

THE ROAD TO UNITY IN PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

By Leo Rangell, M.D.

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The massacre at Virginia Tech last April recalled for me what sparked my initial interest in psychoanalytic psychology. The “problem of evil,” once the province of religion and demonology, later of philosophy, was passed to psychology. Psychoanalysis is the most serious attempt to deal with its complexities. Freud offered a method that was both a therapy and a means of understanding. Rejecting medicalization of his findings, he saw and stressed the continuities of normal and abnormal in a broad theory that aspired to be inclusive of individual and mass psychology, as well as of the creative products of the human imagination. Heinz Hartmann and David Rapaport elaborated Freud’s vision, developing psychoanalysis as a “general psychology.”

This grand plan reached an apex about thirty-five years ago and has fallen on hard times since. We seem no longer to have a comprehensive theory, but instead a host of competing formulations. Some ideas are offered as new paradigms while others are eclectic. Some seek integration or common ground, say, in the clinical situation.

Leo Rangell believes that theoretical pluralism has fragmented our field, accounting in good measure for its decline both as a therapy and as a respected social and intellectual force. A major extender of the Hartmann/Rapaport project for over half a

century, Rangell has promoted his “total composite psychoanalytic theory” for at least a decade. This book is his latest attempt at restoring theoretical unity.

Readers of this newsletter, the house organ of perhaps the very hotbed of pluralism, might need a reminder of Rangell’s credentials. In 1954, he presented what was to become one of two overlapping standard definitions of the treatment method of mainstream psychoanalysis (Merton Gill’s was the other). He was twice president of the American Psychoanalytic Association (APsaA) and twice president of the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA). His publication list is vast in number and scope. A nonagenarian, he is honorary president of IPA, a distinction held by just three others before him: Ernest Jones, Hartmann and Anna Freud.

Rangell published a professional autobiography (2004) that I reviewed in this newsletter (Golland, 2005). The current volume reprises psychoanalytic history and his own place in it; it goes beyond, though, to answer criticism and to advance a program for promoting reunification.

Unlike the autobiography, this is a short book (for the statistically-minded: 17 chapters; mean, 7 pages, median, 6 pages). I will not repeat my discussion of the rich detail provided in 2004. Rangell’s central and repeated points are but two:

- False dichotomies characterize most psychoanalytic controversies. Rangell offers a “both/and” approach in place of “either/or” splitting. He emphasizes the centrality of Freud’s (1917, p 347) “complemental series” concept and Waelder’s (1962) use of that idea regarding levels of abstract and clinical theory.

- Formulations other than his total composite theory have erred with *pars pro toto* thinking: they exaggerate a new issue while ignoring or discarding older discoveries that should be retained.

In, Out, Pending

Rangell is clear with regard to what is included in total composite theory, what is excluded, and where the jury is out. “In” are: objective rationality, transference from the past, uncovering unconscious conflicts, interpretation and reconstruction, the Oedipus complex. “Out” are idiosyncratic concepts that have not found general acceptance: e.g., “self-object,” concrete early fantasies, “without memory or desire,” symmetrical two-person psychology. Decisions pending are, e.g., projective identification, depressive and paranoid positions, “analytic third,” “analytic space.” He explains how many ideas can be subsumed within existing theory: e.g., mind and body; attachment and mentalization; asymmetric two-person psychology; narcissism (not as a diagnosis, but as a central psychological issue on a par with anxiety).

Who decides? The general theory evolves by consensus; individual analysts work with preferred ideas that may or may not survive. When innovation arouses group excitement (e.g., Owen Renik’s challenges to received technique), modifications are widely attempted in what is intrinsically a flexible method. The faddish falls away, leaving enduring contributions. Theoretical conflicts are routine in any evolving science; contradictions are not allowed.

Rangell summarizes his own additions to the overall theory: 1) similarities and differences between psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic treatments; 2) a theory of

choice and action; 3) the concept “compromise of integrity” on a par with neurosis in human affairs; 4) the concept “human core,” with sexuality remaining a central issue; 5) unification of theory; and 6) advances in large-scale group psychology.

Polemic

This book is a polemic. Its aim is to return us to a time when theoretical argument was captivating, and psychoanalysis was an inspiring social movement. Rangell sees the irrational, our subject matter, as having invaded the method - inevitable in large group process where democracy rules over science, where each analyst is an uncalibrated instrument defining personal practice, and where every child can overthrow parents. Pluralists, like groups in general, are seen as dominated by irrationality

These are meant to be fighting words, and while I am sympathetic with their aim, I question the likelihood of their efficacy. Rangell cites Martin Bergmann (from an historical perspective) and Arnold Richards (from a political one) also as sympathetic, each offering skepticism similar to my own. Bergmann emphasizes the ferocity of dissidence. Rangell believes history is moving his way, citing as evidence recent work by Renik, Green, Chusid, Greenberg, and Schafer, and noting that Wallerstein, Kernberg, Fonagy and others are writing about theoretical convergence. Rangell praises Reed and Baudry’s (1997) questions designed to promote rational discussion - as against affective decision-making.

Interestingly, Rangell does not directly challenge fellow nonagenarian Charles Brenner, as he had done in the earlier work (Rangell, 2004). In his sole citation of Brenner (p. 76), he finds agreement that psychoanalysis is a natural science. In his concept of unconscious choice, Rangell directly opposes Brenner’s central formulation

(that all psychological products are compromises) but he does not address Brenner's more recent elaborations. Nor does he note that Brenner's theorizing entails a radical paring of concepts, in striking contrast to his own additive approach (Golland, in press).

Lay Analysis

In my earlier review (Golland, 2005), I faulted Rangell for his discussion of "lay analysis." Although he now devotes four chapters to the topic, two of every seven pages of text, I remain disappointed. Rangell separates the politics of theoretical pluralism from the issue of political exclusion, a position I had taken much earlier (Golland, 1991), and he provides many examples of medical and non-medical analysts in different theoretical camps. But his list of theoreticians does not reflect the demographics of exclusion. When I began my analytic training in 1968, programs admitting psychologists were nowhere to be found in the United States outside of New York City. Many of my teachers were products of "bootleg" training. As we know, it took a lawsuit to end exclusion by APsaA, the settlement of which Rangell claims here was "universally applauded" (p 47). The lawsuit was initiated in the face of intractable conflict; its resolution was not easy. The defendants' applause was mostly for APsaA's avoiding bankruptcy; there was hardly a warm welcome for the plaintiffs or their group.

Rangell considers his discussion of "lay analysis" a digression (p 77), one taken, perhaps, in response to my criticism. He seems not yet to recognize its centrality to his earlier thesis (Rangell, 2004), the interaction of personal factors with theory, nor that righteous indignation is a legitimate part of the political psychology in which he is a pioneer (Rangell, 1980). The very phrase "lay analysis" still rankles. Rangell credits my home base, the predominantly non-medical New York Freudian Society, with hosting his

theory in 1996. Many in Division 39 consider those like myself who have recently joined APsaA to be sleeping with the enemy. That this controversy remains affectively unresolved for so many represents an essential psychoanalytic truth: traumas of the past manifest themselves in the present.

Is a psychoanalytic social psychology possible?

Psychoanalytic controversy has often centered on the issue of inner vs. outer reality. Freud's complementary series concept, consistent with the Hartmann/Rapaport model and with Rangell's position, should resolve this conflict. But a psychoanalytic social psychology remains elusive. Pluralism and exclusion are each highly charged issues. Group emotions are more difficult to comprehend than individual ones, especially since there is no evading the participant/observer dilemma.

Rangell's theory encompasses person and society (p. 76). Yet, unfortunately in my opinion, neither "compromise of integrity," nor his more recent discussion of public opinion (2005) has gained consensus - even as being proper psychoanalytic topics. Freud's own essays in social psychology have experienced a similar fate. Alfred Adler, the neo-Freudians, and even Erik Erikson go unrecognized within much of current theory, apparently for their external emphases.

Rangell notes pressures for social applications of our theory, as well as the demand for results, but he recognizes that pragmatism is often at odds with an open search for coherent understanding, our primary refined tool. Group applications (e.g., Sklarew et al, 2004) are often disparaged as diluting theory for pragmatism. Untangling subjectivities is a major focus of psychoanalysis as practiced today. How much more

difficult is it to separate oneself in trying to analyze group or political issues in which one is a participant? Rangell's own application of psychoanalysis to the larger political arena is often viewed with suspicion, as are psychoanalytic commentaries on politicians from Barry Goldwater to George W. Bush.

In the clinical setting, confrontation is a technical intervention used sparingly; exhortation is not consistent with an analytic attitude. Can polemic be more effective (and analytic) in achieving consensus in our own professional group – or in any group? Rangell presents a sophisticated discussion of “applied” psychoanalysis, but states that confirmation comes from “free associations of living beings” (p. 75). Clinical technique remains a matter of much controversy; surely, we are further from consensus about any methodology beyond the consulting room.

Rangell is a keen observer of the interaction of personal factors with theoretical development; but can he separate them any better than analysts can separate affect and intellect in our offices?

Is theoretical unity possible?

I am a scion of the Hartmann/Rapaport era, and I identify myself with Rangell's phrase, “developed Freudian” (p. 8). His work supports Freud's (1927) sentiment: “The voice of intellect is a soft one, but it does not rest until it has gained a hearing” (p 53). His strong voice and emotions are entwined with his life in theory. I have highlighted here issues that might limit his success. It is far from clear that psychoanalysis will reunify, but Rangell's efforts are admirable and his words merit a respectful hearing.

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