Freedom to be me, so now what? Choosing technique when there is no right or wrong

Steven Tublin PhD

Psychoanalytic technique has, in earlier chapters of the field’s history, been a complicated matter with considerable dispute among various schools about the proper way to conduct an effective treatment. But in the wake of what has been called the “relational turn” the very idea of technique has been challenged. Technique has increasingly been associated with a clinical detachment in which abstract categorization and prescription are imposed upon a unique human interaction. How, one might ask, can one prescribe the proper way to conduct an analysis when the process is now conceived of as a unique dyadic journey marked by the emergence over time of unpredictable relational patterns? What technical principles might find universal applicability in a process in which both participants have only limited awareness of events and enactment is presumed to be ubiquitous?

Nevertheless, the analyst, faced with the patient’s needs still has to do something. S/he still has to conceptualize what an analysis can accomplish and what s/he can do to effect change. The analyst must still aspire to do the sorts of things that might transform their patient’s life. And by corollary, s/he should carefully avoid doing those things that would in any way limit the process of therapeutic change. There remains, therefore, a need to conceptualize effective intervention. How to balance these two impulses – the freedom to act in a way that cultivates a singular, affectively rich encounter and the countervailing demand to work in a disciplined way toward a profound outcome – will be the question addressed in this course.

Week 1: On the link between technique, theory, and values

The first week lays out the dilemma of freedom and discipline in contemporary technique in greater detail. It addresses the solutions
proposed by a number of contemporary theorists and situates the issue of technique in the context of broad, often unspecified values.


Stern, D (2012), Implicit theories of technique and values that inspire them. Psychoanalytic Inquiry, 32:33-49.

Learning objective:

Students will be able to describe the link between implicit values in psychoanalytic theories and its relation to associated technical stances.

Week 2: Flexibility and spontaneity

Interpersonalists have advocated an analytic stance that meets the specific patient and engages him or her in as genuine a manner as possible. This has entailed, historically, a position that Fiscalini (1994) has described as “pragmatic and pluralistic.” It has also allowed for far more self-disclosure than had been accepted in other paradigms. The two papers presented this week, one by Fiscalini, the other by Ringstrom, focus on the analyst’s freedom to adapt to the circumstances of a given treatment and a given moment in order to engage the patient in a manner that is authentic, alive, yet still analytic.


Learning Objective:

Students will be able to describe the theoretical arguments for situationally based flexibility in Interpersonal psychoanalyses.
Week 3: Levenson – The Detailed Inquiry and the exploration of dyadic interaction: What’s Going on Here?

Edgar Levenson recast the interpersonal stance and the detailed inquiry in contemporary terms. Whereas Sullivan, respecting the fragility of his deeply disturbed patients’, largely avoided transferential exploration, Levenson moved the interpersonal inquiry into the moment of immediate interpersonal experience. His structuralist sensibility (cf. Foehl, 2008) led him to see patterns in the patients’ narrative, dreams, and in the encounter with the analyst. Levenson, anticipating the current focus on enactment, argued that whatever the analyst might think s/he was doing, s/he was inevitably drawn into a dyadic drama that echoed the patient’s personal patterns. Technique, from this perspective, became less a matter of what to do than what to do after you found yourself drawn into something not of your own making.


Recommended:


Learning objective:

Students will be prepared to describe the principles of isomorphism and enactment in the Levensonian extension of Interpersonal technique will describe the altered technical stance that follows from these.

Week 4: Wolstein and Co. – The encounter of equal persons
Benjamin Wolstein was a complex theorist whose work presaged much of what concerns many writers in the contemporary psychoanalytic literature. He was among the first to write at length about countertransference and many of his writings on psychoanalytic interaction anticipate the prominent role played by intersubjectivity in current theorizing.

Wolstein, however, was wary of the effect the analyst’s adherence to theory and prescribed technique might impose on psychoanalytic treatment. His stance emphasized the power an encounter between two genuine selves, each unprotected by the armor provided by the abstractions of metapsychology. Wolstein’s stance influenced a generation of theorists who modified and extended his focus on the mutative value of profound contact between persons.

Technique in this tradition ranges from a loosening of traditional guidance on self-disclosure to a near abandonment of traditional psychoanalytic praxis in favor of the deeply personal mode of participation demonstrated by Warren Wilner in the article below.


Recommended:


Learning objective:

Students will be prepared to present the technical deviations offered Wolstein and his followers that emphasize immediate contact with patients.
Week 5: Dissociation and Enactment – Stern

Among the key innovations introduced by Relational theorists has been the insistence on the analyst as whole person: expert perhaps, but also flawed, conflicted, and no less hampered by dissociation and personal bias than his patient. The acknowledgement of the analyst’s equal blindness, while bringing a welcome egalitarianism into the room, creates a technical dilemma, as the analyst can no longer count on his capacity to monitor his own participation. Donnel Stern, an interpersonally oriented Relationalist, has famously eschewed the imposition of a priori method (his term, but can be read just as well as technique) in psychoanalytic treatment. In the two articles below, Stern attempts to grapple with the paradox of the analyst’s responsibility to conduct an analysis (however that may be defined) while recognizing that he, like his patient, may have little sense of what he is excluding from awareness.


Learning Objective:

Emphasizing the roles of dissociation and enactment, students will be able to describe Stern’s attempts to grapple with the technical problems that accompany the notion of the analyst’s limited awareness of his own participation.

Week 6: External discipline: the analyst’s relation to the psychoanalytic community

Formal discourse about the proper conduct of psychoanalysis – what used to be called technique – has receded as discussions of spontaneity, play, and genuine human relatedness have assumed greater prominence in the literature. One consequence of this has been that analysts’ conduct in the consulting room is partially shaped
by implicit community norms, which vary among subgroups of analytic practitioners. These two articles explore the role of professional communities in shaping technique.


Also recommended on this topic:


Learning objective:

Students will be prepared to identify the implicit role of community norms on the moment-by-moment technical performance of psychoanalysis.