

# Inside and/or Outside? Working Sensitive-ly with Political Material in Psychotherapy

NISSIM AVISSAR, Kibbutzim College of Education, Tel Aviv; Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, Israel

**ABSTRACT** *This article focuses on one particular dimension of psychopolitics: that which manifests itself in the personal contents or materials clients bring into psychotherapy. It seems that many psychotherapists find themselves struggling when faced with political issues which come up in psychotherapy, both overtly and covertly. Many psychotherapists find value in clarifying political aspects of clients' lives and psychotherapy itself, but are hesitant to touch upon this loaded issue or do not know how to approach it. The present article seeks to formulate a theoretical basis for politically-conscious therapy, as well guiding principles that help to implement this position. Copyright © 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

**Key words:** psychotherapy; politics; activism; politically sensitive psychotherapy; society

A growing tendency to include the political in therapeutic discourse can be observed from the late 1980s (Avisar, 2009). This has found expression in theoretical and conceptual changes in relation to therapy; in growing recognition of the role of political variables in psychotherapy; and in increasing reference to the possible effects on political reality of psychology, including its therapeutic branches. At that time, the professional literature began to feature publications that referred to the broader political factors affecting psychotherapeutic work as well as the factors that are affected by it. Indeed, examining the interrelations – or interplay – between psychotherapy and politics one may discern numerous linkages and examples. Totton (2000) articulated and used a matrix to present the realm of psychopolitics in a manageable coherent way: psychotherapy *in* politics, psychotherapy *of* politics, politics *in* psychotherapy, and politics *of* psychotherapy. These four categories are not exclusive; indeed they are closely related and sometimes overlapping. The most recent decade has seen this psychopolitical discourse evolving into a detailed inquiry into the practical implications of these theoretical insights. Some books and articles have been devoted to the possibility of putting together therapeutic praxis with a social-political value (e.g., Aldarondo, 2007; Avisar, 2016; Layton, Hollander, & Gutwill, 2006; Proctor, Cooper, Sanders, & Malcolm, 2006). In this work the barrier between the professional and the political is no longer

\*Correspondence to: Nissim Avisar, Kibbutzim College of Education, 149 Namir Rd., Tel Aviv, Israel, 6250769.  
E-mail: nissimav@gmail.com

intact, allowing us now to think of therapeutic work (of a certain kind) as a political act, and vice versa, of political engagement as action bearing therapeutic relevance. And so the therapeutic has come to be considered inseparable from the political while the political action constitutes a main channel for therapeutic intervention.

In this article I examine conventional one-to-one therapeutic praxis from the point of view of the political contents that may arise in the course of a therapy session – and, thus, elaborate an aspect of politics *in* psychotherapy. It would appear that, quite often, therapists are concerned about directly responding to such subjects, and hence they do so very rarely. This, one may assume, is partly the outcome of an absence of relevant knowledge and/or training, as well as a fear of the splitting and destructive potential of politics. However, as with any other secret kept within a relationship, ignoring or avoiding politics creates division. This is especially true wherever political reality affects daily, personal existence and undermines well-being. While I wouldn't want to argue that the political discourse doesn't hold any risks, I believe that totally curbing it is even riskier.

## POLITICS IN PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC DIALOGUE

In an article entitled “Working Directly with Political, Social, and Cultural Material in the Therapy Session”, Andrew Samuels (2006) posed the question: “What shall we do about politics?” – we, of course, being therapists. In posing this question, his objective was – and is – to clarify the ways in which therapists may work with political material directly, responsibly, and with more confidence and lucidity. For him, what this implies is psychotherapy with a “whole person”, a perspective which brings social and political aspects of life into the picture. This is why such material should be part of the therapy on a regular basis: “We must try to achieve a situation in which the work is political always, already – not unusually, not exceptionally, not only when it is done by mavericks, but when it is done in an everyday way by Everytherapist [sic]” (p. 16). Because this project is at a very early stage, Samuels argued, we find ourselves ill-equipped and lacking an adequate idiom. No matter how hesitant and awkward our first steps may be, evolving a new idiom requires openness and experience. Samuels went on to argue that, due to contextual forces, political discussion in psychotherapy is bound to be unlike other types of political conversation. To illustrate this he referred to feminist works of art which have presented certain aspects of human life as political action. In one of these, “Menstruation 2” by Care Elwes (1979), the artist was seated in a glass box, on a transparent stool, dressed in white, partly transparent clothes, without underwear or sanitary towels, while she was bleeding. As the blood flowed and was staining her clothes, the artist engaged in dialogue with the spectators about the implications of women's bodily processes, and about the spectators' thoughts concerning what was going on in front of their very eyes. Samuels claimed that, much as menstruation, framed in this manner, transforms into conceptual art, so political discourse changes meaning when it occurs in psychotherapy. Since, in therapy, political subject matter will blend in with the therapist's and client's psychological processes, their significance will be both personal and collective at one and the same time. Once the barrier between the political and the personal begins to come undone, the psyche is likely to reveal itself as more political than it seemed and this, in turn, is likely to subvert what was hitherto stable and unquestioned, to clarify self-experience, and to lead to change. Over and beyond undoing the traditional zone of avoidance, and expanding the

therapeutic discourse so that it can come to include additional dimensions of human existence, dealing with the political in the therapeutic space brings to bear a different understanding of human personality. If we choose to consider humans as “political creatures”, then political discourse touches the deepest core of clients’ souls, allowing them to shift from a passive and helpless position in the face of a changing, diverse world, to a position marked by initiative and choice.

## **FUNDAMENTAL DISTINCTION: INSIDE OR OUTSIDE**

I now consider the politically-sensitive therapeutic process as a unique encounter between inside and outside. The conceptualization I propose is based on the clear analytical distinction between internal and external investment of energy. This is an analytical distinction in the sense that, in reality, things are not separate, and each rather affects the other and constitutes it. So, for instance, it is obvious that investment in objects (outside) affects investment in the self (inside), and hence inside is formed through its relation with the outside. This is where the insight that the personal is political originates. This should not imply, however, that the axis of external investment is identical to the axis of internal investment. Usually there is a clear experiential difference between internal and external worlds. Sometimes, the boundary between inside and outside is sharp and reflects a marked gap between what is exposed to the view of others and what remains occluded. This state of affairs is often attended by feelings of loneliness and deficiency, which were likely brought about by traumatic experiences or an exceptionally painful encounter with the outside world which triggered a defense response and withdrawal. The other – though, in certain ways, similar – extreme involves an experience of insufficient separation between inside and outside, and this can manifest in a variety of ways. In my view, the more relevant ones among them are hyper-sensitivity or a sense of being over-exposed. The expected response to this will be a degree of helplessness due to feeling a more or less passive object vis à vis external environmental forces. Here inside and outside are confounded. In other, better cases, there is a greater degree of flexibility in self-expression allowing a person to choose what to say or do, and when. Then, the dividing line between inside and outside is clearer. The individual will be aware of inside and outside at the same time and will choose to express her or himself in correspondence with the external circumstances and their own preferences. A flexible distinction between the two, therefore, makes it possible to evolve a secure connection with the outside world. This is what we may consider a consolidated personality: the individual will be capable of distinguishing between internal and external sources of suffering and to act with a greater sense of inner freedom. In this intermediate space one can feel a sense of control on the one hand, and a connection with the world on the other. In other words, the common and accepted definition of personal identity preserves the distinction between inside and outside. It should be stressed that “common and accepted”, here means in relation to a specific time and place. This is a moral position reflecting contemporary Western culture and not a proclamation.

I suggest that an approach that maintains a distinction between these two axes – internal and external investment of energy – is very valuable. Again, I mean this strictly in an analytic sense, that is, this approach is therapeutically valuable as it may help therapists in their attempt to support their clients, especially regarding “political” issues. It seems to me that, in most conventional psychodynamic conceptualizations, the distinction between inside and outside has become too vague. The resulting “confusion of tongues” leads to chaos, misunderstandings,

conflicts, and inevitable injury. Often, the external or internal attribution of the client's distress is eventually determined as suits the therapist's perspective, whether or not it suits that of the client – but then the question arises, what is the client's intention or experience? The attempt to make a fundamental, though not a rigid, distinction between these two, inside and outside, introduces order and helps to give proper meaning to different materials.

## INSIDE AND OUTSIDE IN PSYCHODYNAMIC DISCOURSE

Let us consider the common stance on “internal objects” in object relations theories. This is a key concept relating to internalized versions of significant others. Object relations theory has described the intersections and mutual interactions of the internal and external worlds. While, in many ways, this project is interesting and important in relation to personality development, there is a conceptual confusion in its usual, naïve application. When talk about “internal objects” is not sufficiently clear (to either therapist or client) regarding the inside-outside relations from which these objects emerged, it perpetuates a confusing inner contradiction because it remains unclear who or what is at issue – the self or the external reality? Either it's all about objects (outside, reality) or it's about interiority (e.g., personal identity, motivations, values). Talking in mixed terms of “internal objects” can all too easily be taken to translate the external to the internal, thereby confusing one thing with another.

By contrast, one may argue that both axes – investment in self and investment in external objects – operate throughout life while mutually affecting one another. So a change in one's relations with the world is likely to influence self-investment (self-worth, for instance) just as much as, in the more classical direction, change in the self will result in changes in one's relations with the outside world. The very ability to consider creative combinations between these two axes – one of these being what the term “internal object” refers to – depends on maintaining the basic distinction between them. If it is not kept, the concepts themselves lose their meaning and any possibility of interaction as such, leading to a vague or meaningless discourse. It may, incidentally, be objected that this division imposes a separation between inside and outside and thus promotes an individualistic approach, cut-off from the outside. I don't think so. Keeping inside and outside defined and apart is crucial for a relation with reality, much like a solid identity is the condition for a satisfactory relation with the other. Winnicott seems to have been very much aware of the importance of the distinction as something that helps us understand both inside and outside as well as psychic development. Both his statements and actions bore this out. In a meeting of the British Psychoanalytical Society dedicated to aggression and its origins, which was held during the Blitz on London in the Second World War, Winnicott got up and drew the assembled company's attention to the uproar outside, saying: “I should like to point out that there is an air raid going on”. He made his statement, sat down and the meeting continued (Grosskurth, 1986). The point was not to stop the discussion or to reduce the creative, intellectual space. On the contrary, for Winnicott, the reference in the middle of a discussion of internal experience to the external-political reality was a fruitful addition. A recent book, *The Holding Environment Under Assault* (Ruderman & Tosone, 2013), similarly examines the implications for therapy of exposure to a violent socio-political reality, while using psychodynamic, politically-sensitive thinking.

Heinz Kohut elaborated the narcissistic developmental axis, the one dedicated to self-investment. This axis has had a *spurious* value in the therapeutic discourse, stressing object

investment. In fact, it is the two axes together that indicate reference to the internal, either through a narcissistic investment of energy (i.e., in the self) or through investment into internalized versions of external objects. If this sounds confusing that's because it really is. The psychoanalytic sophistry about an inside which is really outside and an outside which is actually inside has clouded over the basic distinction between these two. Hence it becomes impossible to discuss the dialectical tension which gives rise to subjectivity. I obviously do not intend this as a general statement about psychoanalytic theories and conceptualizations: my comment relates to common interpretations of these insights. Often these are simplistic readings that remain oblivious to their own political (and often radical) potential. In other cases, it is the theories themselves that contribute to the "repression" of the political and mix up between inside and outside. I believe it is only possible to develop complex thought addressing various interrelations and offering new understandings of the one signifying the other on the basis of a clear distinction. In the absence of a stable semantic foundation, the therapeutic dialogue will be intrinsically unsteady and will always threaten to erupt into misunderstanding and confusion. Let us now return to Kohut whose self-psychology reserves an important role for empathy in the process of healing the self. Therapists' empathic understanding of their clients will make it possible to find out the latter's needs, which therapists will then meet as best as they can with the aim for the self to go on developing. The therapist's key objective, according to Kohut, is to constitute a satisfactory selfobject to the client, that is, to be an outside that is inside. Politically speaking, however, Kohut's contribution also adds a conceptual confusion. If the therapist is inside, that is, lacking any signs of separateness, she or he cannot denote the outside. This amounts to intra-psychic therapy, what is called "one-person" (client-centered) psychotherapy. As empathy is the ability to see reality from the other's perspective, in such circumstances, empathy becomes impossible. Empathy requires two people. Dialogue is a relationship between inside and outside in which these two interact. When, on the other hand, the therapist is an other, she or he cannot remain in denial of their own subjectivity. In a way, Kohut wants to have his cake and eat it: he would like to take the good things from both extremes and avoid dealing with the difficulties each of them also brings along. Being inside makes it hard to cope with external forces and it gets in the way of the dialectical play of forces that gives rise to identity – which never comes into being on the basis simply of an internal dialogue or from being in front of the mirror. This approach will not easily evolve into a complex dialogue or negotiation, one that includes the client's attitude to the therapeutic ambiance and the therapist's subjectivity. Such a dialogue is, thus, of necessity incomplete though it is of course likely to be valuable; however, if the constraint at issue is structural, the capacity of this dialogue to cope directly with the outside will be limited. Being outside, by contrast, makes it necessary to address issues concerning power relations and influence, similarity and difference, and so on. It requires a transition to a "two-person psychotherapy", a shift to which Kohut did not make. He made infrequent reference to issues regarding power relations in therapy and preserved the positivist façade of therapeutic practice. Such a position carries a two-fold risk: it may lead to a patronizing and oppressive stance in therapy, and to the development of a hermetic and arrogant professional discourse in the cultural domain. So the confusion between inside and outside potentially affects both the therapeutic relationship (internal politics) and the character of the professional discourse (professional politics) and obviously the general social-political domain.

## PSYCHOTHERAPY, ACTIVISM AND PERSONAL GROWTH

A discourse of this kind which combines internal and external is unique to the psychotherapeutic dialogue. Thus, this may well be mental health professionals' special contribution to the political discourse and to society at large. To make it possible, a willingness is needed to take risks and to take an open minded attitude towards the political. As Philip Cushman (1995) proposed, it must involve three factors: client, therapist, and culture; and, as Samuels (2006) argued, political discussion, when it occurs in the context of therapy, will be meaningful on several levels at once: the personal, interpersonal and collective. Similarly, Tudor (2014) has used the term "two-person-plus psychology" to acknowledge the place of external reality in therapy. I believe it is on the basis of this dialogue that personality (internal, personal and collective) emerges – always in the face of the other and of external reality. All this, it seems to me, is especially pertinent in the case of violent and harmful realities. In such a situation, talk that is disconnected from the context and does not bring the political domain into the picture, is inadequate, also from the point of view of personal development.

A fascinating example of this occurs in Robert Lindner's *The Fifty-Minute Hour* (1955/2007). This book is a collection of real-life stories based on psychoanalytically-oriented therapy, conducted in the United States of America (USA) in the early 1950s. One of them is the story of Mac. Lindner recounted: "For many years I have been active politically in a small way out of conviction that the psychoanalyst belongs in the world, among men, and should participate in the life of his community" (p. 69). This included membership in organizations that were considered radical, in other words, which were situated on the margins of the normative political discourse. The first meeting with Mac, who himself had been a political activist and communist in the McCarthy era in the USA, took place at a political conference, presided over by Lindner the therapist. Their therapeutic relationship had started some months later, following a call from Mac who insisted on meeting Lindner, and only him. Already during their first meeting Mac made a point of stating that he had no intentions of leaving the Communist Party, in his words "because the party is my life [...] because the party is right. Because the party is the only way to build a new world" (p. 79). He even declared that if therapy required, now or at a later stage, his leaving the party then he was not interested in therapy. Without going into the detail of this fascinating case, one of Mac's problems involved sexual dysfunction, which Lindner associated with Mac's membership of the Party. This may well have led to a dilemma: should Lindner aim to heal Mac, while ignoring the aims and reservations the latter had clearly brought up at the outset of the therapy, or should he, alternatively, accept Mac's way of life and his declared values? There was no doubt in Lindner's mind: once Mac agreed to be in therapy, at the risk of it leading to his resigning from the Party, the road to healing was open – but healing from what? From Lindner's perspective, this might involve from being a Party member, for, as he argued: "the party, then, was Mac's neurosis" (p. 109). Note, by the way, the implied association between political activism and psychopathology. As Mukamel (2009) has shown, such linkages can be observed elsewhere, including the current psychological discourse.

The political attentiveness I propose relies on the idea that political material may lay bare a deep motivating power expressing a person's concern about the world in which she or he lives. Activism is neither a "neurosis" or a form of "acting out" some psychic issue. One should at least find out the meaning and value the activity carries for the client and the community in which she or he lives – from their own point of view. Activism, in the broad sense, that is, when a person



takes responsibility for his or her life and world (and not at the cost of self-neglect), can be perceived as a valuable mode of existence, which expresses confidence and strength rather than pathology. Research into the relations between activism and well-being support the notion that activism is bound to increase individuals' happiness and their ability to cope with socio-political threats (Boehnke & Wong, 2011; Klar & Kasser, 2009). Psychological work with activists is likely to help them cope with real-life sources of suffering, that is, with real external conflict and not solely with internal conflict. Shifting focus to the intra-psychic level will lead to frustration and thwart the individual or cause the therapeutic bond to weaken and eventually break. This is a clear instance of an oppressive and damaging use of power which may occur in a psychotherapy which confuses inside and outside or sets too much store by oppressive internal forces.

In another example, in one of our conversations, Rachel, a Jewish client who was not born in Israel and lives alternately in Israel and abroad, mentioned the gap between "here" and "there". This gap was reflected in her political positioning and in her attitude to Israeli politics. When she's "there", she explains, she finds she's more of a "patriot", adopting hawkish views on controversial actions in an attempt to deal with criticism from the outside. When she's "here" she notices she is more "leftist", more in accordance with the values with which she would say she identifies. This political issue is obviously bound to reflect her sense of being torn and the alienness she experiences both here and there. So, symbolically speaking, this may be a dilemma of identity and belonging which is likely to play a role, too, in other interpersonal contexts, but such an approach, if it remains exclusive, will nullify the glaring political charge of the material the client has chosen to bring up. A more inclusive approach will also examine the concrete-political dimension. Indeed, the subsequent discussion in therapy brought to light the client's political history which was marked by shifts between phases and positions and spells of intense idealistic activity alternated by periods of exhaustion and withdrawal. The resulting outline of this political narrative clearly cast its light on internal processes, which though they tied up with her identity development did not constitute a direct translation (or reduction) into an intrapsychic idiom and did not redirect the discussion away from the material with which the client had come in.

As I see it a person's political attitude reflects her or his relation to the outside reality or to the world, and this can be said to be neglected by intra-psychic approaches. A person's relation to the political marks the nature of their external investment. It may hint at an unrealized motivation (due to internal reasons) which may then cause frustration. It may, by contrast, suggest a motivation that cannot be realized, one that is experienced as unrealized due to external reasons. This can weaken the individual, for instance, through a sense of helplessness, a sense of alienation and meaninglessness and the development of a lack of interest in the outside world, or, on the contrary, the development of an excessive preoccupation with the outside world and self-neglect. In all these cases, the relationship with the outside world is disturbed as a result of a troubled reciprocity between self and world. The implication is that empowerment and improved well-being can be approached from two directions, depending on the extent of their explicitness in the client's own discourse. When the client brings the political into therapy she or he thereby suggests a focus or starting point. It would be a mistake to stress the political with clients who indicate a primary internal preoccupation; this would be coercive. Equally it would be wrong to impose a personal angle on clients who come with an external one. In time, as the therapeutic discourse evolves, changes and rearrangements are likely to occur, making it the responsibility of the therapist to be sensitive to how different messages mark the central difficulty at any given moment. Attribution (external or internal) eventually depends on how the client experiences the conflict:

knowledge, that is, is in the hands of the client. The therapist must ask, inquire, take an agnostic position and raise a variety of possibilities and understandings.

## PSYCHOTHERAPY AND POLITICS: FROM SPLIT TO INTEGRATION

Previously, I have referred to two psychological approaches (object relations and self-psychology) in order to illustrate the problems that arise as a result of confusion between outside and inside or between a person and her or his environment. The consequence, usually, is a denial of the role of the external-political domain in understanding people. It is interesting that from these two perspectives, some contemporary approaches evolved whose impact on the current therapeutic discourse has been enormous: relational and intersubjective psychotherapy, both of which introduced politics into therapy. To begin with they stressed internal politics or power relations: replacing dichotomizing conceptualizations of a therapist-subject (free to choose and capable of judgment; the agential force with the overall responsibility for the process of change) who encounters a client-object (object of observation, passive, and subject to external forces, lacking in freedom of choice). These approaches proposed a more equal partnership relation and a more reciprocal conceptualization of the therapeutic alliance. In this perspective the client, too, is a subject with the capacity to judge and to initiate, and the client, too, observes and interprets. Moreover, the therapist, like the client, is a subject in the sense of being subjected: her or his freedom, too, is limited, and she or he, too, is at times moved by, for instance, unconscious or political forces. What underlies these ways of thinking is a relativist assumption which underscores the relative nature of personal viewpoints and their interrelations, and which emerge in a unique shared reality: the intersubjective third. Given such a perspective, one which is aware of its own constraints and doesn't claim ownership of the truth, the likelihood that oppressive force will be used by therapists diminishes. The encounter becomes more equal, too, due to the therapist's more active involvement and self-disclosure. As they address power relations and attempt to distinguish between the part of the therapist and that of the client, these approaches are more politically inclined. Even so, until not so long ago, they too largely neglected the external political domain in favor of internal politics. Recently, however, possibly in the wake of 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, this therapeutic discourse took a more decidedly political turn.

## POLITICALLY-SENSITIVE (OR -CONSCIOUS) THERAPY

Politically-sensitive therapy focuses on the axis complementing the internal one and it envisions reinstating the relationship to the world. Since this involves an investment in the outside, therapy tends to be more "extroverted", including components of action and initiative, both as part of the therapeutic relationship and outside it. However, because this is a therapeutic stance that is sensitive to deployments of power, it has absolutely no intention to impose political interpretations or a political charge on clients. It so happens that the main problematic issue presented in therapy is sometimes internal. As I mentioned, here, too, the situation will affect the relations between individual and world, but it will not be right, in this case, and certainly not initially, to focus on external relations. Just as talk about a person's feelings about her or himself is likely to lead somehow into their attitude to their surroundings, talk about the relations between a person and the world (the political realm) is bound to open up, sooner or later, into an intra-psychic inquiry.



So it is important to keep in view that what we have here is not a mutually exclusive distinction or a dichotomy but rather the reintroduction to the dominant-internal axis of what became obscured due to social amnesia. When it is possible to acknowledge the influence of both these axes – internal and external – on people's experience and well-being, there will be a greater degree of freedom. This is Winnicott's (1967) transitional space between reality (the political) and imagination (the personal). In the absence of it the therapeutic discourse will be closed, cut-off, and uncondusive to creativity and change.

Perhaps the main issue that sets apart politically-sensitive from not politically-sensitive psychotherapy involves the power relations within the therapy. This is not really surprising as politics, broadly speaking, refers to the uses of power and how it affects individuals and groups. It is, therefore, only natural that this issue should be a crucial one in therapy. Totton (2006) suggested that power, and the struggle over power play a major role in psychotherapy, and zooms in on the battle between therapist and client over the definition of reality. Totton proposed that therapists approach their clients from a position of equal rights and acknowledge the fact that the therapeutic encounter is almost as daunting to them as it is to their clients. In order to achieve this, therapists must develop a sensitivity to the dimension of power in the therapeutic relationship, and pay attention to exercise the self-criticism required to keep inappropriate uses of power to a minimum. For Totton the voluntary renunciation of power used for attaining one's own objectives (admiration, status, income) or as an oppressive tool (even if this is done unintentionally) is key to supportive therapeutic action. This requires in-depth examination of the politics and patterns of power attending the therapeutic establishment and its practices.

Moreover, politically-sensitive therapies highlight the social-cultural context in which one must consider the individual's experience. Here the psyche, too, undergoes a process of politicization; it is seen as political in two respects: as the product of political forces, and as an effectively political factor. As a result of this contextualization of the individual and her or his life, the roles external forces, such as the family, the community or politics play in the life of a person and her or his well-being become more salient. Therefore, this type of therapy is likely to include individually-based interventions, even of the kind that is in consonance with traditional therapeutic approaches, along with interventions on the community and social levels. This emphasis on context is one of five principles of empowerment identified by McWhirter and McWhirter (2007). Though originally the authors focused their attention on clinical training and supervision, I consider that their model can be adjusted to politically-sensitive psychotherapy. That is, the same principles described by the authors as they relate to training and supervision processes, can be applied by therapists in psychotherapy.

**Collaboration** – refers to the “joint definitions of the problems to be addressed, goals of counseling, and possible interventions and strategies for change and growth” (ibid., p. 420). This actually also includes transparency and partnership, which imply a renunciation of power. Collaboration, here, does not refer to the client's submissive response to the therapist, but rather to clients' vital involvement in any decision-making.

**Context** – refers to therapists' understanding of the lives of their clients' by familiarizing themselves with their family and community environment, their socio-political history, their socio-economic status, their culture, and their values. This amounts to a detailed and realistic clarification of the client's life situation, i.e., the conditions in which her or his personality evolves and can be understood.

**Critical consciousness** – relates to “individuals’ ability to examine themselves within their life contexts, and to see themselves as actors in those contexts rather than merely as individuals who are acted on” (ibid., p. 423). This component, therefore, includes dimensions of awareness and action and requires commitment to an ongoing examination of contexts and their mutual interactions, especially on the part of the therapist.

**Competence** – if a therapy that pivots on weaknesses and hardships leads to their entrenchment and even further amplification, then a focus on clients’ strengths may bring about their empowerment. The concerted effort to find and focus on clients’ resources and competences, either existing or potential, will allow them to recognize them in her or himself, thus adding to their sense of self-effectiveness and self-worth.

**Community** – relates to the possibility of promoting through therapy individuals’ identification with and involvement in the(ir) community. It is achieved by the clarification of a person’s sense of belonging, the quality of his or her relationships, etc. The link to community acts as a source of hope and strength, support and challenge, relationship and contribution.

## CONCLUSION

Two parallel lines of development can be observed, which require two channels of therapeutic attentiveness: external and internal. Though it would be wrong to consider these separate or dichotomous domains, I contend that there is a point to insist on their distinctness. The effort to clarify the interrelations between them and to distinguish between the effects of external influence on the one hand and the individual’s responsibility for her or his actions and their consequences, on the other, amounts to nothing other than the buildup of awareness and the consolidation of identity. In a politically-sensitive psychotherapy, political material offers an opportunity to deepen self-understanding along with an invitation to understand the place in which we live.

Politically-sensitive psychotherapists will act from a critical awareness focused on the power relations in both therapy and in society at large. They will strive to evolve the knowledge and experience from their work that may enable them to take a stance on the harmful implications of various social phenomena, to act so as to raise consciousness of them and thus to introduce change. This is how psychotherapists may reach new insights into therapy and to contribute to society and its members while also bringing transformation and renewal to psychotherapy as a practice. Among other things they may thus discover new ways of dealing with political contents as psychotherapists, whether this occurs within the individual therapeutic setting or in therapeutic activity outside the clinic, and formulate new conceptualizations about the individual and her or his relations with their surroundings and society. In other words, this is a position that takes a position: one which takes cognizance of its own moral foundations and acts, while trying to minimize the effects of oppressive forces on therapy and outside it.

## REFERENCES

- Aldarondo, E. (Ed.) (2007). *Advancing social justice through clinical practice*. New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Avisar, N. (2009). Clinical psychologists do politics: Attitudes and reaction of Israeli psychologists toward the political. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 7(3), 174–189.

- Avissar, N. (2016). *Psychotherapy, society and politics: From theory to practice*. New York, NY: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Boehnke, K., & Wong, B. (2011). Adolescent political activism and long-term happiness: A 21-year old longitudinal study on the development of micro- and macrosocial worries. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37(3), 435–447.
- Cushman, P. (1995). *Constructing the self, constructing America*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- Elwes, C. (1979). *Menstruation 2* [Performance]. Retrieved July, 2016, from [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/catherine\\_elwes/menstruation\\_2.html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/catherine_elwes/menstruation_2.html)
- Grosskurth, P. (1986). *Melanie Klein: Her world and her work*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Klar, M., & Kasser, T. (2009). Some benefits of being an activist: Measuring activism and its role in psychological well-being. *Political Psychology*, 30(5), 755–777.
- Layton, L., Hollander, N. C., & Gutwill, S. (Eds.) (2006). *Psychoanalysis, class and politics: Encounters in the clinical setting*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lindner, R. (2007). *The fifty-minute hour*. New York, NY: MJF Books. (Original work published 1955)
- McWhirter, E. H., & McWhirter, B. T. (2007). Grounding clinical training and supervision in an empowerment model. In E. Aldarondo (Ed.), *Advancing social justice through clinical practice* (pp. 417–442). New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Mukamel M. (2009, 2 July). הגישה הפסיכולוגית למטופלים אקטיביסטים פוליטיים [The psychoanalytic encounter with the political activist]. Lecture at the Annual Conference of the Israel Psychological Association, Tel-Aviv University, Tel-Aviv, Israel.
- Proctor, G., Cooper, M., Sanders, P., & Malcolm, B. (Eds.) (2006). *Politicizing the person-centred approach*. Ross on Wye, UK: PCCS Books.
- Ruderman, E., & Tosone, C. (Eds.) (2013). *Contemporary clinical practice: The holding environment under assault*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Samuels, A. (2006). Working directly with political, social, and cultural material in the therapy session. In L. Layton, N. C. Hollander, & S. Gutwill (Eds.), *Psychoanalysis, class and politics: Encounters in the clinical setting* (pp. 11–28). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Totton, N. (2000). *Psychotherapy and politics*. London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Totton, N. (2006). Power in the therapeutic relationship. In N. Totton (Ed.), *The politics of psychotherapy: New Perspectives* (pp. 83–93). Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Tudor, K. (2014). Empathy: A co-creative perspective. In K. Tudor & G. Summers (Eds.), *Co-creative transactional analysis: Papers, responses, dialogues, and developments* (pp. 119–140). London, UK: Karnac Books.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1967). Playing and Culture. In C. Winnicott, R. Shepherd, & M. Davis (Eds.), *Psycho-Analytic Explorations: D. W. Winnicott* (pp. 203–206). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.



**Nissim Avissar** (PhD) is a clinical-social psychologist. He has presented and published work on the interplay between psychology and education on the one hand and politics (in its wider sense as power relations), social responsibility and political engagement (or activism) on the other hand, particularly within the Israeli context, and is the author of *Psychotherapy, Society and Politics: From Theory to Practice* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016). He teaches in the Kibbutzim College of Education in Tel-Aviv, and in the School of Psychology in the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya.