

**Howard Shevrin on Peter Wolff**

April 28, 1998. Peter Wolff's elegant essay in *JAPA* 44/2 deserves careful attention, as his argument against the relevance of infant observations to psychoanalysis is at bottom an argument against the relevance of *any* research to psychoanalysis. As he states at the conclusion of his response to his commentators, "all that is relevant for psychoanalysis must come from the couch" (p. 473). Arnold Wilson, in his commentary, appears to be aware of this implication when he states that "ironically, Wolff's arguments with respect to research on infants are equally applicable to the clinical psychoanalysis he seeks to preserve . . ." (p. 457). In effect, Wolff's argument is a powerful version of the position I attributed to "Dr. Case" in my plenary dialogue published in *JAPA* 43/4, with all of its undoubted strengths and considerable limitations.

As Wolff correctly notes, the psychoanalytic method is unique and irreplaceable. It does make possible at its best a process of personal discovery no other method can duplicate. But it is also based on certain fundamental assumptions about the nature of the mind that are not in themselves testable "from the couch." Wolff asserts that psychoanalysis is about "phenomena subsumed under the concepts of unconscious ideas, hidden motives, and repression . . ." and that psychoanalytic theories should "specify a method or methods for exploring the polysemous meanings of irrational fantasies, dreams, and actions that are *presumed* to be motivated by unconscious ideas" (p. 370; emphasis added). But it is exactly in the presumption of an unconscious that is both psychological and motivational in nature that psychoanalysis has encountered the most skepticism from scientific quarters, including the neurosciences that Wolff (and Barnaby Barratt) quote with satisfaction on the complex nature of memory.

Moreover, by correctly emphasizing the importance of polysemous meanings, Wolff introduces another fundamental assumption, and a real bugbear in the minds of other scientists—the apparent abandon with which psychoanalysts decide that a particular manifest content carries with it other, "hidden" meanings. Psychoanalysts from Freud on have assumed that the unconscious does not reveal itself directly and manifestly but through displacements and condensations of meaning—

another grand assumption, useful and necessary to psychoanalysts, but not self-evident to many others.

These two assumptions, referred to by Freud as the “pillars” of the psychoanalytic method—a psychological unconscious and the indirect manifestation of unconscious ideas—require research extrinsic to data obtained on the couch. Logically, they cannot be proven by psychoanalysis itself, a point made by Edelson, as well as by Freud. Fortunately, not only is such research possible, but a good start has been made on doing it (see Shevrin, Bond, Brakel, Hertel, and Williams 1996; Brakel, Camaj, Snodgrass, and Shevrin 1996).

Lastly, Wolff’s position, drawing on chaos theory and the theory of self-organizing systems, contains at its heart a paradox: if our past cannot predict our future, of what use is psychoanalysis? A successful psychoanalysis should make possible a better future, certainly better than the problematic past the patient has suffered from, or else what good are our hard-won analytic discoveries? Or is Wolff ready to concede that no matter how good a psychoanalysis, no matter how important the personal discoveries, some accidental change in “initial conditions” will render it all moot. Indeed, the course of an analysis is itself subject to the same chaotic vicissitudes as our childhood past, and there is no way of knowing that the discoveries of one hour, or the dynamic changes in one phase of the analysis, will persist beyond it. Nor are these vicissitudes a matter of analyzable resistances because they are inherent in the nature of how the mind as a complex system operates. Yes, one might be able to identify complex dynamic patterns at one point or another, but this very discovery is itself subject to the law of initial conditions and can as readily disappear as persist. Certainly the dynamics of memory cited by Wolff and Barratt make it even less likely that the memory of the discovery will remain unchanged within the time span of the analysis. What is remembered as the discovery at one time can be misremembered and distorted at a subsequent time, and neither analyst nor patient will be able to tell the difference because for each the original memory trace has been transformed by all the incalculable, intervening vicissitudes of life. One might argue in response that despite memory distortions certain dynamic changes may have occurred that neither patient nor analyst is aware of; but these dynamic changes are themselves subject to the law of initial conditions and can change chaotically.

To put it more succinctly, if the childhood past is subject to the law of initial conditions, why not any past, including the years spent in psychoanalysis? And if so, why undertake it? We had no choice about being born, but we can choose not to be analyzed.

The pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus maintained that one could not step into the same river twice, to which another pre-Socratic philosopher, Parmenides, responded that despite that there was still a river. This dialectic has gone on ever since and is reflected in the Heraclitean position taken by Wolff against the staunchly Parmenidean position taken by most child researchers. But there is another way of phrasing the issue: What changes, and what remains the same? Something has to be invariant or else there would be true chaos rather than the non-random, misnamed chaos of chaos theory. Life would be a series of disconnected, stochastic moments, as if we were forever in constantly changing fugue states. Since Wolff clearly does not subscribe to this view, he must tell us what in his view is invariant in childhood development and what is invariant in a psychoanalysis. Wolff's position requires him to presuppose that over and above chaotic, dynamic changes there are more linear changes not subject to the law of initial conditions and on the basis of which the understanding of these dynamic changes can be formulated, so that mastery of these dynamic processes might occur; otherwise all is a Heraclitean flux like the ephemeral eddies and whirlpools a flowing river forms while still remaining a river, inexorably rushing between its Parmenidean banks to the ocean year after year.

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## REFERENCES

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