can be conceptualized on an expressive–supportive continuum (Gabbard, 2017; Luborsky, 1984): at the end of the expressive pole are psychoanalytic interpretations, while at the end of the supportive pole are advice and encouragement. The treatment approach must be flexible and tailored to the patient, and not the theory (Stefana & Gamba, 2013). Regarding the treatment objectives, at one extreme there is symptom relief (which is the common goal), and at the other an open-ended exploration of inner experience. Usually, the degree to which the latter objective has been achieved will be possible to assess only at the end of the treatment.

In line with the points previously discussed, our findings indicate that psychoanalysis is characterized by a proliferation of “schools” (Jiménez, 2008; Kernberg, 2011b; Leuzinger-Bohleber, 2015; Wallerstein, 1988, 2005), by a “pluralism of theoretical perspectives, of linguistic and thought conventions, of distinctive regional, cultural, and language emphases” (Wallerstein, 1988, p. 5). All respondents agreed

on that point. However, there was a rift when considering the effects of such a pluralism, which highlights a lack of understanding of the epistemology of psychoanalysis. The majority considered it negative because the fragmentation of the psychoanalytic field makes it difficult to progress as a scientific discipline, while a minority considered it positive because the state of pluralism indicates a mature state of a scientific discipline. Thus, two completely opposite positions obtain the same results, that is, the status of psychoanalysis as a scientific discipline, another finding that shows the confusion and fragmentation of the field. Maybe it could be useful for psychoanalysts to adopt an attitude of “reflexive skepticism” and “critical pluralism” that allows going beyond “comparative psychoanalysis” and even beyond theoretical integration, in order to be able to learn from each other’s opposing views (Lewis, 2017) and foster discussion and debate between different schools (Gonzalez-Torres et al., 2016). But above and beyond this, the psychoanalytic community should develop a serious empirical research program to establish which theories and techniques are better and for whom/what.

The issue of psychoanalytic schools is very closely linked to the training of candidates. The psychoanalytic educational system has been subjected to increasing well-founded criticism from a small number of colleagues over the years (e.g., Bolko & Rothschild, 2006; Casement, 2005; Dimitrijevic, 2018; Kernberg, 1986, 1996, 2000, 2011c, 2012, 2014, 2016; Kernberg & Michels, 2016; Wallerstein, 2007, 2010). Two different models were also proposed recently: one based on the study of empirical research (Gerber & Knopf, 2015), and the other where independent training institutes and universities should divide responsibilities (Dimitrijevic, 2018). Still, the changes have thus far been limited. Indeed, our results overall portray a rather superficial view of the current critical status of psychoanalytic training, and some respondents seem unaware of the many discussions on the crisis of psychoanalytic education that have been published in recent years.

Further important topics covered by the questionnaire are the relationships between psychoanalysis and both psychotherapy research and the neurosciences. With regard to the empirical research, the number of participants who replied to the two questions about its importance varied between 36 and 43, which is between 60% and 70% of the total sample, and it is unclear why the others skipped this part of the survey. It could be a reason for optimism that, among those who did reply to these questions, 47% consider process and outcome research “possible and useful.” Almost a half of them said that this could help us validate or falsify psychoanalytic

theories, while there are also those who find research utterly useless.

Despite the considerable empirical support in the last decades for both psychoanalytic therapy (outcome research; Briggs, Netuveli, Gould, Gkarakavella, Gluckman, Kangogyere, et al., 2019; Fonagy, Rost, Carlyle, McPherson, Thomas, Pasco Fearon, et al., 2015; Leuzinger-Bohleber, Hautzinger, Fiedler, Keller, Bahrke, Kallenbach, et al., 2019; Migone, 2021; Shedler, 2010) and basic psychoanalytic constructs (process-outcome research; Eubanks, Muran, & Safran, 2018; Flückiger, Del Re, Wampold, & Horvath, 2018; Hayes, Gelso, Goldberg, & Kivlighan, 2018; Høglend, 2014; Høglend, Bøgwald, Amlo, Marble, Ulberg, Sjaastad, et al., 2008; Lilliengren, Falkenström, Sandell, Mothander, & Werbart, 2015; Perry & Bond, 2012; Roy, Perry, Luborsky, & Banon, 2009; Stefana, Bulgari, Youngstrom, Dakanalis, Bordin, & Hopwood, 2020; Stefana, Youngstrom, & Vieta, 2021; Talia, Daniel, Miller-Bottome, Miccoli, Brambilla, Safran, et al., 2014), our results suggest that almost a half of the analysts interviewed appear to have little or no knowledge about the epistemological and methodological aspects of an empirical psychoanalytic research and its findings. This is less surprising when we consider that these research articles are usually published in nonpsychoanalytic journals. Others have claimed that some psychoanalysts consider doing empirical research some sort of high treason (Schachter & Kächele, 2012) or are allergic to it (Birksted-Breen, 2008, p. 2), or that teaching them methodology is extremely difficult (Buchholz & Kächele, 2018). As a confirmation, among the first 100 most cited journal articles from the last five years on the PEP-Web Archive, there is not a single research article.

In contrast to the position on empirical research on psychotherapy outcome and process, psychoanalysts appear interested, almost enthusiastic, in neuroscientific research. In the last three decades, neuroscience has moved towards the investigation of possible modifications of neural patterns related to psychopathological status improvements following psychotherapeutic treatment (Cozolino, 2017; Kandel, 1998), as well as toward the exploration of mind-reading ability (Gallese, Eagle, & Migone, 2007). The interconnection between the two disciplines goes beyond evidence of effectiveness alone (Salone, Di Giacinto, Lai, De Berardis, Iasevoli, Fornaro, et al., 2016; Solms, 2018). Indeed, a staggering 75% of our participants found this dialogue “possible and fruitful.” From this dialogue they expect that neuroscientific findings will validate (i.e., provide the neurobiological correlates to) or falsify psychoanalytic concepts or hypotheses, and thereby encourage

change and growth. But a question arises: are analysts scientifically curious and thoughtful about neuroscientific observations and ideas or are they searching for something that might give psychoanalysis apparent “scientific” support? Unfortunately, there is no possibility to answer this question with the current level of our insight.

Two concepts that played a key role in the development of early psychoanalysis are the Oedipus complex and dreams. The Oedipus complex was the central tenet of psychoanalytic theory for Freud and most of his followers for at least half a century, and for some it still is (for a thoughtful critique, see, for example, Wakefield, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2013). Indeed, more than 70% of all our participants expressed their opinions about the current status of Freud’s legacy. Among those who voiced their positions, only three believed that this concept has no meaning today, while the remainder, including prominent empirical researchers such as Peter Fonagy, still see the Oedipus complex as important both theoretically and clinically. At the same time, although the interest in the motif is widespread, its interpretation has changed substantially. More than one-quarter of the respondents found the most critical part of the Oedipus situation to be the transition from dyadic to triadic relationships. In this sense, the closure of the Oedipal triangle through the recognition of an exclusive relationship between mother and father creates a “triangular space” (Britton, 1989), that is:

a space bounded by the three persons of the Oedipal situation and all their potential relationships. It includes, therefore, the possibility of being a participant in a relationship and observed by a third person as well as being an observer of a relationship between two people. (p. 490)

However, one might observe that this conceptualization of the Oedipus complex is very different from Freud’s, who saw it essentially in terms of libidinal feelings. Other aspects of this concept were also singled out: four participants find it culture specific, and one thinks its importance was overemphasized “at the expense of other essential myths and patterns” (Ferro, 2016, p. 445), “the basic idea of love, of rivalry and its resolution” (Fonagy, 2016, p. 455), “a myth designed to ‘explain’ the differences between the generations” (Scarfone, 2016, p. 585). Plausibly, this diversity of answers testifies to the enduring relevance of Freud’s legacy, yet more in the form of his questions than his specific answers. This seems natural because Freud died more than 80 years ago, and it gives hope that psychoanalysis is not an ossified doctrine or a religious group incapable of evolving or critical thinking.

Concerning dreams, our findings inform on them in two ways: first, when it comes to Freud’s dream theory, and, second, related to the role dreams play in psychoanalytic clinical practice. Differently from the increasing marginalization of dreams in the more general clinical psychological practice despite patients continuing to bring dreams to therapy (Leonard & Dawson, 2018), dreams still have a central place in psychoanalysis (Fonagy, Kachele, Leuzinger-Bohleber, & Taylor, 2018). This is important because patients continue to bring dreams to therapy and look to therapists for assistance with them, which when competently used can facilitate therapeutic processes, assist patients to develop self-awareness and insight, be a source of useful clinical information, and address distress associated with bad dreams or nightmares (Leonard & Dawson, 2018). The majority of respondents (30 of 39) maintain that dreams are a window into the unconscious, while some think that dreams are a form of unconscious thinking. As with the Oedipus complex, however, contemporary dream-work models (various, not one) have modified Freud’s to a significant extent, mostly in the direction of a closer connection of dreams and transference. Only four participants believe that Freud’s principles of dream interpretation are still valid today in their original form (for an empirically based critique of Freud’s theory of dreaming, see Hobson, 2002, 2006, 2013; Sulloway, 2016). Finally, it should be remembered that, since the 1950s, dreams have become an object of neuroscientific interest (Givrad, 2016; Hobson, 2002; Mancina, 1999, 2003).

Finally, we would like to briefly discuss the issue of marginalization of psychoanalysis. For more than half a century, psychoanalysis has not been the force it once was – in academia, in mental health systems, or in popular culture (see Dimitrijevic, 2011, 2018; Stepansky, 2009). It has been largely replaced by various forms of brief psychotherapy and medication, as well as by scientism and/or various postmodern trends. This was illustrated by Paul Stepansky (2009), former editor-in-chief of the Analytic Press, who observed first hand how print runs of major psychoanalytic books shrunk from millions to not more than a couple of hundred copies. But how do our participants see this? About 70% of our sample replied to this question, and, surprisingly, 16% of those maintained that no marginalization of psychoanalysis has happened at all. Those who have noticed it mostly find internal factors responsible for this: elitism, self-isolation, lack of dialogue with other disciplines, as well as the disinterest in validation through research. Others have also noticed that psychoanalysts quote contemporary works much less frequently than psychiatrists,

medical doctors, and theoretical physicists do (Gonzalez-Torres et al., 2016), which also makes the image of the discipline less attractive to various audiences. Many, however, believe that the problem is not in the attitude as much as it is in contemporary forms of capitalism and their obsession with rapidity and profit. Although many psychoanalysts seem to see that it is up to us to solve this problem, no one has offered effective ideas as to how it can be solved.

Strengths and limitations

Strengths. This study addresses a gap in the existing knowledge as it is the first effort to investigate and synthesize experienced psychoanalysts' subjective perspectives on the current status of the psychoanalytic field. Furthermore, the results provide insights to inform future research, including a possible large-scale survey.

Limitations. Our findings should be considered in the light of the following limitations. An important bias is that the questionnaires were not sent to a randomized sample of psychoanalysts, but to a group of colleagues connected to an Italian psychoanalytic journal; even if this journal is independent of any association, and is one of the most widely circulated psychoanalytic journals in Italy, it might still represent a selected sample of international psychoanalysts who are not representative of the entire psychoanalytic community. Furthermore, no participants from Latin America, Eastern Europe, or Asia were recruited for this study, and English overshadows all other languages. Similarly, female analysts were included in the sample but were underrepresented, and no candidates or young professionals were included. Furthermore, not all the participants discussed every theme, so the number of responses is limited. Finally, the survey did not include questions about clinical practice.

Conclusion

Our study revealed the image of a pluralistic psychoanalysis, with various schools, definitions, and sources, where Freud and the classical model are contested by numerous other approaches. This is a relief when it comes to developing individual creativity and institutional democracy. On the other hand, it could also be seen as a discouraging picture of the field as a scientific discipline, to the extent that it is characterized by a lack of consensus on major issues (such as dream theory, the Oedipus complex, etc.); disagreements were evident also in important themes such as the status of psychoanalytic training). However, the research was exploratory in nature and

should be observed as a preparation for a more comprehensive study, or indeed studies, able to recruit a more representative sample(s), and then to help us get a more comprehensive and clearer picture of the current status of psychoanalysis as a set of theories and methods of therapy, as well as of its relationships with other disciplines. This may be the first step towards (1) bridging the gaps between theory, clinical practice, and empirical research, (2) improving patient care and management, and (3) reconquering a good acceptance within the mental health community and the general public.

Supplemental data

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed here <https://doi.org/10.1080/0803706X.2021.1991594>.

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