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ON DIFFERENT FORMS OF “PUBLICATION ANXIETY”

Laurence Spurling

(This paper is based on a short talk I gave at Birkbeck College, London, in October 2015 at the launch of my book *The Psychoanalytic Craft: how to develop as a psychoanalytic Practitioner*)

In a paper called “Making the Private Public” Ronald Britton described a phenomenon he called “publication anxiety”. This is the sometimes intense and crippling anxiety that authors can experience which can prevent them publishing their work or, if they do publish, can lead them to disguise or distort what they are really trying to say. In his exploration of this anxiety, Britton concluded that “publication anxiety...emanates from a fear of criticism by third parties who are regarded as authoritative and *fear of disaffiliation* from colleagues with whom the author feels the need to be *affiliated*” (Britton, 1997: 14, italics in original).

I think I have experienced some forms of publication anxiety in all of my writing, but never so acutely as with the book I have just published, *The Psychoanalytic Craft* (Spurling, 2015). This book is a sequel to a book I published in 2004, *An Introduction to Psychodynamic Counselling*, which was intended for beginners, whereas my present book is primarily aimed at those who are about to or have recently qualified. It may be the case that I have simply forgotten or repressed how difficult I found writing this first

book. Nevertheless I have the strong impression that writing *The Psychoanalytic Craft* was a far messier and anguished business, involving many substantial re-writings of large chunks of the book, frequent juggling around of the order of the chapters, and many changes of mind about what to put in and what leave out. I think this was a mark of how I struggled to be clear to myself what my basic argument was, and in particular why I was writing the book in the place, what I wanted to say and to whom I wanted to say it.

I can see that the nature of my anxiety was to do with what I was trying to do in writing each book. I was invited to write my first book, *An Introduction to Psychodynamic Counselling*, as an introductory text. Writing the book gave me the opportunity to spell out my own understanding of the psychodynamic canon, and to fashion this into a way I could imagine my own students and supervisees would find helpful in their learning. It was also an opportunity for me to pick out and write about my favorite texts of Freud, Klein, Winnicott and whoever else I deemed worthy of mention. Writing it felt like an enormous achievement, that I could, almost omnipotently encompass in a single text all the main features of psychodynamic theory and practice, and work them into a meaningful whole.

Alongside the excitement and exhilaration of what I was daring to do in writing this book was the great sense of anxiety that Britton describes. In writing and publishing my book I was thereby exposing my own reading of these classic texts, my own version of the tradition, and in so doing positioning myself within that tradition. Nevertheless – although perhaps this is now more looking back, I am not so sure at the time – I could

reassure myself that I was doing nothing more than producing a guide book or travelogue to accompany the reader in exploring the most important, interesting and inspiring ideas and writings in psychoanalytic thinking and practice.

This sense of writing a travelogue is also present in my current book, but now I feel I am writing more as an inhabitant of the country or city I am describing, as someone who lives there and who knows that alongside the grand sites and architectural wonders there exists an underlife, that things might not be so good as they appear. I am still writing about psychoanalysis, and still as the way of thinking and working that sustains and inspires me. Indeed my belief in and sense of being at home within psychoanalysis is now even stronger as it has withstood the test of time. But with the substantial increase in clinical experience which has taken place since writing my first book, which I feel has not only deepened but also widened my understanding of psychoanalytic theory and practice, something has changed. As well as becoming more committed to psychoanalysis, or perhaps as a consequence of this deepening of my affiliation to it, I have become more critical of the psychoanalytic approach, and in some ways disillusioned with some of its basic ideas.

Thinking of this change in my attitude towards psychoanalysis in terms of fears of rejection and disaffiliation, I can see several examples where these fears are most evident. Over the course of my career, which has involved working for 17 years in the NHS, I have gained a lot of experience both working and supervising short-term and time-limited therapy. I have found that working in this way has its limitations compared to working in

a more intensive and open-ended way, as I do in my private practice. But I have found these limitations far less than seems to be the accepted norm in much of the psychoanalytic literature and amongst many of my colleagues. I have also found that working in both a short-term and time-limited way has considerably enriched my more intensive and open-ended work, and helped me develop my own approach and style. In fact it is probably true to say now that whereas I always take into account the nature of the setting and contract with the patient – of which the length, intensity and nature of the ending are very important elements – I think of myself as a psychoanalytic practitioner using my own version of the psychoanalytic method which I apply in all circumstances and with all patients. In other words I don't think of "short term" or "long term" work as two distinct entities, nor as playing a decisive role in how I work. It is more the particular quality of the work with each patient, the particular nut the patient and I are trying to crack and how we can do so in the time available, that determines how I will conduct any particular piece of work.

Hence my decision in my book, in attempting to illustrate the clinical thinking that underpins and in a way produces the analytic work we do, to use two extended clinical examples, one from an intensive and open-ended therapy and the other from a short-term and time-limited therapy. These two therapies are laid side by side in the book, and both used to illustrate and exemplify the same basic points. In one of the versions of these chapters, which then got left out of the final version of the book, I did have a section in which I discussed the differences between the intensive, open-ended work and the short-term, time-limited work, making the point that I no longer saw these differences to be as

large or significant as I used to. I decided in the end to omit this section as it was not really relevant to the argument of the chapters. I think this was the right decision in terms of what I was trying to say in each chapter and how best to say it. However I was also dimly aware that if I had included this section I imagined I was more likely to encounter disapproval or rejection from some sections of my readership.

Another example where I am aware of my fear of disaffiliation is in my attitude towards incorporating into my work elements from therapies that are not essentially or primarily analytic. I know there are many views on this subject within the analytic community, but my sense is still that those who are seen to embrace non-analytic approaches are seen as weakening psychoanalysis by watering down its most precious and distinctive ideas (see, for example, Jane Milton's critique of those who try to find ways of bringing ideas from CBT into analytic practice [Milton, 2001]). But that has not been my experience. While working in the NHS I was encouraged to develop other approaches, and went off to become both an accredited practitioner and supervisor in Interpersonal Therapy (IPT). It is certainly true that learning a non-analytic approach creates conflicts and difficulties, as the conceptual framework and therapeutic stance of IPT is very different to that of psychoanalysis, and in some ways at odds with it. While training to become an IPT therapist this sometimes felt as though I was having to make a choice between two incompatible ways of working. But, over time, I found this conflict to become less and less, as I came to realize that the conflict I was experiencing was only a more acute version of the conflict one feels all the time in one's work. What I mean by this is that as you get to know the particularity and uniqueness of your particular patient, you are

always forced to modify and adapt the theoretical and practical tools you have at your disposal. And that IPT not only gave me more of these tools, but enabled me to use some of my psychoanalytic tools in a different and more creative way. So far from weakening or diluting my analytic work, I found adopting another approach has instead enriched it (I have elaborated this argument in Spurling, 2010 and 2012).

My positive view of the contribution of other ways of working can make to psychoanalytic practice is reflected in my decision in the book to use a piece of IPT work, carried out by a practitioner without a formal psychoanalytic training, as an illustration of some of the “craft” aspect of analytic work. Dorota Jagielska-Hall, whose work I used, is an experienced clinical psychologist who has an interest in psychoanalytic work and has done a substantial placement in a psychoanalytic setting. Nevertheless she has not done a psychoanalytic training and would not claim her work to be strictly psychoanalytic. I decided to use her work as I found it of sufficient quality and transparency to both sustain and further develop the arguments I was pursuing. However I was all too aware of the rather paradoxical position I was putting myself in, as teaching psychoanalytic theory and practice is such a central part of my career and I am a firm believer in the value of a formal, psychoanalytic training. More worrying for me was the message I was sending out – or could be seen as sending it, I found it very difficult if not impossible to separate out what I thought I was doing and what I imagined I would be seen by members of the analytic community as doing – about the value of an analytic training and what is to count as analytic practice. As in the previous example, in one version of the chapter containing this work I included a section directly addressing these concerns, and, as

before, decided in the end to omit this section as detracting from my argument. But alongside these (good) intellectual reasons for omitting this section were fears of antagonizing imagined members of the analytic community.

In these two examples I decided to leave out or leave implicit my critical stance towards some of (what I take to be) the shared or taken-for-granted assumptions in the analytic community. But on other occasions my criticism of important aspects of psychoanalytic theorizing and practice is out in the open. For instance, in the course of looking at psychoanalytic work through the lens of craft work in general, which is one of the basic themes of my book, I subject two of the most fundamental psychoanalytic concepts, countertransference and containment, to a critical appraisal as to their meaning and value. I think this caused me a bit of anxiety, but not too much as a critical approach is accepted practice in all intellectual argument and writing. My anxiety became much more acute when I realized that it would be a good idea if I could find a piece of analytic writing by a well-respected “authority” which I could then show to be lacking or deficient in terms of the arguments in the book I was pursuing. Furthermore it would be even better if I could find a piece of writing that I could genuinely regard as good or even exemplary – if I chose a piece of analytic writing that was not very good, I could rightly be accused of simply finding examples that fitted my own presuppositions (this way of thinking is necessary in order to construct a viable and solid argument, but it is also evidence of how easily it can turn into the kind of paranoid thinking that is driven by publication anxiety).

Having come across a piece of clinical writing that I thought would serve my purpose, this part of the book has, I think, been subject to more re-writing than any other. I found it very difficult to adopt what seemed to be the right tone towards the piece of writing and the author of the writing. I tended to be either too critical (as the point of the book was to show that something essential is missed out in even the best clinical writing) or not critical enough (as I could see that the piece of clinical writing I had chosen was really very good, and demonstrated a standard of work that was “almost certainly” higher than mine – but note my equivocation here is not only to do with my own narcissism, but with the lack within psychoanalysis of proper ways of evaluating the competence of clinical work, one of the points I make in the book) . I had to work hard to be genuinely admiring of the quality of the clinical writing, while at the same time not holding back from what I wanted to say about its deficiencies. I could see that part of the issue for me was that in criticizing these authorities, I was also criticizing myself, or rather the way of thinking and working which I described in my first book *An Introduction to Psychodynamic Counselling*. But that was not the real problem. After all, as we develop we are bound to change our ideas. I think my anxiety was more to do with what Britton has to say about what the poet Harold Blum called “the anxiety of influence”. All poets are influenced by their predecessors, but also fearful that those who have gone before have said the last word on the subject. So the poet’s attitude towards those who have influenced him or her are ambivalent: “compounded not only of love and admiration but also of hate, envy and fear of the father poet’s pre-emption of the son’s imaginative space...(he) safeguards his own sense of autonomy and priority by reading a parent-poem defensively, in such a way as to distort it beyond his own conscious recognition” (Britton, *op.cit.* 18). I think this

distortion or misrepresentation of the words of my authority was present to me as a constant fear, that I was not doing them justice, and at the same time as a constant wish, that I could triumph over them. Hence my repeated re-writing of this part of the book.

A final example of the kind of anxiety I experienced in writing this book was the decision to publish an account of my own clinical work, as an illustration of the kind of “craft-based” practice I was advocating in the book. This anxiety, of exposing one’s work to the critical gaze of one’s psychoanalytic readers, is familiar to all those who write about their own work. However in this book I had set myself a very particular task. Since one of the key strands of my argument was that most clinical accounts in the psychoanalytic literature present a misleading if not idealized picture of ordinary analytic work, by missing out or obscuring the various aspects of “craft practice” I identify in the book, and this was the basis of my criticism of the clinical work of the authority I had chosen to present, it was incumbent on me to write an account of my own work that was ordinary, not idealized, and designed precisely to reveal those aspects of craft practice that are normally left out. In a way this was all too easy. Of course I had to work hard to try to get hold of the bits of my clinical thinking and reasoning that lay beneath the surface (another theme of the book). But it was not difficult to give an account of an everyday session of mine, all I had to do was resist the (admittedly pretty strong) impulse to clean it up. In fact this is one of the chapters that needed far less revision than many others. My anxiety here was centred far more on publication than on writing. And its nature was quite tangible: in describing a very ordinary session of mine - with no impressive sounding interpretations, in fact with a number of comments of mine that could sound

trite and thoughtless - it was all too easy to imagine the “authorities” in the analytic community (perhaps those I had already attacked now taking their revenge) trumpeting this chapter as the final piece of evidence in convicting me of being a poor and incompetent practitioner or, even worse, as not really worthy of being considered an analytic practitioner at all.

So in what ways do I think the anxiety I suffered in writing my book *The Psychoanalytic Craft* was more acute, or different from the writing of my first book? In both experience of writing the wish to be loved, admired and praised was powerfully present. But, perhaps, in writing the first book I found these wishes more acceptable. After all, I was being a “good boy” in extolling the virtues of the psychoanalytic tradition. In the second book, I was at times not sure whether I was coming to praise psychoanalysis or to bury it. Another difference was that I was invited to write the first book, whereas I chose to write the second. I think this contributed to making my investment in the second book stronger. It expresses more of who I am and what I want. In his paper Britton looks at some of the most deeply felt wishes that motivate authors through the lens of the Oedipus situation. My claims for *The Psychoanalytic Craft*, to be writing something original rather than simply repeating what has been written before, are larger, and I think this generates not only fear (of rejection and disaffiliation) but something more acute: “gaining knowledge of an object engenders in the individual a sense of possessing it and this evokes anxiety lest this will provoke retaliation from a third party: publication advertises possession of the knowledge” (Britton, *op.cit.* 16). This makes sense to me,

that writing my second book, which is more transgressive and makes a larger claim to knowledge than my first, produced a stronger and more acute fear of retaliation, as I experienced particularly in giving an account of my own clinical work, and perhaps acted out in my many corrections and changes of mind, as though turning against my own product. If in my first book my oedipal wish was to claim the right to get into bed with my analytic parents, in the second it might be more to kick one of them out of the bed and have the other to myself. And the punishment for that would be that I would be then be banned from the parental bed altogether, condemned forever to sleep on my own.

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