

Studies in Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, A History

Studies in Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, a two-year training program sponsored by the Western New England Psychoanalytic Society, had its genesis 20 years ago. Psychoanalytic Institutes and Societies around the country were successfully training psychotherapists. Our group at the time was more inward-focused and somewhat suspicious of outsiders. We did not welcome strangers to our meetings. It was almost all White, somewhat elitist, and focused on the 'gold' of psychoanalytic training. There were very mixed feelings about training psychotherapists. Would it harm full training? What if a student was sued for malpractice? The institute was not ready for a full program, so we proposed a series of linked seminars for a year, often extended into a second year. We did not, at the time, offer supervision or have any formal admission requirements. The program was modeled on one from the Boston Institute. It was very successful, and we did 4 or 5 rounds. One problem was that the students had no place in the organization. There were no avenues for further training.

Then we could move to a more comprehensive program about ten years ago and convened a committee to formulate a proposal. We proposed the current program based on two years of seminars, two years of supervision and a requirement for personal psychotherapy. We set up admission requirements and an admission process. Students were evaluated more at the end of the academic year to identify strengths and areas to improve rather than a formal progression. The committee spent a lot of time on education for the Society membership. We sought legal advice on whether a looser or more formal program would provide more legal security. The answer was that a more formal oversight was the better way to go. There was still opposition, but only from a few individuals, and the proposal passed with wide support. We have now had, I think, five cycles of classes. Each has its own character. We think many students found the concepts transformative for their work. One or more students from each class entered full analytic training in each class. I have been running a reading group for graduates. Many continue in supervision. One of our students has joined the committee and faculty.

About four years ago, we proposed a new category of Society membership for SPP graduates. They would pay a reduced membership fee and not have voting privileges but could join committees and participate in educational opportunities. This proposal passed. One of our graduates has now joined the committee and co-taught courses.

Until this class that recently graduated, the students were all licensed graduates of clinical training programs and tended to be older. We decided to offer training to advanced psychiatric residents for this class and, to our surprise, found an enthusiastic response. We ended up not being able to take everyone who applied. We did have difficulties. This was the most diverse group we have had. Especially in the first year, there were racial tensions, and tensions between the student group and the older group of more established clinicians. The psychiatric residents were more likely to question accepted dogma and theoretical assumptions. This is ultimately beneficial for the field of psychoanalysis. It brings youthful enthusiasm, and it forces the rest of us to rethink how we work. Especially pertinent is the complexity of psychosocial pressures and identifications on the internal psyche. This tension gets expressed in the group process when splits start to form. We managed the splits through a combination of dialogue with individuals and setting limits to

ensure a sense of safety. We lost two students, but the rest coalesced in the second year, and we had five graduates.

The program is run by a committee that plans and approves the courses offered, recruits faculty for the courses, reviews student applications, and approves admissions. Most in the committee also teach classes. Supervisions are drawn from the entire Society membership. Students pick their own supervisor and are expected to meet weekly with the supervisor. They can get a new supervisor for the second year or continue with the same supervisor. In addition, we have case conferences as part of the curriculum where students present their clinical work.

I want to thank everyone over the years who has contributed to the program's success. Elsie Synder helped teach some of the early seminars. Susan Bers, Debra Boltas, Fred Koerner, and Janet Madigan were part of the initial proposal. Current committee members are Jen Meyers, Brian Tobin, Janet Madigan, Bonnie Becker, Jenifer Nields, Prakash Thomas, Chris Leveille, Wendy Peterson, and myself. Many others taught courses or supervised. Dr. White retired from the chair in 2024 and was succeeded by Jen Myers and Brian Tobin.

Robert White, MD