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BOOK SECTION

FROM PSYCHOANALYTIC NARRATIVE TO EMPIRICAL SINGLE CASE RESEARCH. IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOANALYTIC PRACTICE

By: Kächele, H., Schachter, J. & Thomä, H. (eds.). New York/London: Routledge, 2009.

With his classical six case reports, Freud set the model for scholarly writing of generations of psychoanalysts. In light of today's scientific criteria for a case study, however, except for the Schreber case, they fail in a very critical respect by not allowing an assessment of the material independently of Freud's processing of it. Thus, the here-and-now proceedings, in the sense of what took place, are confounded with the then-and-there hindsights, afterthoughts, and reflections in the analyst's mind. There is a risk that it ends up in fiction rather than fact. However clinically meaningful and inspiring this may feel, the psychoanalytic case reports are less than scientifically convincing to many readers, and this may have contributed to the current widespread distrust of psychoanalysis in psychology and psychotherapy.

The shortcomings of the psychoanalytic clinical case report are the point of departure of an important recent book edited by Horst Kächele, Joseph Schachter and Helmut Thomä, with contributions from the Psychoanalytic Process Research Group at the University of Ulm, Germany: *From psychoanalytic narrative to empirical single case research.* The editors are distinguished senior psychoanalysts and, importantly, among the very pioneers and advocates of what has somewhat erroneously been called empirical research in psychoanalysis – after all, the psychoanalyst's recall and reflections are empirical, too, in the sense of being based on observations. Relating to Freud's claim that, in analytical work, treatment and research coincide, the authors note that "a number of case-report-based theories have proven to be erroneous" (p. 3). As Spence (1994) has noted, interpretations unfortunately tend to reflect the analyst's expectations rather than the facts of the matter. Therefore, Weiss & Sampson (1986) have suggested that it is necessary to study the psychoanalytic process in a more formalized and systematic way.

The alternative offered by Kächele, Schachter and Thomä is the systematic case study – note, not the kind of case stories some analysts like to call case studies. What the authors call empirical case research is more like the case study as it is sometimes practised in other branches of psychological research, for instance, cognitive psychology and neuropsychology. Its value depends on the comprehensive and systematic documentation of all kinds of data on a case – the more the better, in principle – and its backbone is the audio or video recording of the sessions with the analysand. Beside the problems of managing the enormous amounts of material accumulating during the years of a psychoanalysis, the main problem seems to be a reluctance of many analysts to put their words on tape. And the authors do discuss, maybe a little too cursorily, the pros and cons of tape recording. This is followed by a, to my mind, longish chapter on the metascience of psychoanalysis, particularly focussing on Grünbaum's (1984) critique, and another chapter on the history of the case-study approach in psychoanalysis.

The methodological approach of the Ulm group is described as having four levels, and each of these levels is generously illustrated in the rest of the book: the clinical case study; systematic clinical descriptions; guided clinical judgment procedures; computer-assisted text analysis. This structure reflects the authors' conviction that the systematic elucidation of clinical meaning and scientific credibility require a multiple-perspective approach. The specimen case is that of Amalia X, the most precious asset of the Ulm text bank, a case record of more than 500 sessions with a 35-year old teacher suffering from depressive thoughts, low self-esteem, occasional obsessive-compulsive thoughts and impulses related to religious beliefs, and idiopathic hirsutism. A deep and detailed exposition of the course of treatment theme by theme and almost session by session follows, illustrating the second level of the Ulm approach. The first level was illustrated with material from the Amelia

X case in a previously published textbook by Thomä & Kächele (1994). The third level, guided clinical judgment, is presented in a very rich overview of studies of change, involving systematic ratings of emotional insight, content analysis focusing on self-esteem and other themes, dream series analyses, systematic analyses of core conflictual relationships using the Luborsky & Crits-Christoph (1998) method, plan formulations à la Weiss & Sampson (1986), and the general processing of observations according to the Enrico Jones's (2000) *Psychotherapy Process Q-Sort*. A psychoanalytically interested reader cannot but be impressed and inspired by these studies, whatever his or her prior attitudes toward "empirical research" may be.

A separate chapter is devoted to the fourth level of the Ulm approach, the linguistic studies based on material collected in the Ulm text bank. The person mainly responsible for these operations is Erhard Mergenthaler who together with Kächele demonstrates the potential of computer-analysis of texts, for example, in vocabulary studies, analyses based on Mergenthaler's therapeutic cycles model (Mergenthaler, 1996), and in other interesting contexts.

In all research, there is a perennial conflict between the richness and uniqueness of natural events and phenomena and the abstractness, simplification, and generality of scientific models. Although the Ulm group has gone a long way to preserving the *in vivo* nature of psychoanalysis, to many psychoanalysts, much of what is argued and presented in this book will probably be provocative reading. As someone who is both psychoanalyst and researcher, and who is concerned with the negative attitudes of fellow researchers towards psychoanalysis as well as the negative attitudes among fellow psychoanalysts towards systematic research, I think that this very confrontation is a good reason why psychoanalysts – psychoanalytic candidates, in particular – should read it. Besides stirring resentment, anger, or contempt, in some happy cases it will also stimulate thinking and reflection, and in the long run also generate scientifically convincing evidence of the value of psychoanalysis.

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Rolf Sandell
Fredrikshovsgatan 3A
SE-115 23 Stockholm
Sweden

rolf.sandell@liu.se