



Field experiences and field theories: the bridgin' function of caution and precision

Experiencias y teorías de campo: la función puente de la cautela y la precisión

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on psychoanalytic field theories as epistemological perspectives capable of fostering dialogue between different domains of knowledge while resisting theoretical closure. Drawing on the contributions of Madeleine Baranger (2005), Bion (1991), Heisenberg (1958), Husserl (1970), Luis Kancyer (2005), and Ogden (2004), the article explores the relational, groupal, and institutional dimensions of psychoanalytic experience, emphasizing how analytical fields challenge notions of neutrality, individual omnipotence, and self-sufficient knowledge. Psychoanalytic knowledge is presented as necessarily incomplete and suspended between experience and conceptualization. The field is therefore approached not as a fixed entity, but as a methodological perspective that enables “bridging” between heterogeneous experiences, theories, and disciplines. In this framework, caution and precision become complementary epistemological functions: precision sustains critical inquiry, while caution protects thought from ideological rigidity and theoretical hypostasis. The article ultimately proposes pluralism, uncertainty, and epistemological humility as necessary conditions for sustaining meaningful bridges across psychoanalytic and institutional fields.

Keywords: psychoanalytic field theory; epistemology; group dynamics; pluralism; institutional processes.

RESUMEN

Este artículo reflexiona sobre las teorías psicoanalíticas del campo como perspectivas epistemológicas capaces de promover el diálogo entre distintas áreas del conocimiento, resistiendo al mismo tiempo el cierre teórico. A partir de las contribuciones de Madeleine Baranger (2005), Bion (1991), Heisenberg (1958), Husserl (1970), Luis Kancyer (2005) y Ogden (2004), el trabajo explora las dimensiones relacionales, grupales e institucionales de la experiencia psicoanalítica, subrayando cómo los campos analíticos cuestionan las nociones de neutralidad, omnipotencia individual y conocimiento autosuficiente. El conocimiento psicoanalítico se presenta como necesariamente incompleto y suspendido entre la experiencia y la conceptualización. El campo es entendido no como una entidad fija, sino como una perspectiva metodológica que permite tender “puentes” entre experiencias, teorías y disciplinas heterogéneas. En este marco, la cautela y la precisión se convierten en funciones epistemológicas complementarias: la precisión sostiene la investigación crítica, mientras que la cautela protege el pensamiento de la rigidez ideológica y de la hipóstasis teórica. Finalmente, el artículo propone el pluralismo, la incertidumbre y la humildad epistemológica como condiciones necesarias para sostener puentes significativos entre campos psicoanalíticos e institucionales.

Palabras clave: teoría del campo psicoanalítico; epistemología; dinámica de grupos; pluralismo; procesos institucionales.

Preamble

In a book published in 2005 in the International Psychoanalytical Association’s Library edited by Sergio Lewkowicz and Silvia Flechner (2005), I found the observations from which I intend to start this contribution. The book is entitled *Truth, reality and the psychoanalyst* and the subtitle is *Latin American contributions to psychoanalysis*. Each chapter

of the book is written by a South American author and commented on by an analyst who lives and works elsewhere. The structure of the text gives the book the character of an effective dialogue (which is rare) on a whole range of clinically relevant topics (countertransference and the emotional vulnerability of analysts, interdisciplinary research in linguistics and psychoanalysis, the interface between external and internal reality, dreams, the processes of *unconsciousfication* and more).

The second chapter devoted to psychoanalytic field theory is the only one in which there are two South American contributions while the commentary is by an Italian who had long since become famous on this subject: Antonino Ferro (2005). The second South American text is written by Luis Kancyper (2005), while the first is by the godmother of field theory: Madeleine Baranger (2005). The text I am quoting contains considerations that are particularly useful for the purposes of this article. They can help us to think about how we can establish conceptual points of contact between areas of knowledge and theoretical traditions that run the risk of organizing themselves like silos: rigid containers with no active functions of interface between the internal and external environment, suitable for storing grain... or missiles.

Madeleine Baranger's (2005) contribution is entitled *field theory* in the singular; Luis Kancyper's (2005) is entitled *The confrontation between generation as a dynamic field*. The theme chosen—the correlation between field and generational confrontations—is particularly apt¹. There are numerous reasons why field theories (note: plural) are difficult to accept. Kancyper (2005) lists three of them:

- Field theory inflicts a wound on the analyst's narcissism, because it reduces his/her individual power: it downplays the omnipotence of interpretation and hampers the illusion of self-sufficiency of his/her knowledge. The unconscious fantasies of the psychoanalytic field 'spread their wings' in the unconscious *à deux* relationship and exert their influence independently of the analyst's conscious and rational control. Thus, the issue of countertransference explodes, and the problem of the analyst's co-transference emerges;
- Analytical field theories imply, on the part of the clinician, the assumption of an additional amount of psychic work. It is a matter of accepting that the course of the process also depends on the analyst's functioning and the complementary series (*Ergänzungsreihe*) of his/her psychic factors, as well as those of the analysand;
- Although subject to the workings of the unconscious in an asymmetrical manner, finally, all those involved in the analytic field have their own specific responsibility. This complicates the analyst's reflection, hampers the construction of third-person concepts (Mr. G.'s pathology is... this) and necessitates a radical epistemological reorganization, which is often summarized with Werner Heisenberg's (1958) uncertainty principle: the observer is not neutral and influences observation; descriptive precision has limits.

To these reasons, at least a couple more must be added, which concern themes and processes that take us out of the bipersonal field—where the subtitle of this contribution suggests us to go.

The first of these is the subject of John Rickman (1957), Bion's first analyst: *psychoanalysis and numbers*. The experiences one has on the relational field also depend on the number of subjects that are active on that specific relational field. There are large groups, small groups, medium groups and above all intergroup dynamics. It is not enough to say group. We need to describe which groups we have direct experience of.

Furthermore, to understand group dynamics, one must bear in mind what in the tradition of group relations is called the *primary task*. This is the orienting point, the task-guide established by the institutional setting. What the group leadership must bear in mind to bridge the gap between leaders and followers to govern the process of their interaction; what the primary emotional psychic functioning of the group (in the Freudian sense of *primary process*) always, and of necessity, tends to overlook.

In short, one cannot confuse the experiences gained in a group psychoanalytic context, in institutional supervisions, in a group relations conference or in a social dreaming matrix. They are different relational fields, the differential characteristics of which must be respected.

¹ "The confrontation between generations is essential to the acquisition of identity" is the first sentence of the contribution (Kancyper, 2005, p. 72). The primary precondition for initiating this process is that one is in the presence of another "who is neither soft nor arbitrary." Another subject who, Kancyper (2005, p. 72) writes, "makes possible a tension of differences between opposites possible, while both parties acknowledge that being opponents is not tantamount to being enemies." Mind the adjective soft. The significant other must not be prone and yielding. It must not be too permeable to projections and projective identifications. Only if it exists and resists, does it become possible the coexistence of opposites confronting each other.

Hypothesis/hypostasis

No theory, however rigorous and cogent, is immune from the effects of the use made of theories by those who use them. The use of theories determines relevant transformations that introduce, or overlook, conceptually significant differences. As Husserl (1970) wrote in his book on the crisis of the sciences and the crisis of human coexistence (the book was conceived shortly before the Second World War: *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology*): “The general desire to proceed without prejudice does not eliminate its presence at all” (Husserl, 1970, p. 149). It is not enough for us to say that we resort to a theory that undermines the idea of the isolated, single subject. It is not enough that we say that the field—or that fields—is (or are) a singular that is at the same time also plural.

It is necessary for what we think to be able to truly hold in abeyance the judgement on the origin of thoughts, and for our thinking (that activity of psychic processing that follows the emergence of thoughts) to tolerate uncertainty and incompleteness and to put in place a construction that keeps alive the doubt on the pertinence between experiences and theories. This is why I used two different but converging words in the subtitle: *caution* and *precision*. The first attitude is weakened if the second is suspended or neglected. It is the woodworm of precision—always a frustrated though legitimate demand—that keeps researchers cautious and prudent. Thomas Ogden (2004) hypothesized that human thought tends to oscillate between three dimensions that are always virtually present: magical thinking, dream thinking, and transformative thinking.

The second and third ways of functioning manage to keep in mind different points of view: dream-thinking because it stages them simultaneously, and transformative thinking because it systematically distinguishes the part and the whole, that is, it does not mess up by metonymically confusing *pars pro toto*. The first—magical thinking—, however, confuses the symbol with the symbolized object. And this difficulty in getting rid of the omnipotence of thought transforms, often without our realizing it, theories into ideologies, confuses thought already established with thinking thought and makes hypotheses degenerate into hypostasis. *Hypothesis* is what moves thought and thinking to research. *Hypostasis* is what happens when the hypothesis is imagined, proved and the thinking no longer seeks words to say the experience, words whose meaning it seeks to understand, but it replaces experience making it unnecessary.

Inevitable dualism

It is Edmund Husserl (in the good company of many others) who has clarified an aspect of the good use of knowledge that makes it remain open to research and bent on understanding the becoming of reality. “The Galilean idea is a hypothesis,” he writes (Husserl, 1970, p. 71), “of a surprising kind.” What does he mean by this?

“Surprising: because, in spite of verification, the hypothesis remains a hypothesis, and it always remains a hypothesis; verification is an infinite continuation of verification” (Husserl, 1970, p. 71). Reinforcing the point and clarifying it further, he adds: “This is precisely the essence proper to natural science, the a-priori of its mode of being: that of being an infinite hypothesis and verification” (Husserl, 1970, p. 71).

A little further on, he concludes the paragraph (title: “The character of the verification of the fundamental hypothesis of the natural sciences”): “Inherent in the essence of all methods is the tendency to extrinsicate itself by technicalising itself. Thus, the sense of the natural sciences undergoes a complex evolution; a real concealment of sense takes place” (Husserl, 1970, p. 77). The reconsideration of the meaning of knowledge vanishes; knowledge becomes abstracted and formalized, while research into its foundations “stops too soon” (Husserl, 1970, p. 77).

What applies to the natural sciences applies *a fortiori* to non-naturalistic areas of knowledge. In hard sciences—as physics, chemistry and geometry—, the comparison between codified knowledge, new facts and pragmatic intentions of our *Lebenswelt* is never ended. In the soft areas of knowledge, this endeavor is even more necessary, and the comparison between experiences and concepts, between the emergence of thoughts and the process of their organization in theories must be attentively scrutinized. Where there is a lack of philosophical attention to the interplay between neighboring areas of knowledge (explicit and implicit, known and unknown, conscious and unconscious); where knowledge forgets its low, concrete origin, rooted in factual reality and in the human intentions that organize its understanding, not only does bridge-building become impossible, but something essential of the specificity of that knowledge is lost.

In short, we must resign ourselves to a half-knowledge; that is, to a knowledge that always remains suspended in the space that divides the banks of the streams we would like to cross.

Pluralism is our destiny.

And it is a condemnation, as well as an asset. The dualism between life and knowledge, between *Lebenswelt* and science, is inevitable and cannot be radically overcome. It is sobering, as well as it is vitalizing. It is also what helps us not to overlook the disturbing fact that there are always differences that divide us. Only if we really keep them in mind can we hope to build integrations that have any chance of lasting.

Method as a conceptual container

I feel justified in saying that there are two large families of field theories.

There are, on the one hand, theories of the field that end up making the field a unitary and self-evident subject, and there are theories of the field that consider this to be a problem, rather than evidence, and insist on seeking bridging concepts that attempt plausible correlations between what we experience and what we believe.

Experiences are not unitary. If they were, we would always have the same experience. To be new and different from each other, experiences must originate from a crisis or rather an *epoché* as the philosophers say: from a suspension of judgement on the theories with which we are used to understanding them. Only then do we really learn something from experiences.

Thinking is this perpetual oscillation, this tiring and unstable movement between the abstract concept and the concrete, oriented and never inert world of that common sense, which is often not so good and not so common either. This necessary divide should make us greedy for precision (however unattainable...) and carefully cautious in our conclusions.

The field seems to me more a hypothetical and elusive object than evidence. More an observational perspective than an entirely new idea founding a known and strong theory. Perhaps it could be said that the theories that seem more plausible to me use the concept as a method for investigating processes rather than as a theme with which to string together sequences of arguments that establish certainties.

As I was searching for the words to say what I would like to express, I was reminded of one of the pages with which Bion (1991) concludes *A memoir of the future*: "A danger lies in the belief that psycho-analysis is a novel approach to a newly discovered danger. If psychoanalysts had an overall view of the history of the human spirit, they would appreciate the length of that history of murder, failure, envy and deceit" (Bion, 1991, p. 571).

Immediately afterwards, however, I am reminded of a poem by Larkin (1988) that seems to have been written specifically to mock the patent but unconscious clericalism of doctors of the soul, as well as doctors *tout court*. It is entitled "Days:"

What are days for?
Days are where we live.
They come, they wake us.
Time and time over.
They are to be happy in:
Where can live but days?

Ah, solving that question
Brings the priest and the doctor
In their long coats
Running over the fields (Larkin, 1988, p. 67).

Conflicts of interest

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