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Totem and Taboo-The IPA "Standards" Debate

The recent survey of strategic priorities revealed a startling fact. By a considerable margin, education is the number one priority of our Association. Based on the recent controversy in the International Psychoanalytical Association, our appreciation of the centrality of education to our profession is shared throughout the world.

Probably for that very reason, there is no other single issue within our psychoanalytic organizations that produces as much passion and conflict as a debate around educational standards. Our very identity as analysts seem rooted in the standards by which we were trained

I recently served as chair of the IPA Education Work Group, charged with looking at the possibility of creating more flexibility within our training standards. The resulting debate devolved, as it so often does, into a torrid controversy about "frequency" of training analyses, i.e. three versus four to five times per week. The resulting controversy created a furor in the societies of our three regions of North America, Latin America, and Europe, which for a time seemed to endanger the very cohesiveness of the IPA itself

The issue began in 1999 when Otto Kernberg, then IPA president, received a request from the Latin American societies that component societies should "have the autonomy to introduce flexibility into their training standards." In 2001, incoming president Daniel Widlocher wrote a memorandum to all component societies initiating discussion on this issue. In July 2002, the IPA Executive Council approved a proposal to recognize different models of training, including the classic Eitingon model practiced by most IPA societies. In addition, however, it also recognized the "French model", which differed from the Eitingon in a number of ways, the most controversial of which was a three time a week frequency. A number of safeguards were included in the proposal, such as ensuring that the standards within each country for any new group admitted to the IPA would remain at the same level as those recognized by the existing groups within that country. The next task was to write these changes into the IPA procedural code, for reconsideration by Council, and ultimately, the members.

Accordingly, in March of 2004, the new code draft was brought back to the Executive Council, now called the Board of Representatives. After a lengthy and heated debate, the Board narrowly approved the changes, but stipulated that the proposal be clarified by a new Board working group, consisting of two representatives from each region. This was the Education Work Group, which I chaired.

The work of our committee began with a deep division regarding the nature of our charge. This division reflected almost exactly the division and discussion within the Board. In spite of clarification of the charge by the Executive Committee, dissension continued, with the result that the Work Group was unable to carry out the reworking of the proposal.

The Work Group was able to carry out another portion of the charge, however, with considerable success. We were charged with gathering information and feedback from the regions and societies. What became clear was that this issue aroused intense and deep affect throughout the IPA. This was true regardless of region, and regardless of which side of the issue a particular individual or society represented. In general, there was wall-to-wall opposition to changes in the standards and practices of the IPA in North America; Europe was divided. In Latin America, however, the feeling was just as strong that more flexibility was required. What became clear was that there was an enormous potential for polarization, and potential splitting within the IPA, over this issue.

As the debate unfolded, it became clear that the most important contribution that the committee could make would be to bring some reason to the discussion. A commonality among the reports, regardless of position, was the absence of actual data on the issue. This probably was a major factor in fueling the heat of the debate.

It was striking to note that neither the IPA and the American, in the respective 96 and 93 years of their existence, had gathered scientific data on our educational practices upon which to base recommendations or conclusions. Amidst the growing controversy, we began to feel that the most important contribution of our committee would be to produce a proposal that would move the debate to one more properly reflective of a scientific and educational body. Therefore, we needed to highlight our most important finding: there is very little data on which to base a decision. We decided to recommend a study of the major models of psychoanalytic education, complete with some assessment of results, to be established as soon as possible. We recommended that those of our members who are familiar with this kind of research, as well as noted educators, should form a new working group to make a thorough evaluation of coherent models and outcomes.

We recommended that the new working group should be given a firm timeline and made as high a priority as possible. We suggested that the preliminary drafts of such a working group could serve as a basis for ongoing discussions within regions, as well as between regions, on the various models under consideration. This might also be a major theme of the Berlin Congress.

Ultimately, our Working Group was able to identify three major models within the IPA: the classic Eitingon, the French, and the Uruguayan (similar to the French, but administered with a determinedly democratic involvement of the candidate). We were able to distill these from thorough reports received from 24 societies within the three regions.

The proposal of the Working Group was ultimately refined and supported by the Executive Committee, particularly by Claudio Ezirik and Monica Armesto, the incoming President and Secretary of the IPA.

At the November 2004 IPA meeting in Rio, the Board, after lengthy debate, approved the motion of the Executive Committee, which essentially agreed to “draw up a proposal as to how research into the major training models should be conducted.” The three major identified models were also accepted. With much relief, this proposal was adopted unanimously by the Board and was later presented at the Business Meeting, where it passed overwhelmingly.

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