



Position Statement Regarding Psychoanalysts' Providing Commentary on Public Figures

The American Psychoanalytic Association takes the position that psychoanalysts should offer relevant psychoanalytic insights to aid the public in understanding a wide range of phenomena in politics, the arts, popular culture, history, economics, and other aspects of human affairs. The added depth of understanding that psychoanalytic commentary can provide regarding public affairs benefits society and the profession. However, the American Psychoanalytic Association expects psychoanalysts to exercise extreme caution when making statements to the media about public figures. Respect for the limits of psychoanalytic inference about individuals one does not know and has not interviewed in depth is essential.

Rationale

Public figures often exhibit behaviors or personality traits that are puzzling and surprising to the public, evoking a great deal of curiosity. Reporters and editors from various media may seek out psychoanalysts' opinions in an effort to explain and understand the aberrant or startling behavior of the public figure. "Public figure" refers to any widely known person in politics, the arts, sports, business, or a crime victim or perpetrator, as well as individuals who have come to receive widespread public and media attention for any reason.

In the case of commentary on public figures, we urge all psychoanalysts to take careful precautions so that their comments avoid the appearance of "wild analysis", do not overstep the bounds of psychoanalytic knowledge and undermine the basis for psychoanalytic inference, and of course stay very clearly away from the edge of libel and defamation of character.

Injudicious and unsupported use of psychoanalytic inference is harmful to the profession and to the public.

At the same time, the American Psychoanalytic Association is committed to the principle of free speech and the extension of knowledge about psychoanalytic ideas.

Psychoanalysis must maintain its identity as a depth psychology, its inferences depending on a wide variety of data including developmental history, information derived from the transference and countertransference, evidence of unconscious conflicts and strivings. Manifest behavior of a distant figure does not yield this kind of data and therefore does not create a sound basis for psychoanalytic diagnosis or interpretation. In the case of psychobiography, the clinical material is replaced by a wide range of data derived from documents, interviews, and observed behavior patterns over the subject's life course. This kind of data offers a different kind of in depth exploration of the psyche. Additionally, psychobiographers such as Kowitz, Dyer and Volkan articulate the need for a defensible scientific methodology and freedom from bias and countertransference for psychoanalytic biography to achieve an acceptable professional standard¹. Thus psychobiography is a legitimate form of psychoanalytic communication when practiced according to professional standards.

History

In 1964, Fact Magazine, now defunct, conducted a singularly unscientific survey of a large group of psychiatrists soliciting their opinions on the mental fitness of Senator Barry Goldwater to serve as president. After the magazine published a story that included attribution of severe psychiatric diagnoses and negative character traits to the Senator, Senator Goldwater sued the publisher and editor of Fact for libel and won his case in court. In response, several of the major mental health organizations altered their ethics codes, adding a prohibition against commenting on public figures one has not personally interviewed^{2,3}. APsaA did not put such a prohibition in its ethics code but did issue a strong position statement written by its then President Heinz Kohut along with A.R. Anderson and Burness Moore⁴. This position statement stated unconditionally that the conditions for psychoanalytic inference about an individual's emotional stability did not exist in a political campaign. Kohut et al also warned of the likelihood of bias and distortion on the part of the psychoanalyst, who could be assumed to have a personal preference in the campaign. This position was reaffirmed 4 years later by a letter from Burness Moore and Bernard Pacella⁵.

Recommendations

Specific recommendations to psychoanalysts follow:

- Avoid thinly veiled, disingenuous diagnostic interpretations of public figures, such as "I can't say anything about Senator Smith because I haven't interviewed him, but people who behave like him generally have a narcissistic personality disorder". Obviously, you are offering a diagnosis of Senator Smith.
- Communicate a range of possible psychoanalytic and other explanations for the behavior in question, with the clear statement that you don't know which if any of these is true about the particular public figure⁶.
- Attempt to turn the conversation to an area where you can make definitive statements, such as the public reaction to the surprising behavior.
- Never make a definitive statement about the personal psychodynamics or diagnosis of a public figure.

References

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