Comments on the Concept of the “Analyzing Instrument”

The publication of Otto Isakower’s presentation of his ideas on the “analyzing instrument” (or “The Analytical Instrument”) is a welcome and a timely event. It is welcome because for many years the analyzing instrument has been mentioned often in conversation but has rarely received extensive discussion in print (Balter et al., 1980, Spencer and Balter, 1984, 1990). It is timely because now, as at the time Isakower discussed his conception with the faculty of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute, there is a lively interest in clarifying the distinctions between psychoanalysis and other forms of psychotherapy.

In the 1950’s, new developments in ego-psychology and object relations theories led to reformulations of psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic process. The idea of a “widening scope” of psychoanalysis (Stone, 1954) that emerged during that time promoted discussions concerning the differences and similarities between psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Since then, the clarity of this distinction has become increasingly difficult to specify as the number of psychoanalytically based therapies has multiplied.

The evolution of these interests led to greater attention to particular factors in the psychoanalytic situation. Isakower attempted to find a specific, invariable factor in the analytic situation, one that would distinguish analysis from psychotherapy and general psychiatry. His interest in the analyst’s use of his or her own associations has been taken up by many current writers on countertransference. His remarks are thus relevant to a consideration of how to characterize the psychoanalytic process. This, too, is a topic that has attracted interest recently. For example, recently an entire issue of the Psychoanalytic Quarterly (1990, v. 59, #4) was devoted to this subject.

The minutes elaborating the idea of an analyzing instrument are interesting for historical reasons, as well. These meetings occurred at a time when ego-psychology
was at a most vigorous point in its development and strongly influenced by Hartmann, Kris and Loewenstein. We are, perhaps, inclined to forget today that ego-psychology was once opposed by those who thought it represented a departure from the basic Freudian discoveries. W. Reich (Reich Speaks of Freud), for instance, thought that Freud had himself abandoned his discovery of the importance of sex in the neuroses with his introduction of the structural model. Ferenczi wrote: “The critical view that I gradually formed during this period was that psychoanalysis deals far too one-sidedly with obsessive neurosis and character analysis — that is, ego psychology — while neglecting the organic-hysterical basis of the analysis.”¹ Many other analysts distrusted Hartmann’s ideas about a conflict-free sphere of the ego. Some analysts believed that the appreciation of the dynamic unconscious was in constant danger of being lost or watered down. This perspective gives added significance to Isakower’s emphasis on Freud’s early descriptions of free association and the freely hovering attention of both the patient and the analyst. It was a “return to Freud” although in a somewhat different

¹ Letter to F. 25Dec29: "1. In all cases where I penetrated deeply enough, I found uncovered the traumatic-hysterical bases of the illness. … 3. The critical view that I gradually formed during this period was that psychoanalysis deals far too one-sidedly with obsessive neurosis and character analysis — that is, ego psychology — while neglecting the organic-hysterical basis of the analysis. This results from overestimating the role of fantasy, and underestimating that of traumatic reality, in pathogenesis … 4. The newly acquired experiences (though in essence they refer back to the distant past) naturally also affect some particular features of technique. Certain measures are far too severe and must be tempered without completely losing sight of the secondary, educational aspect." In: Dupont, J. (1988). The Clinical Diary of Sandor Ferenczi (M.H. Balint & N.Z. Jackson, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. xii.
sense than the Lacanian movement that took this for a slogan at that same time (Lacan, 1955).

Isakower’s focus on a specific aspect of the analyst’s activity can be seen as reaction to a perception that ego psychological theory was becoming too abstract and impersonal. Today, we are more familiar with a different side of a similar reaction. At the present time, the critique of ego-psychology moves away from basic Freudian concepts toward self-psychological, relational and interpersonal orientations that are believed to be closer to experience.

This brief comment merely indicates a climate of interest in which the faculty discussion of the analyzing instrument fits. It is evident that the issues continue to deserve our critical interest. More specifically, the four issues that Isakower addressed in his presentation can serve as a starting point for further examination. My discussion will only mention these issues as a preliminary to an examination of the concept of the instrument.

First, Isakower addresses the function of supervision. He regards the function of supervision to be primarily to teach the student how to achieve the state of mind necessary for self-observation as a component of listening to the patient. Included in the discussion of supervision is the idea that there should be a separation of functions in the teaching of psychoanalysis. For him, theoretical discussion does not belong in supervision. To focus supervision on self-observation, he introduces his second interest, the description of the psychoanalytic situation in terms of the use of the psychoanalyzing instrument. This requires the third topic, an attempt to describe and clarify the conceptual status of the “analytical instrument”, the “tool” of the analyst. Thus, he cites the passages from *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900) that support his idea of some apparatus, like the sense organ “consciousness”, that is able to respond via freely hovering attention to perception and to the preconscious, and that suspends criticism of emerging, involuntary ideas. Finally, his quotation of a comment of Lewin’s
that associates ego-psychology with having the patient more awake than does the use of the topographical theory suggests a fourth interest, the orientation to topographical and structural theories and their relevance to the psychoanalytic situation.

In Isakower’s presentation, the narrative flows from a discussion of the function, goals and method of supervision. Isakower asserts that supervision has a special function that involves the student in learning how his or her mind works and how to use it in listening to and responding to patients. Supervision is distinguished from the personal analysis, which explores the contents of the student’s unconscious, and from course work that teaches psychoanalytic concepts. Supervision helps to study the student’s own mind by observing how it functions, not by studying its contents for their unconscious meanings and not by applying various concepts to it — except for “the analyzing instrument”. The student is helped to notice associations occurring in response to the patient’s associations. The student is encouraged to discard preconceptions, themes, attempts at formulation, and theoretical notions that come to mind. Imagery is valued as an indication of an appropriate state of regression and absence of critical control. Isakower emphasizes that he is not teaching technique so much as he is teaching process. He acknowledges that this is not the entire process. However, it is the essential part, or perhaps, manifestation, of the analyzing instrument.

At this point, it is not difficult to see the didactic value of the “analyzing instrument” as “a point of reference for the clarification of the psychic processes which constitute the foundation of the specific analytic activity” (ch. 4, p. 3). With respect to Isakower’s goal, to “establish criteria for the behavior, actions and interventions of the analyst, and afford an evaluation of their effect on the analysand” we are left wanting (ch. 4, p. 3).

Although Isakower refers to this as the “art” of psychoanalysis, it seems to me that what he describes is perhaps better described as teaching a *skill in achieving a kind of experience*, perhaps analogous to learning meditation. In effect, he says this
later in his example of supervision: “The student was encouraged to foster this kind of experience [of attending to and using his own imagery]” (Ch. 7, p. 5). Freud, too, seems to be describing the development of a skill in a passage supplementing the passages on free association quoted by Isakower. Freud wrote: “No one should expect that an interpretation of his dreams will fall into his lap like manna from the skies. Practice is needed even for perceiving endoptic phenomena or other sensations from which our attention is normally withheld; and this is so even though there is no psychical motive fighting against such perceptions. It is decidedly more difficult to get hold of ‘involuntary ideas.’ Anyone who seeks to do so must familiarize himself with the expectations raised in the present volume and must, in accordance with the rules laid down in it, endeavour during the work to refrain from any criticism, any parti pris, and any emotional or intellectual bias. ... he must work, that is, with as much persistence as an animal and with as much disregard of the result.” (Freud, 1900, pp. 522-23) Here the sense of conscious struggle connected with the fundamental rule comes to the fore. Freud added that if his advice is followed, the task ceases to be hard. Not long after, however, he added that it is not possible to interpret every dream because: “It must not be forgotten that in interpreting a dream we are opposed by the psychical forces which were responsible for its distortion. It is thus a question of relative strength whether our intellectual interest, our capacity for self-discipline, our psychological knowledge and our practice in interpreting dreams enable us to master our internal resistances.” (Freud, 1900, pp. 524-25) As we can see earlier in the book, too, Freud alternates in saying the task is and is not difficult. He wrote: “... the adoption of an attitude of uncritical self-observation, is by no means difficult.” (1900, p. 103) In 1909, he preceded this comment with a paragraph in which he stated: “The adoption of the required attitude of mind towards ideas that seem to emerge ‘of their own free will’ and the abandonment of the critical function that is normally in operation against them seem to be hard of achievement for some people.” (p. 102)
In these passages, Freud, like Isakower, is talking about developing a conscious skill, consciously motivated, that is working against unconscious impediments. This is also the way Freud developed his concept of resistance (which he mentions in the 1909 addition). To condense the issue greatly, he began by treating resistance as something that could be overcome by force of will supported by positive transference and the analyst’s authority. The resistance sprang from the childish Unconscious.

One of the factors necessitating the development of the structural model was the fact Freud came to appreciate the complexity of the unconscious resistances. Just as it had been difficult to hypnotize many people, it was difficult to preserve the state of freely hovering attention that he and Isakower stressed. Of course, Isakower states clearly that the unconscious factors had to be dealt with in the student’s analysis. And he, like Freud, must correct himself frequently, to acknowledge exaggerations, overemphases and caricatures that his extreme statements lead to. However, it may be that the effort to isolate the analyzing instrument must lead to distortion even though the regression Isakower recommends is an important aspect of the psychoanalytic process. I shall say more about this shortly.

For a moment, I shall note Freud’s elaboration of his early characterization of interpretation and resistance. It is easy to trace the similarities in Freud’s comments about resistance from a letter to Fliess (Freud, 1897) to An Outline of Psychoanalysis (Freud, 1940). However, the differences are instructive in the present context. In the Outline, Freud distinguishes between the patient and his ego, as well as between aspects of ego functioning. At the same time, he notes that “We serve the patient in various functions, as an authority and a substitute for his parents, as a teacher and educator ...” (1940, p. 181; italics added). To this he adds the positive transference and the rational, mostly conscious, factors in the patient that aid the analysis. On the other side are the mostly unconscious resistances which have increased considerably in complexity since his early letter. To some extent, there are indications that Isakower
was also addressing these complications in his own way. However, he directed his efforts to isolating the idea of the analyzing instrument as an organization functioning unconsciously to produce the state of consciousness required for analytic work and observation. It therefore remained for others to provide an adequate elaboration of the complexities of analysis within which the method of observation that Isakower described can be integrated more meaningfully (Balter et al., 1980, Spencer and Balter, 1984, 1990).

Thus far, it seems evident that Isakower was trying to give due importance to the teaching of analytic listening and its role in obtaining analytic data. “But in contrast to the preparatory analysis and the teaching by way of courses and seminars, it is only in the supervisory sessions that the instructor is in a position to teach the student how to listen to his patient in an analytic way. (Ed. Underline.) Therefore, the function which is unique for this phase of the curriculum is to teach the student how to observe himself at the same time as he observes and listens to his patient. (Ed. Underline.)” He goes on to say that “... it is the function of teaching by supervision to enable the student to focus also on his own reactions, difficulties and blind spots which interfere with his work as a therapist and which are to be resolved in his personal analysis, as well as to develop and improve his ability to empathize in the analytical sense with his patient ....” An essential feature of learning this ability is to develop a capacity to observe the thought processes, and particularly perceptual processes that are evident when conscious aims, preconceptions and critical activity are abandoned. Isakower regards this as a near-dream state of consciousness, a state of regression with special properties. (For a discussion of closely related issues, see Rapaport, 1951.)

Isakower gives an elegant description of this state and his own self-observations in ch. 4. Although he generally refers to the “tool of the analyst” and to developing the instrument in the analyst, his description here depicts a composite analyzing instrument with analyst’s and patient’s components. This novel idea has never been developed nor
have the possibilities of the conception been further explored. Here, Isakower gives the characteristics of the analyst's half of the instrument that can be observed when the patient leaves the room and the analyst emerges from “that near dream-like state of hovering attention”. In that moment, “... you are left in mid-air and you become aware of the denuded raw surface of your half of the analyzing instrument, the surface of which is opposite to the patient’s half.” This is what can be observed. In fact, when the “composite, integrated state of the apparatus prevails, self-observation would seem to be latent. This seems to be required for the optimal functioning of the analyzing instrument. When the operation is broken off, the integration of the analytic instrument is also broken up.” (ch. 4, p. 8) According to this picture, the apparatus operates unconsciously and is observable only retrospectively. Of his observations, Isakower says that they are “nothing but rough tracings”.

Isakower’s account captures something essential about the analyst’s experience of the psychoanalytic situation that distinguishes that experience from other situations. Does accepting this view require us to accept the idea of the analyzing instrument as something more than convenient and dramatic didactic imagery? I think not. And, as I suggested earlier, attempting to treat the instrument seriously as an “entity” leads to distortions in the clarification of the dynamic aspects of experience. I shall try to sketch this briefly.

The observations embodied in the idea of the analyzing instrument are retrospective recollections of experiences occurring earlier in a “near dream-like state”. They are, if I understand Isakower correctly, ideally observed after the analytic hour. These memories are regarded as observations of what had been previously going on.

Because of his effort to turn an experience of a changing state of attention and the emergence of memory into the momentary glimpse of an entity, Isakower converts the dynamic processes he is trying to grasp into a static and elusive object of observation. Psychologists have long recognized the problems associated with this kind
of attempt to conceptualize introspection (Grossman, 1967). Psychoanalysis brought a
dynamic view of consciousness and memory that helped to understand the processes
of observation and recall as continuous processes.

It serves Isakower’s intentions better to regard the recollections of the analytic
hour as a continuation of the analyst’s response to his or her own thoughts about the
patient’s material. The reproduction in memory of the psychoanalytic experience would
be a part of the process of construction by the analyst of the analytic process after the
patient’s departure alter’s the state of attention. The analyst’s reflections on this series
of experiences are a part of the analytic data. They are readily recognized as
reconstructions of the recent past in the same way that our dynamic view of memory
recognizes memories of the distant past as reconstructions, too. We might paraphrase
Freud’s (1899) insightful comment on screen memories by saying that we have
memories relating to the analytic hour, rather than memories from the hour.

This is not intended to question the validity of recall of the analytic hours, the
problems of which are well-known, in any case. I am stressing the dynamic character of
recall in this context, which is the same issue that interested Isakower. His method of
supervision was clearly intended to bring home to the student the way this dynamic
involvement with the patient worked. For this reason, he opposed taking notes during
the hour and presenting from notes in supervision. Consequently, reifying these
processes into an analytic instrument that must be looked into and “cleansed” seems to
introduce an ironic countercurrent to a dynamic description. The suggestion that he
would offer students, that it would be “better not to think” certain thoughts, seems to
introduce criticism, constraints, and rules into “free” association. Again, there is a kind of
irony that this should be so when the goal is the free flow of thought.

We may agree that it is best not to impose preconceptions, or to search for
particular theoretical and clinical trends in the material — to be, in Bion’s dramatic
phrase, without memory or desire. If theoretical notions or impulses to formulate
material prematurely do occur to the analyst, perhaps it is more useful to inquire why they come to mind in place of, say, some perception or another thought of a more personal or empathic kind. Sometimes it may be a defensive intellectualization provoked by something in the material. Such thoughts may also be regarded as unconscious fantasies couched in the terms of theories. At other times, an association of that kind may be a step on the way to understanding. Finally, these possibilities may not be incompatible. Thoughts that come to the analyst’s mind that “it might have been better not to think” may have all of those implications with differing degrees of relevance at various times. In any case, rather than dismissing them as unwanted intrusions, there is value in seeing such events as inevitable, like unconsciously motivated resistance. Rather than contaminators of the instrument, unwanted thoughts of various kinds are now widely recognized as expectable parts of any dynamic situation. They bring information, signal alterations in attention and states of consciousness. Finally, these intrusions are an expression of unconscious fantasies the analysis of which, in both analyst and patient, is an integral part of analysis.

Evidently, Isakower believed that the special mode of listening in analysis was being neglected, and with it the awareness of alterations of attention and imagery in the analytic hours. The idea of an instrument that had to be kept clear of unwanted intrusions had its counterpart in an anecdote he once to told in class to convey the way he thought about countertransference. He told the class that one day he had been sitting at his desk, shaving with an electric shaver. Suddenly, he noticed a brief vibration in his knee, a brief pause and another vibration. His knee was resting against the desk. He looked down and saw — nothing. The intermittent vibrations continued. He turned off his shaver and heard the telephone. Of course, when he answered the phone, the vibrations stopped. This, he said, was like countertransference. It was an intrusion which, once attended to, stopped being an intrusion. Of course, in telling this anecdote, heard in a class with my teacher, Otto Isakower, more than a few minutes ago, it may
be a memory only relating to the anecdote he told. However, he had a dramatic way of saying such things that left a lasting impression. The story captures that sense of the mind of the analyst, poised between the unconscious, on one side, and perception, on the other, that Isakower, like Freud, could evoke so well.

There is a great deal more to be said about the relationship of the conscious effort to abandon critical awareness and to achieve “freely hovering” attention. Only one more point may be noted here. In Freud’s comment, quoted above, on the difficulties of interpreting dreams, the ongoing character of the effort was evident in his vacillation as to whether it was easy or difficult. First, he says that it is not difficult to abandon the critical attitude, then he says we should not expect it to be easy but practice helps. Next, he says that even then, when we succeed, there are unconscious impediments that become evident. When Freud wrote, as he did frequently, that the positive transference promoted the analysis, he opened a path to recognizing that the effort to abandon critical thought expresses a conscious motive. As a conscious motive, it is also a compromise formation with an unconscious meaning that cannot be ignored in any serious effort to discuss the states of consciousness of the analyst and patient. Unconscious fantasy does not merely interfere with the process of free association. It operates in the establishment and maintenance of free association and all aspects of the analytic experience, too. The ongoing shifts in the motives for analysis reflect this fact. The question of how we are to integrate this understanding with the stable features and ego aspects of various states of attention and awareness remains unanswered. Concepts like automatization of functions and the “work-ego” of the analyst are intended to address the fact that learning, experience and skill play a part in understanding even one’s own unconscious.

Isakower’s attempt to work out the idea of an analyzing instrument was also an effort to address the fact that an unconsciously organized mode of functioning could be periodically activated for analytic listening. The concept serves to remind us
dramatically that we need to think again about our methods of observation, and the role of states of awareness in the process of observing. Isakower’s ideas about teaching and learning psychoanalysis are still valuable today and do not depend on the acceptance of the “analyzing instrument” as an “entity” rather than a “metaphor”.

REFERENCES


Freud, S. (1900). The interpretation of dreams. SE, 4-5.


