Psychoanalytic Field Theory and Clinical Process

Field theory describes a set of psychoanalytic perspectives that are based upon the essential intersubjective nature of the work we do. It does not describe a singular theory or coherent set of ideas, but has been referred to as a “metatheory” or a metaphoric construct (Lichtenberg, 2017). It attempts to address and elaborate the clinical experience of the co-created dyad in the consulting room, with its imaginative nonlinear, communicative and affective qualities that facilitate the emergence of meaning and change. Developed relatively independently in different parts of the world, the ideas and language of field theory have increasingly entered the international psychoanalytic discourse.

This class will explore the cultural contexts and foundational papers that anchor three contemporary versions of psychoanalytic field theory. We begin with Madeleine and Willy Baranger, working first in Argentina and then Uruguay in the 1950’s, who are credited with introducing the field theory concept to psychoanalysis. We will then look at a group of psychoanalysts from Italy (i.e., Ferro, Civitarese) who have developed a theory and practice of field theory that is heavily influenced by Bion. Drawn by similarities in the emphasis on co-creation in the dyad, most recently the work of some North American psychoanalysts has been considered though a field theory lens (i.e., Ogden, Stern, Levenson, Atwood).

This class will look at these different versions of Field theory, which seem to engage similar phenomena but suggest differences in clinical practice. Participants will learn the vocabulary and conceptual frameworks used in field theory discourse, and the psychoanalytic techniques it suggests. Convergences in the engagement of a two person process, the centrality of both Ucs and the here and now of treatment, and the inherent creativity of the psychoanalytic situation will become apparent.

Controversy will be engaged about the place of field theory amongst the panoply of psychoanalytic models. We will consider together whether Field theory suggests a new model, or an umbrella to bring together multiple theories and approaches. We will discuss what it might add to the analyst’s evolving clinical thinking, and what it may add to our work. Throughout the class we will consider the clinical applications and discuss how contemporary field theory integrates with more familiar relational perspectives, and how it suggests a vehicle for the transmission of culture into the unconscious play in the consulting room.

Part I: Introduction and Latin American Field Theory

Class 1: The Field Concept in Psychoanalysis


Class 2: Latin American Field Theory


Class 3: Clinical Process and Latin American Field Theory


PART II: Italian Field Theory

Class 4: Italy and Post-Bionian Field theory


Class 5: Italian Field Theorists and Practice/Technique


Class 6: Italian Field Theorists and Clinical Practice


Part III: North America and Field Theory
Class 7: Field Theory in North America


Class 8: Summary and Interplay of Fields

Learning Objectives:

Class 1: This class will provide an overview of the field concept in psychoanalysis. Students will read the Baranges’ foundational paper, and discuss the climate in which their field theory developed in South America. Students will read Ogden’s work on the Third, and understand it as representing a field phenomena.

Class 2: Students will continue to learn the theoretical foundation and vocabulary of South American field theory, and its relation to other conceptualizations of South American psychoanalytic thought.

Class 3: Students will explore the clinical applications of the Baranger’s work in authors whose work is influenced by field theory. The instructor and students will provide clinical material.

Class 4: Students will understand the origins of the Italian field theory model, and learn about its grounding in Bionian ideas.

Class 5: Students will study additional work of Italian (post-Bionian) field theory, understand its distinctive vocabulary, and explore its clinical application.

Class 6: This class will continue the focus on clinical technique of Italian field theory. Clinical material of the instructor and students will be included.

Class 7: Students will learn how the work of some important North American psychoanalysts can be seen through a field theory lens.

Class 8: Students will be able to discuss the potential utility of a unifying concept of field theory and the differences amongst field theories; and draw comparisons and contrasts between field theory and more familiar interpersonal, relational, intersubjectivist perspectives.