

## Political identity and countertransference

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In the brief essay that follows, I will address a class of transferential and countertransferential experience that receives little attention in the Relational psychoanalytic literature. I am referring to the emotional reactions one experiences when engaging a person whose political identity and values clash with one's own. I will highlight the unique difficulties that such transferential matrices create and will argue that the technical stances adopted to address such conflicts are not likely to resolve these difficulties in treatment.<sup>1</sup>

A clash of political identity – what, for simplicity's sake, I will call “political transference” – is unlike other transference/countertransference matrices. First, to state the obvious, political identity is unlike other identity categories in that it is intrinsically and inescapably adversarial. Being a Democrat or a Republican is therefore not like being a Sagittarius or a Philadelphian. Neither is it fully like “deeper” categories such as male/female or gay/straight, which, though depicting opposite ends of a constructed binary, need not imply hostile opposition. In the American two-party system, being a Democrat or Republican entails, *by definition*, being opposed to the other party – as political figures, as people, and as moral actors in the cultural domain. The two parties exist to engage each other in a battle for power, for a vision of a just society, and for group prominence. And, the more deeply identified one is with one political group, the sharper one's antipathy toward the other party and its members.

Second, I think it is important to recognize that politics, at least for those who hold positions on these matters, is a more fundamental, inner-dwelling component of self-definition than the domain of ideas and opinions which can be altered with relatively little disruption to a person's

sense of self. Political identity is a meaning-giving, morally driven sense of one's place in the world, one that influences not only one's fundamental values and how one sees things, but where and how one lives, who one associates with, how one dresses, what one spends money on, and how one feels about oneself. In a word, one doesn't vote Democrat or Republican so much as one *is* a Democrat or Republican.

And last, the partisan experiences his or her politics with remarkably little friction. However prone to ambivalence a person might be in all other areas of life, politics seems to be felt with utter certainty. One never hears, for instance, "I'm a Democrat, but I hate myself for it." Political identity imposes a clear moral order upon the world, and the partisan knows who the good guys are and what are the proper principles. Political identification thus provides the person with a sense of belonging and an assurance of moral soundness. To say that I am a Democrat means that I am a member of the blue team; they are *my* people. I consider their values to be morally proper, their policies the ones that lead to a more just world, and the members of that group to be better human beings.

The world is thus simplified and the partisan finds he's always on the right side. This is then reinforced in conversation with like-minded group members who share talk of the greed, mendacity, and cognitive limitations of the other guys. Indeed, politics is the only area of contemporary life that I can think of where a kind of conscious splitting is utterly normative. For the partisan, there is little room for doubt, as equivocation carries the whiff of betrayal and risks questions of character. Indeed, venomous disparagement – really *hating* the opposition – connotes a righteous commitment to the just cause.

Committed activists carry this mode of adversarial certainty several degrees further, but the general picture described above could be applied to many citizens who consider themselves politically aligned. This would include most educated, well-informed citizens, a group that would encompass the vast majority of psychoanalytic clinicians and a great many patients. As such, both participants in each analytic dyad often enter the consulting room ready to view the other as either on their team and therefore morally sound and versed in the realities of the world, or on the other team, whose view of the world invites a measure of suspicion or negative judgment. Therefore when analyst's and patient's politics diverge, a morally inflected relational matrix will often emerge that creates an unusual challenge for both parties.

We have become accustomed to working with an array of countertransferential experiences – some intense, some puzzling, some disorganizing – the emergence of which, while unsettling, provides the analyst with information about the patient that is then ideally interwoven into the treatment. Analysts struggle daily with the complex task of remaining open to such experiences while at the same time trying to stand apart from them in order to reflect upon their origins and meaning.

However, political countertransference is often experienced and handled differently. The Relational analyst, working with an assertive, conservative patient, as he talks about his enmity toward Muslims, the corrosive effect of government entitlement programs, or his opposition to same-sex marriage and the rest of the “homosexual agenda,” can certainly grow annoyed, infuriated, even disgusted. The registration of a passing hostility toward such a patient is itself unremarkable.

More notable, however, is that there seems to be little inclination with political countertransference for the analyst to thoroughly interrogate his own subjectivity. The analyst in my above example may wonder why the patient is speaking in a way likely to provoke his disdain, or what his own negative feelings might say about the patient’s inner world. But, the notion that these feelings and attitudes might be shaped as much by the analyst’s history, biases, and particular moral principles – that they are as subjective and relative as any other experience – has not, to my knowledge, been considered.

Rather, the Relational analyst facing the conservative’s worldview and values is often thought to be reacting the way any reasonable, decent human being would respond in the face of an objectively noxious stimulus. The analyst might silently wonder, “What experiences led this person to such objectionable positions?” Or, in more explicitly partisan terms, “What led this person to become an awful Republican?” But, what I have not heard asked in this context is: why do Republicans *seem* so awful? And relatedly, how did it happen that Relational clinicians are all Democrats, progressives, or neo-Marxists?

To those on the left, the answer to the first question seems sadly obvious. During the most recent legislative session, the Republican majority in the House of Representatives attempted to cut the budget for food stamps. Left-leaning citizens generally hear this and ask, “What kind of person wants to starve poor children?” The Republican party wants to balance the government’s multi-trillion dollar deficit by cutting Social Security and Medicare benefits. Again, the left would ask, “What kind of person wants

to impoverish old people and reduce their medical care?” Republicans (albeit with some increasingly prominent exceptions) seem far more willing than Democrats to employ the ferocious power of the American military throughout the world and seem less concerned with the death and destruction that ensue. To most on the left, this seems incomprehensibly callous. These policies and the people who promote them seem awful because, to those on the left, they simply *are* awful.

The nearly universal leftward tilt among Relational clinicians logically follows. We are all liberals or progressives because we’re smart, educated, and compassionate people (or so we like to believe). Many readers, genuinely puzzled, might well ask, “What else would we be?” To the left-leaning partisan, conservatives and Republicans seem to be morally repellent people; in the United States, it simply makes no sense for informed, decent people to be anything other than Democrats or liberals. That conservatives harbor very similar feelings – that *they* are right and good and smart, that the left is populated by the selfish, the ill-informed, the arrogant, and the hypocritical – provokes only fury and confusion on the left.

Of course, some experience this political disjunction far less viscerally. Some Relational analysts live their politics with greater distance. So, while their values may largely align with their more assertive peers, they can put aside at least some political disagreements and retain their stance of general acceptance toward their right-leaning patients.

However, it’s hard to know how many accomplish this task, or how they manage it, because no one to my knowledge has written about the issue of political divergence. Rather, the modest literature addressing the issue of politics in the analytic consulting room seems to assume a leftward tilt in the politics of both the analyst and the patient (e.g., Botticelli, 2004; Samuels, 1993, 2004). So seamlessly does this work present the meeting of two left-leaning people that, in reading it, one gets the impression that there are no right-leaning Relational analysts (which is probably not true) and no right-leaning patients (which is obviously not true).

But, absent a thorough sample of politically introspective accounts, it is hard to know how analysts deal with the conflict of values that I am addressing. From anecdotal evidence drawn from conversations with colleagues and students, as well as many intriguingly unguarded posts on online colloquia (where the medium seems to cultivate a fantasy of unanimity and safety which then fosters an unusual candor), my impression is that the approach most commonly employed is to work with the

right-leaning patient as best one can while trying to avoid the tension of mutual political antipathy.

Not surprisingly, those who try this approach report that it's quite difficult. I've heard a number of people describe it in pained and awkward terms, as the silent, if unwelcome, disdain felt toward the patient generates a certain cynicism and a feeling of hopelessness about the treatment. Some analysts describe nevertheless persevering in such circumstances, hoping the treatment will cultivate a greater capacity for empathy in the patient and then somehow a natural evolution to the more "humane" politics of the Democratic party. Beyond the bleak cast imparted to a treatment conducted in this manner, it is worth noting that this approach effectively treats right-leaning politics as intrinsically pathological, a premise arguably true in more extreme cases but one meriting a more nuanced conceptualization in a thorough understanding of political identity.

A less common solution to this problem is to make it a matter of professional policy never to work with Republicans. There is a simple elegance to this stance and certainly all clinicians ought to retain the right not to see a patient they'd prefer not to see. Though, if widely employed, this policy would yield a situation in which Relational psychoanalysis and psychotherapy become treatments offered only by progressives to other progressives.

One occasionally encounters a third approach, in which the analyst, hoping to bring the potentially destructive tension out of the shadows, speaks openly about his political inclinations and the depth of disagreement that exists between him and his patient. One can imagine how this approach might offer the potential to integrate these divergences into the dyadic engagement. But this position too carries considerable risk if presented in a hierarchical or judgmental manner. If, for instance, the analyst proceeds in an evangelical spirit where the analyst endeavors to "teach" the patient the proper politics (e.g., Walls, 2006), one should anticipate suboptimal results. Discussing politics openly but *without* judgment or a wish to influence can be very, very difficult – imagine, for a moment, trying to maintain non-critical curiosity while listening to a patient rail about "libs'" infringement on second amendment rights immediately following the Newtown massacre – but if this issue is to be engaged at all I think this is the only way it can be done.<sup>2</sup>

That is because, in order to navigate this dilemma, the analyst must be prepared to do something that may feel impossible. In order to fully

engage a Republican in treatment, not in the truncated way that treads carefully around his political worldview and identity, the analyst must be prepared to reflect upon his own most basic political assumptions and be ready, not just to learn a thing or two, but to reflect upon his defining values. In a word, the analyst must consider negotiating his non-negotiables (Pizer, 1998), the values he would otherwise never think to question.

There is now, within Relational psychoanalysis, a growing literature employing political theory and constructs to understand patients' suffering, therapeutic change, and technique. This literature is uniformly and unapologetically left in its perspective (cf. Dimen, 2004; Guralnik and Simeon, 2010; Harris, 2012; Layton, 2009; Walls, 2006). Therefore, to get a perspective that looks at political divergence in a non-partisan manner, it is necessary to consult psychological sources outside the domain of psychoanalysis.<sup>3</sup> Here I will be relying primarily on the extensive research of the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues, who have studied the moral underpinnings of various political positions. Haidt (2013) has analyzed several large samples in the United States as well as a variety of demographic groups in India and Brazil. And he has found that moral intuitions rest on five distinct foundations (as he calls them): care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation.

All five have at least some resonance with most people, but there are enormous cultural differences, differentiated both by class and geographical region, in the prominence accorded the various foundations in the formation of moral judgment. The end result of this differentiation – and here I am collapsing a library full of social science theory and data – is that around the world and even here in our own country, people rely on widely divergent moral principles to arrive at the values that underlie their politics. Each of these principles is defensible in evolutionary terms and equal in the hold that it has on the psyche of the individual. As a result, we live among people whose morals and politics we find utterly repugnant. And they feel exactly the same way about us.

In particular, Haidt and his colleagues (Graham et al., 2009, 2011; Haidt and Graham, 2007, 2009) found that the politics of the left rely primarily upon two moral foundations: those of care/harm and fairness/cheating. This is why policies diminishing the welfare state are anathema to the left for whom reducing the social safety net beneath the poor and old seems both cruel and unfair and therefore immoral.

But Haidt found that the moral intuitions of people on the right rest on a wider base of principles. As with the left, they do incorporate an ethic of care in their moral intuitions, though they weight it less strongly. And the right also values fairness but, interestingly, they define it differently. Fairness on the left is measured in terms of equality. No one should get too much or too little. The presence in a society of abject poverty juxtaposed with opulent wealth is viewed as evidence of injustice in social policy. However, fairness on the right is measured via what Haidt (2013, p. 169) calls “proportionality.” You get what you earn, not more. Inequality is not, in and of itself, immoral.

But the most marked differences come from the right’s greater reliance upon the remaining three moral foundations (Haidt and Graham, 2007). Sanctity, for instance, figures prominently in social conservatives’ condemnation of many behaviors involving sex or the body in general. One hears the phrases “sanctity of life” and “sanctity of marriage” in debates about social issues. And homosexuality is deplored in religious terms that borrow from the lexicon of purity or decadence. Sanctity as a source of moral judgment barely registers on the left.<sup>4</sup>

There is also, on the right, a far greater reverence for tradition and a wish to protect social institutions such as conventional marriage. Such institutions are viewed with suspicion among the left as instruments for the maintenance of oppressive power relations (thereby violating their ethic of fairness). But among the right they are revered for their ordering of society and the cultural wisdom they are thought to embody.

As it happens, the moral foundations of leftist politics overlap perfectly with the guiding premises of Relational psychoanalysis. Both rest primarily upon empathy, care, and the notion of fairness as defined by equality. Moreover, Relational psychoanalysis retains a subversive, anti-authoritarianism. This theme has been present in psychoanalysis perhaps since Freud and later came front and center in the writing of theorists like Erich Fromm (1941, 1947). That element has been further emphasized in recent Relational work bearing the strong influence of critical and post-structural theory (e.g., Botticelli, 2004; Cushman, 1995, 2009; Dimen, 2004; Harris, 2009, 2012; Layton, 2006, 2009, 2014; Rozmarin, 2010, 2011). This recent work views conformity and adaptation with suspicion and aims to fortify patients in the struggle with what are viewed as oppressive trends (e.g., heteronormativity and rampant consumerism) that exist within broader society. Moreover, like much of progressive politics

and more than other psychoanalytic groups, Relational psychoanalysis, in its moderation of the analyst's role as expert and its emphases on reciprocal influence and mutual inquiry (Hoffman, 1983, 1996), rejects the traditionalism and reverence for authority that so influence the moral intuitions of the right.

As a result, one can expect that, when treating right-leaning patients, the left-leaning Relational analyst will encounter a worldview premised on at least some moral intuitions that seem not moral at all. And because these are deep value judgments, the ensuing countertransference will often lodge in the analyst's psyche in ways that easier differences, easier Othernesses (Haidt et al., 2003), will not. For this reason, I believe therapeutic management of such situations requires much deeper consideration than has been dedicated to date.

In sum, political identity presents a unique countertransferential dilemma in that awareness of it provides no avenue towards its resolution. The visceral hold of political identity, its inherently adversarial orientation, its associated moral certitude, and the evolutionary utility of the group belongingness that accompanies it, create a substantial obstacle to the general acceptance of the other that we regard as a necessary condition for transformative analytic work. In order to perform this work, the analyst must imagine himself having different basic moral principles, in effect not valuing the premises that make him decent and humane in his own eyes. Moreover, in broadening the scope of potential moral intuitions, the analyst risks being shunned within his own community, because psychoanalysis, like everything else, is embedded in world riven by political difference. And in politics, you're either one of us, or you're one of them (Berreby, 2006).

## Notes

- 1 Almost all Relational analysts identify politically left (a situation I address later in this chapter). For that reason, in discussing treatments where the participants' politics diverge, I portray an analyst who identifies somewhere on the left and a patient somewhere right. There are, to be sure, a small number of right-leaning Relational analysts, and I apologize to them as this paper will seem not to address their work experience.
- 2 Once explicit, it may become apparent to either member of the dyad that the political or moral differences are too stark to overcome and that the extended meeting of *these* two minds is not in the patient's best interest.
- 3 The field of psychology, like most of the academy today (e.g., Gross, 2013), leans decidedly left (Duarte et al., 2015; Redding, 2001). That skew, while marked, is less pronounced than is observed in Relational psychoanalysis.
- 4 One does encounter some reliance upon notions of purity and sanctity in the environmental movement and in other narrower concerns regarding food supply.



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