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The celebrity as teaching object: Using Kanye West and Kim Kardashian to explain Freud

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Abstract

The author describes some obstacles encountered teaching undergraduates psychoanalytic theory. In academic environments that reflect a broader cultural skepticism, disinterest and animosity to analytic ideas, the author argues that it is imperative to develop and utilize teaching methods that have an experience-near quality. Without clinical experience and perhaps hesitant to use their own personal lives for material, students may seemingly lack data to test out the explanatory value of analytic ideas. This essay illustrates one device the author developed of using students' "celebrity object" relationships to idiosyncratically cathected popular culture figures to allow for increased engagement with analytic ideas.

KEYWORDS
celebrity object, fantasy, psychoanalytic education, theory

"Old-fashioned," "Unscientific," "White," "Reductive," "Misogynistic," and "Elitist." These were just some of the words used by Barnard College and Columbia University undergraduates in Introduction to Psychoanalysis seminars that I offered through the institutions' respective psychology departments. With the marginalization of psychoanalytic thought within American academic psychology (Bornstein, 2005; Park & Auchincloss, 2006; Redmond & Shulman, 2008), I found it useful to begin my semesters by asking students for their perceptions about psychoanalysis. Of course, this is just a small sample of the kinds of associations (if you will) to psychoanalysis provided by the students (cf. McWilliams, 2000). Words such as "complex," "deep," and "dynamic" were also used. I would usually tell the students after this opening exercise that though not necessarily factual, I thought that there was something accurate expressed their derogatory notions about psychoanalysis. At the outset and throughout these seminars, I would then encourage the students, particularly the ones more skeptical about psychoanalysis, to elaborate and develop their critiques perhaps with psychoanalytic ideas themselves. For what is psychoanalysis if not foundationally questioning?

Over the last couple of decades, calls have been made by many voices to reform psychoanalytic education from undergraduate through training institute levels (Binder, 2007; Bornstein, 1988; Kernberg, 1996). The proliferation of various schools of psychotherapy, pharmacological approaches and the limited allowance of treatment due to the restrictions of American healthcare and individual insurance companies are just a few of the factors that continue to contribute to crowded and increasingly competitive space within which psychoanalytic practice exists. The marginalization of psychoanalysis is partially a self-inflicted wound that can be outlined on several fronts (Aron & Starr, 2012), including psychoanalysis' failure to be more inclusive to a larger demographic of practitioners and patients, and its reluctance to adapt to cultural changes and conduct systematic empirical research that parallel advances in the field.

It is in this context that the professor of psychoanalysis attempts to engage with students in a college classroom. The challenged standing of psychoanalysis in the academy has to be differentiated to address the growing divide between its place in psychology departments and other social science or humanities disciplines. In my experience, one is more likely to encounter psychoanalytic ideas on a college course syllabus if one looks exclusively outside psychology classes. It may not be all too uncommon to find psychoanalytic ideas offered by professors in comparative literature, film, and post-colonial critical studies from disseminators such as Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, and Slavoj Zizek—and even Freud, Klein, and Lacan. In my informal polling of graduating psychology majors at Barnard College and Columbia University, however, I have found it to be a rare occurrence for any student to have heard of Melanie Klein or Donald Winnicott prior to taking the Introduction to Psychoanalysis seminar that I taught.

What I intend to address in this essay is an approach to teaching psychoanalytic concepts to psychology majors in the contemporary climate of the American university. In particular, I will describe a teaching tool employed in undergraduate seminars for Barnard College and Columbia University students from 2010 to 2012.[1] This 15 to 20-person seminar afforded the flexibility to experiment with different formats within a class session, week to week and between semesters. For instance, in some sections of the course I employed a survey format and presented readings in chronological order. One year, I experimented with teaching Freud last. The idea here was to make psychoanalytic ideas relevant before historical. For students who are already negatively biased against a historical psychoanalysis, starting from the past may poison the well. Redmond and Shulman (2008) surmised in their survey of the availability of psychoanalytic ideas in college courses:

> We believe that the aggregate implication of these findings is that psychoanalysis and analytic ideas, however admired their history, are not likely to be seen as living contributors to the science of psychology; rather, they will be regarded by readers of these texts as "has-been." We believe that readers of these introductory psychology texts are likely to conclude that at this point psychoanalysis is a desiccated and dead tributary to the psychological mainstream. (p. 393)

I have found that many undergraduate students are more easily able to see the value in psychoanalytic ideas from a different messenger. On more than a few occasions I have seen students' experience of first reading contemporary psychoanalytic papers by authors like Kimberlyn Leary or Thomas Ogden enhance their appreciation of Freud's originary role in how we understand concepts such as transference or *Nachträglichkeit*.

On the other hand, having inherited this course, there were certain parts less open to change. The seminar was restricted to psychology major seniors having fulfilled almost all their course requirements. As a pre-requisite, students had to have taken one of the few clinical classes offered by the department. Perhaps not surprisingly, aside from being the only class within either Barnard's or Columbia's psychology departments that dealt with psychoanalytic ideas, the seminar also served as one of the few clinical courses for undergraduates. Perhaps not uncommon in the contemporary landscape of academic psychology, most students with any clinical background entered the seminar being only familiar with neurobiological theories of psychopathology and cognitive-behavioral treatment approaches.

In conceiving the construction of my Introduction to Psychoanalysis seminar, I consulted contributions to the literature on the subject of psychoanalytic teaching (Blass, 2001; Dunn, 2013; McWilliams, 2000; Skorczewski, 2008;

Yalof, 2015). Also, I was determined to draw from my undergraduate experiences (however many years ago), both in and outside of the psychology department. Although I took classes from psychology professors who discussed their clinical work with patients, very few overtly invoked psychoanalytic ideas—with the exception of George Atwood, who was able to keep lecture halls captive with his blend of philosophical intersubjective analysis of psychosis and severe psychopathology. Alternatively, some of the best classroom experiences were when psychoanalytic ideas were presented in conversation with other disciplines. These usually were **not** in classes offered by psychology professors, but from the Philosophy, English, and American Studies faculty. For instance, in an English course, *Literature and Psychology*, taught by the practicing psychoanalyst Martin Gliserman, students were treated to an intermingling of fiction by authors such as Kathy Acker, Mary Gaitskill, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Tony Morrison and the theories of Jessica Benjamin, Judith Herman, and Adam Phillips.

What I, and I imagine some of my classmates, appreciated in this course was an approach that introduced us to psychoanalytic ideas by way of a third teaching object. Gliserman's selection of fiction exposed undergraduates to the psychic effects of trauma in works that were not always even explicitly about trauma. Rather than teaching us analytic theories directly, Gliserman drew us into the lives and minds of the characters in these narratives. As students, we then wanted ways of making sense of these people. Psychoanalytic theory thus became a compelling, relevant explanatory lens for this work.

Years later, charged with bringing psychoanalytic ideas to undergraduates, I did follow the lead of interdisciplinary learning that encourages students to use characters from fiction, television, and film in final papers interrogating psychoanalytic concepts. To lead up to this, however, I used class discussions to have students think about topics, including Melanie Klein's positions and Heinz Kohut's self-objects, in relation to "characters" still distant to them, but seemingly in the intermediate zone of reality and fiction. I decided to capitalize on my students' pre-existing engagement with the lives and minds of people who were close to them in some ways, yet altogether removed in others—celebrities.

1 | CELEBRITY OBJECTS

From Barack Obama to Virginia Woolf to Muhammad Ali, we all have different associations to famous figures. There is research that leads us to expect a curvilinear relationship between age and *conscious* role model interest that peaks in late teen years and declines in adulthood (Giuliano et al., 2007). Psychoanalytically however, we must question how our *unconscious* identifications with cultural personalities continue to impact us throughout our lives, and whether there really is a definable period when these figures begin to possess diminishing intrapsychic currency. Despite examples of patients referencing famous figures in case illustrations, there has not been a significant direct study of these fantasied attachments in psychoanalytic literature. Freud's reporting of the place that Hannibal held in his fantasy life may easily be the most famous of these connections (Freud, 1900, p. 197). The lack of psychoanalytic attention to this topic is contrasted with the various ways individuals' fantasy lives have been investigated broadly in other social science disciplines. Though mainly focusing on the conscious understanding of people relating to celebrities, work on *imaginary social worlds* (Caughey, 1984), *secondary attachments* (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990), and *parasocial interaction* (Stever, 2009) are just a few representative examples of research from anthropology, celebrity/media studies, and developmental psychology to converge on this topic (see also Ferris & Harris, 2011).

In other psychoanalytic writing and presentations (Reynoso, 2012, 2013, 2016), I have discussed a concept I've called "the celebrity object." I use this term to represent various conscious and unconscious fantasies and motivations of an individual's fantasied connection to relatively famous figures unknown to the person. Whether the figure is fictional, historical, or contemporary, through clinical observations with children and adults, I have come to consider the object relations dynamics in a person's relationship with a celebrity to be a potentially rich source to understand unconscious psychic functions and processes.

A Japanese-American patient explicitly began his process of object-probing (Ghent, 1992) and racing (Leary, 2007) my Filipino heritage (accurately perceived by him) by asking if I was fan of the Filipino boxer Manny Pacquiao. As we came to understand in future sessions, this celebrity object question contained unconscious paranoid anxieties regarding my potential historically based retaliatory aggression in light of the brutal Japanese occupation of the Philippines in WWII. My possible identification with a Filipino athlete involved in a combat sport also became particularly relevant due to the patient's disavowal of mental states associated with vulnerability and his unconscious fears of his own aggression toward a father perceived as weak and incompetent, which complicated his gender role identity (Ovesey & Person, 1973).

I have found that some patients use celebrity objects as means for identifying across race, gender, religion, sexuality, and class to collapse or accentuate any form of felt difference or sameness between patient and object. It may be that celebrity objects allow the space for conscious and unconscious identity-expansive intersubjective play. This may specifically be the case when avenues for expression and embodiment of the patient's multiple self-experiences are prematurely foreclosed, split off, and silenced. Relating to celebrity objects may afford the potential space (Winnicott, 1971) where identity as structure gets deconstructed even temporarily before being re-assembled, however more softly (Harris., 2005) in a way that attempts at holding the ontological tension of identity chaos and coherence (Corbett, 2001).

A white male patient shared his fantasy with me about what it is like to be as powerful as Oprah. In doing so, he observed his envy at her "emotional connection" to her guests and audience while still remaining "strong." My patient admired what he considered Oprah's overcoming of racism, and while inspired, he measured himself against his inabilities to triumph over the more meager adversities in his life. In one session he speculated about Oprah's sexuality, and in considering it, he was able to consciously access his erotic male longings in our sessions. This can be contrasted with patients' use celebrity objects to widen the polarity between centrality and marginality in self-experience (Corbett, 2001). For instance, with some teenage patients who are largely preoccupied with certain social media personalities, it can feel as if they are running toward the popular center of societal favorability even at the expense of other aspects of self, perceived to be less desirable by their changing social world. This has been more apparent for me in work with individuals who started treatment with me as pre-adolescents and either continued through their teenage years or returned at a later point. Some of these were male-identified kids, who first presented as acutely sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of others when younger, only to later use their intense identifications with popular masculinist personas (built through social media postings) in a fantasied attempt to overcome being "soft."

For an example in emerging adulthood, one patient, who was born with a physical disability, courted celebrity objects of baseball players as imaginary companions (Bach, 1971; Nagera, 1969). In his youth, they were related to connective possibilities with others. Later they played additional roles, coming to take on sadomasochistic aspects in his psychic retreats (Steiner, 1993). His preoccupation with players like David Ortiz and Derek Jeter were at times a comforting bridge to a time or place of possibility without physical limitations. Yet in more dysphoric states these same ballplayers could also be positioned as torturers humiliating the patient with their physical talent and success. In his schizoid states, these objects provided the illusion of narcissistic self-sufficiency. In his activities of watching baseball, obsessing over player statistics, and searching for news of their personal lives, he was delivered from the risk of dependency on and attack from others. Careful attention to when (in session and in his life) and how (affective tone) he would become more focused on these players revealed how celebrity objects also formed a silent link to an interpersonal world beyond his autistic retreat (cf. Eagle, 1981).

My understanding of celebrity objects has developed from my broad object-relations background, and contains resonances with Bach's (1971) and Nagera's (1969) imaginary companions, Eagle's (1981) work on interests as object relations, Kohut's self-objects (1971, 1984), and Winnicott's (1971) transitional objects. Through teaching, supervision, and clinical work involving this topic, however, I have identified some unique aspects inherent to

celebrities that make object ties with famous cultural figures specifically useful in creating pathways to important psychic processes:

1. Popular culture figures have a psychological **distance** from the individual allowing for an extended range of psychological functions. A person may be more easily able to consciously experience and work through dissociated emotions of hate or love with the distance they have from celebrity objects.
2. The individual experiences increased ability to **manipulate/control** celebrity objects by virtue of the imaginary relation to them. A fantasy relationship that has some reality basis allows for trying out wishes and desires that can instantly be mentally undone or repeated (Maltsberger et al., 2010).
3. Based on their celebrity status, these figures are inherently **receptive to idealization and subsequently denigration.** The relative power that society confers on a given celebrity--along with the self's distance from the individual--creates the psychological possibility for investment of grandiose wishes and desires and associated disappointments and hatred.
4. The relative fame of a celebrity object grants a social status that allows for **an interpersonal or relational link** to a larger assumed community. The individual is connected to a community of others by the assumption of the shared valuing of the popular culture figure. It is from this beginning position that the individual in treatment can be seen to deepen this connection to the community or withdraw from it, as determined by the person's personality.

With the technological advances of the last three decades, these aspects of celebrity object relating only appear to be intensifying due to the increased access and permeability of boundaries to what seem to be a proliferation of celebrity identities.

2 | CELEBRITIES IN THE CLASSROOM

In an attempt to demonstrate an in vivo psychoanalytic model of intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamics, I have often encouraged class participants to use celebrity examples when possible to illustrate their ideas about an assigned reading or theorist. This method is similar to one described by Dunn (2013). In espousing a more engaged teaching style, Dunn cites Freire's (1973) opposition to a "'banking model' of education—that is, teachers as depositors of information students as their receptacles" (p. 948). Dunn goes on to describe a "cross-modality teaching method:"

> It begins with my inviting (but never insisting that) students to bring to class anything that resonates emotionally with how they view psychoanalysis, what it personally means and/or feels like. This can be music, art, poetry, literature, biography, sports, politics, a memory, a DVD film, a journalistic account—absolutely anything at all (students in previous classes brought pottery, which we all viscerally felt as we passed it around, acted out monologues from favorite plays, read from short stories, performed dances, and discussed food preparation). (p. 955)

Dunn was writing about students who were enrolled in postgraduate education at an institute, which implies some baseline commitment and motivation to learn psychoanalysis in a sustained way. For undergraduates entering a seminar entitled Introduction to Psychoanalysis, I have found that one cannot assume more than students having a passing curiosity in the subject. Those of us who have taught enough college classes have undoubtedly had the experience of teaching students whose primary reason for being in the class can be boiled down to its fulfilling a major elective requirement or its being scheduled at an opportune time of day. With this different basis of participant interest, the method I am about to describe departs from Dunn's format and does not assume the student has a "psychoanalytic connection" with his or her "show-and-tell" item.

Attempting to make psychoanalytic ideas live beyond the text to a generation of college students who take *the unconscious* as a given within their postmodern existence is challenging. Paradoxically, though psychoanalytic practices may not be considered a necessary part of one's psychology or clinical training in many universities, the wisdom of psychoanalytic ideas may often be embedded in a student's way of making sense of the world. In my experience presenting psychoanalytic ideas to undergraduates and in rare opportunities to high school students, the majority were not initially very interested in the theoretical mechanisms or psychic systems that underpinned whatever even rudimentary everyday sense they had of "defenses" and "subconscious wishes." Discussing or reading Sigmund Freud or Melanie Klein (who has less of a mainstream reputation—good or bad) can feel like a history lesson that for many students may feel like they are being asked by teachers to pay respect at the grave of an ancestor.

The challenge then is to make the ideas relevant to students in a personal way. The classroom is not usually a place that students will feel comfortable talking about their personal lives, and in this way provide the data for the class to apply to the readings we discuss. Many students don't have therapy experiences or are reticent to talk about them. Using art and other forms of media products (literature, fiction, movies) is useful but dependent upon students' aptitude for textual analysis. Moreover, using psychoanalytic ideas to engage aspects of a film may lend itself to rich but aridly intellectual discussions. I have found that a student's conscious understanding of his or her experience of a film character, if understood as a celebrity object relation, and not in the context of an overall understanding of the film, helps lends vibrancy to discussions.

Through the course of a semester, I can usually expect some student to use a famous figure spontaneously as example of some psychological phenomenon. For instance, I heard students use examples of Elliot Spitzer and Anthony Weiner as politicians with self-defeating or masochistic tendencies. Not surprisingly, the topic of celebrities often emerges in a class discussion on idealization. During one unit I had assigned Freud's "On Narcissism" (1914) and "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" (1921). In the latter, Freud describes the process of idealization in the context of falling in love:

> The tendency which falsifies judgement in this respect is that of idealization. But now it is easier for us to find our bearings. We see that the object is being treated in the same way as our own ego, so that when we are in love a considerable amount of narcissistic libido overflows on to the object. It is even obvious, in many forms of love-choice, that the object serves as a substitute for some unattained ego ideal of our own. We love it on account of the perfections which we have striven to reach for our own ego, and which we should now like to procure in this roundabout way as a means of satisfying our narcissism. (pp. 112–113)

As one can imagine, undergraduates may not find it so comfortable to discuss matters pertaining to their love lives. In order to facilitate a discussion about idealization to understand the dynamics of narcissistic processes and personalities, it was useful to have the students reflect on their past experiences as adolescents. Depending on one's perspective, it is possible to see a classroom of college students as closer to a classroom of adolescents than adults. Yet for teaching purposes, I have found it helpful to accentuate the differences between the current psychologies of college seniors and those of their adolescent selves in order to create some distance for them to reflect back on themselves.

When asked to recall their "distant" teenage experiences of being fans of musicians, movie stars, and other world figures, students supplied cultural figures known to me such as Madonna, Beyonce, Kurt Cobain and Nelson Mandela, as well as personalities obscure to me and to some of their classmates. Taking the apparent distance that reflecting on one's past self seems to afford, many students were able to discuss their former affections for these popular icons. Some students were able to identify and explore some of the factors informing their strong connections to these idols. Beyond talent and world importance, some students pointed to what they perceived as character traits that were exemplified by various persons, such as courage, integrity, and perseverance thought adversity.

What came out of these discussions about idealization was the eventual fate of the attachment to these famous figures. One student discussed how her admiration and affection for Madonna's persona and music eventually gave way to her more critical evaluation of the pop star's superficiality. Another student was able to identify how his connection for athlete Alex Rodriguez was dismantled once allegations about the baseball player's cheating surfaced. The psychological transformation from cherished secondary attachment figure to despized fallen idol helped bring the complicated connection between idealization and denigration to life.

A celebrity like Alex Rodriguez can serve as a gateway to the world of professional athletics, a field ripe for investigation of a person's fantasies about famous others. In many of my classes, I was fortunate to have at least four or five students who were sports fans. As I have discussed in previous work (2013, 2014), sports fandom is an under-investigated topic of psychoanalytic inquiry. My psychoanalytic seminars with undergraduates have provided a surplus of data demonstrating how in a sports fan's attachment to particular teams and players, the concepts of projection, identification, and defenses are made tangible.

The key to utilizing the potential of celebrity objects in the classroom is encouraging students to resist or to go beyond "psychoanalyzing" or "psychologizing" (as I have heard students say) a figure like Kim Kardashian. While individuals will inadvertently reveal aspects of themselves in their "armchair" assessment of a celebrity's psyche, I found that there's more to be gained in having students consider the role a Kim Kardashian plays in their minds in attempting to analyze the reality star's personality from afar. Limited by a lack of clinical experiences in a therapeutic role and often not feeling comfortable using their personal lives as the raw data to which to apply psychoanalytic ideas, students' celebrity object relationships serve as parallel but close enough substitutes to "real relationships" that can serve as classroom data.

One student, who played on the Columbia football team helped illustrate the usefulness of teaching through celebrity objects in discussing various aspects of professional basketball player LeBron James' leaving of his hometown Cleveland Cavaliers for a lucrative contract with the rival Miami Heat team. The student used the triangular relationship between the basketball player and his old and new teams to discuss themes of ambivalence, dependency, identification, prohibition, and rivalry in the context of Jonathan Lear's (2005, p. 181) take on the Oedipal complex.

This student expressed a mixture of gratitude and animosity for James. A lifelong fan of James since early childhood, the student credited the star with inspiring him to excel on the athletic field. He initially understood James' decision to join a rival team as a betrayal of loyalty, likening James to a parent abandoning their family to start a new one. Interestingly, he also described a quality of the betrayal as being better characterized as the way "parents who are divorcing would feel if their kid chose to live with one of them over the other." It was later in office hours that this same student would discuss his surprise at how his experience of childhood divorce informed his classroom discussion of LeBron James.

It has been compelling as a classroom experience and gratifying as a teacher to have a student cite a piece of music, poetry, or art to express the nuances of complicated mental states. Relatedly, I have found it useful to discuss the different aspects of students' connection to music artists themselves. During one class session regarding Oedipal dynamics, my solicitation for popular culture examples of triangular dynamics yielded Kanye West's relationship to his wife Kim Kardashian and her former boyfriend, Ray-J. In another seminar focusing on Klein's (1940) "Mourning and its Relation to Manic-depressive States," a student speculated whether West's range of extreme states depicted in his albums could be understood as movements from the dysphoric grief of the depressive to the grandiosity of paranoid schizoid positions.

One student described how she was understanding Kohut's ideas about self objects by using the example of her relationship with Joni Mitchell, elaborating the ways in which Mitchell's lyrics and songs moved her personally. It wasn't just that the singer-songwriter's music articulated and differentiated previously unformulated or diffuse experiences. As she explained, in listening to Mitchell's songs, she felt as if she was in a deeply personal relationship with someone who was fulfilling a psychological function:

It's like I feel like she's just like me. Like she knows things about me or has had things happen and felt the same things that I have, but like very specifically. Like things I haven't told people, she not only knows, but is singing about

feeling a certain way that I thought I only felt. I know it sounds weird since she's old now, but she was younger when she wrote these songs, so she's singing from a younger perspective.

Though the topic began with Kohut's ideas of self object twinship needs, it was late enough in the semester so that the class had read enough theorists to be able to expand the discussion. One student questioned whether having that kind of feeling with a music performer would be better thought about in the context of Winnicott's ideas of maternal mirroring. This led the class into a broader abstract discussion of the function of art and its parallels to therapy. I let this play out for a few minutes before steering the participants back to discussing these ideas using specific artists. A student whose comments I had always been impressed by brought the conversation back to Kanye West. She described how she found herself having a strange response to the rapper's music. She then began to discuss how she felt that her interest in West's music seemed "familiar." A few other students began responding to her comment from a music criticism point of view, asserting some of the pop, rap, and R&B influences that can be heard on his albums. I got the sense that the student was talking about his music on a different level. I turned the conversation back to the first student asking her to elaborate what she meant. She said she didn't know exactly, but then went on to describe a mix of feelings and thoughts that depicted a kind of "transference" (as she called it) of her relationship to another rap artist, Tupac Shakur. Her invocation of the term transference was greeted with some laughter, but with my encouragement she discussed in an honest way how she had grown up listening to the murdered Tupac Shakur with her older brother.

She was 12 years old and admittedly did not fully like or understand some of what Tupac's songs were about. She did know that she liked the rhythms, the beats, and the way the music made her feel. The student recalled being driven around by her brother, who would play Tupac in the car. He would sometimes disparage more current artists for not having as artistic and intellectual ambitions as Tupac. The class listened to the student as she then brought the seminar to a hushed silence and shared that her brother had died a few years ago, right before she had entered college. In a tearful but self-possessed manner, she reported returning to listen to Tupac songs, and speculated that association of the rapper to her brother allowed her to understand and appreciate his songs more. Now older, she found aspects of Kanye West's music resonating with her in similar ways to Tupac's. More specifically, she experienced West's contradictory persona, rife with extremes of nuanced sensitivity and arrogant simplicity, as an echo not only to Tupac but to her own reconstruction of her brother's identity. In other words, she concluded that the mix of frustration, intense fascination, and empathy were not carried over from Tupac Shakur to Kanye West, but from her brother originally.

Though there are aspects of this classroom moment that may seem thin to some readers, its emotional heft was felt by the class, myself included. What stunned me even more was where the student went next. In a way that likened the moments we can observe in the consulting room when our patients seem to be edging at a deeply personal insight, the student tentatively continued. Based on one of our recent readings, she asked if identifying referred to what someone does or how someone thinks.

To be sure, this student was one of my best and I am sure her mind was capable of wrestling with psychoanalytic ideas presented in any method. Apprehensive of conducting a one-on-one dialog with others only bearing witness, I stopped to ask the class members if anyone could pick up or know what kinds of questions were there to be asked with this data. Here, I think the relatability of celebrity objects like Kanye West and Tupac Shakur facilitated greater class participation. For even if one did not know or was not a fan of either artist, most students in a college classroom can identify with the experience of being a fan of a music performer—allowing for an easy role substitution.

One student asked if the student meant that she wasn't just identifying with her brother in the action of listening to Tupac's music. He stopped there. I encouraged the class to think about these ideas in general and not about the particular situation we had just heard. Another student answered the call and ventured to guess that a person identifies with an action (daddy shaving, brother listening to particular artist) but also with the what the action says about the person. I asked him to elaborate if he was able, and he gave a hypothetical example about an American watching soccer as a way of copying his father, who also watches soccer. The student continued: "what if the guy doesn't just

want to imitate his dad by watching soccer, but wants to be like his dad who watches soccer because he feels watching soccer makes him different than the average American male who watches baseball or football."

I was thrilled by this response, and I underlined for the class that as a collective we had drifted into understanding the complexities of conscious and unconscious identificatory processes. As I explained to them, it may be easy for us in the classroom to identify the motives of the boy watching soccer in the student's example. In reality, this motivation operates unconsciously, and the boy just thinks he likes watching soccer similar to his father, or more plainly that he likes watching this sport and does not even relate this to his family.

Another student posed a question to the student who had started us down this very interesting path with her paralleling her interest in Tupac Shakur and Kanye West. She asked her if she thought her reasons for listening to her brother's music were conscious or unconscious. I usually intervene when student asks "personal" questions to other classmates, and seeing the student's discomfort, I ushered the class to think about the question in a way less specifically related to the student. Later that week during office hours, the student came in to discuss her upcoming paper topic. After praizing the quality of her contribution in the previous seminar and thanking her for sharing her experience of her brother's death, I inquired about the discomfort she had felt.

She told me that it felt "all right." She added that she had been thinking about the question of what she may have been psychologically identifying about her brother in listening to both Tupac and Kanye West. The student's introspection did not point her toward satisfying answers. I told her that what she said in class had moved me in a number of ways, and made me immediately think of a favorite psychoanalytic writer's paper, Harold Searles' "Unconscious Identification." Some people may be familiar with it from Thomas Ogden's beautiful treatment of it in his paper "Reading Harold Searles" (2007). In it, Searles takes the reader through one piece of self-analysis which involved his identification with his mother washing dishes. His psychological work later in life led to the following poignant conclusion:

> it has occurred to me that I have been identifying with my mother not only in the form but also in my spirit of washing the dishes. I had not previously allowed myself to consider the possibility that she, too, may have felt so chronically overwhelmed, so chronically out beyond her depth in life, that this activity, this washing of dishes, was the one part of her life with which she felt fully equipped to cope comfortably. (p. 224)

I told the student I would send her both Searles' work as well as the Ogden paper since she was writing a paper using Ogden. I said that I hoped that these readings would help her come to her own understandings about how listening to Tupac Shakur may share a kinship with Harold Searles washing dishes. My indulgence in this enigmatic statement was partially an attempt to intrigue the student to continue her self-understanding.

3 | CONCLUSION

It can be argued that psychoanalysis has derived much of its compelling richness in its ability to operate at the margins of everyday life. To continue to hold a place in academic psychology and beyond, one important task will be to make psychoanalysis relevant to students, whose relationship to its ideas are ambivalent and ancestral, if not negative. One way to do this may be to bring psychoanalytic ideas to the uninitiated from a position that does assume not any prior interest and perhaps even expects resistance. In this paper, I have described a teaching tool I have found helpful to encourage students to "experiment" with psychoanalytic ideas on their own terms. If we encourage students to identify and speak about what confuses, frustrates, and/or preoccupies them outside of the classroom, fertile material may organically emerge that may be elucidated by frameworks created by Bion, Freud, Klein, Lacan, Searles, etc. In relating these slices of classroom life, I hope I was able to show the winding but rewarding roads upon which one can find oneself when one thoughtfully considers something as seemingly irrelevant to psychoanalysis as what's on a student's current playlist.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Joseph Reynoso has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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ENDNOTE

[1] Indulgence is asked of the reader for what now may read to some as outdated popular culture references. One of the ideas I discuss is the importance of speaking to students using the imaginary attachments to those currently in their minds. At the time of these seminars, many of the celebrities I used were more "alive" to students than they may seem 10 years later.

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