

Psychodynamic Inquiry into World Events: Approaches to Validity and Credibility

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This article sets forth and develops further some of the ideas in my recent book, *Social Science Methods for Psychodynamic Inquiry: The Unconscious on the World Scene* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and I have drawn liberally from that work in this exposition. It argues for the use of social science methods and concepts to improve the validity and credibility of psychodynamically-informed analyses of 'irrational' world events.

In my view, a number of events and speeches on the world scene show signs of profound irrationality. Irrational actions are defined for our purposes as those that are so intensely destructive, self-destructive, or extremely bizarre, that they suggest the presence of motives and fantasies outside of conscious awareness.

Among the examples are the reciprocal bombing of mosques by the Shiites and the Sunnis, The Charlie Hebdo murders, the bombing by the Tsarnaev brothers at the Boston Marathon, the ritual self-crucifixions in the Philippines on Good Friday, the beheading of captives by ISIS, and the machine gun massacres in Paris in November 2015.

Examples from the UK include the Rotherham human trafficking disaster, where over a 16 year period about 1400 children, mostly girls of Pakistani ancestry, were abducted, beaten, raped, doused with petrol and threatened with immolation, and forced into prostitution, by Pakistani gangs with knowledge of police and social agencies, who took no action for fear of inflaming racial tensions. It is hard to attribute this lengthy combination of sadism and denial solely to rational market forces.

In the United States, the epidemic of mass shootings of school children, at the rate of about one shooting per week nationally, furnish an additional tragic example of unconsciously driven actions. In the United States, shootings in schools and other public places have become an epidemic – almost literally, since the fact of one shooting stirs impulses in other shooters. “The latest figures show that in the past year there were at least 358 armed encounters nationwide last year — nearly one a day, on average — in which four or more people were killed or wounded, including attackers. The toll: 462 dead and 1,330 injured, sometimes for life, typically in bursts of gunfire lasting but seconds.” (Lafraniere, Porat, & Armendariz, 2016). The obdurate refusal to institute universal background checks for gun purchases, or to extend the waiting period before purchase to a few more days, or to renew the ban the sale of assault weapons, or to prohibit perpetrators of date violence or stalking

violence from purchasing guns, is part of this destructive, self-destructive, and bizarre picture.

On the international political front, the bizarre actions of Kim Jong Un, serve as another example, with a cult of the all-wise, God-like leader, the execution of his own uncle as a supposed traitor, the dramatic arrest of supposed rivals in public meetings in the tradition of Saddam Hussein. The bizarre execution of a defense minister who slept through dictator Kim Jong Un's speech brings North Korea's brutal death-penalty count to at least 70 since he took power in 2011, according to reports. Experts say the maniacal leader has become more grisly and creative in his means of elimination because he is out to send a message. Hyon Yong-chol's death at the barrel of an anti-aircraft gun wasn't the first time a government leader was killed in such a gruesome fashion. Most menacing to the world generally are the repeated threats to use atomic weapons.

"Irreal" statements, described below, by political leaders such as Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, Jean-Marie Le Pen, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and Georgios Papadopoulos, are a further example.

There are many instances in public life of what appear to be fantasies of impunity, the apparent belief that one is immune to punishment for one's actions. Exemplars who have showed a blatant sense of impunity include Dominique Strauss-Kahn, then the President of the World Bank; Silvio Berlusconi, then Premier of Italy; Andrew Weiner, first a Congressman and then a candidate for Mayor of New York; Eliot Spitzer, then Governor of New York; and John Edwards, then a U.S. Senator and a candidate for the President of the United States.

To look deeply into situations like these, actions or speech redolent of violence or self-destruction, involves psychodynamic inquiry, particularly that drawn from psychoanalytic theory and clinical practice. But psychoanalytically based interpretations of world events, and indeed psychoanalysis itself, have aroused not only intense skepticism but also profound hostility.

BARRIERS TO PSYCHODYNAMIC INQUIRY INTO WORLD EVENTS

Among the reasons for this rejection of psychodynamic and psychoanalytic inquiry is the nature of the unconscious: it is primitive, fantasy-based, symbolic, and concrete. Opposites don't cancel each other out. It can be hard to distinguish reaction formations from authentic wishes. Time doesn't exist in the unconscious: everything takes place in the present. Childhood exists in the present, and the unconscious speaks with the internalized voices of other people from early experiences. The impact of a loss in childhood, especially of a parent, endure throughout the lifespan. Symbolism, particularly pictorial symbolism, is to a great extent the language of the unconscious.

Another reason for this opposition to psychodynamic and psychoanalytic insights is our abhorrence at the idea that we have ideas and wishes we don't know about, especially if

sometimes others can catch a glimpse of them. Consequently there is a huge problem of credibility, that is, believability.

There is also a problem of validity: how do we ourselves know if our interpretations of political and social events are valid, given the perplexing nature of the unconscious?

ADDRESSING ISSUES OF VALIDITY AND CREDIBILITY

In this paper I suggest some approaches that I think will help in resolving some of the problems of validity and credibility inherent in the psychodynamic study of world events. Most of these are presented at greater length in my book.

First, I think we ought to define what we mean by irrational actions, and give some examples. I have offered a definition and some examples above that I hope will be helpful but other definitions may also be workable.

Further, I think we ought to consider these irrational and unconsciously driven psychological processes from a sociological point of view as well as a psychological one. For example, I find helpful Karl Mannheim's (1940) classic distinction between *instrumentally* rational actions and *substantially* rational actions. Instrumentally or formally rational actions are efficient steps toward a goal. But if the goal doesn't make sense, the rational, efficient steps toward it are substantially irrational. One of Mannheim's examples is the formally rational assembling of troops and supplies toward pursuing a war, but the war may itself be substantially irrational: the war makes no sense.

Reductionism

I think the researcher should explicitly discuss the allegation of "*reductionism*." This term refers to reducing a complex phenomenon to a much simpler one. It has value in certain psychophysical or physiological studies, such as expressing felt sensations of noise in terms of actual physical decibels. However in the context of psychodynamic inquiry, it refers to reducing a complex social and political phenomenon to a simplistic psychological explanation. This is the theme of many of the book-length denunciations of psychodynamic explanations of world events. I believe the researcher must come to terms with this criticism or lose the audience completely. I don't see the allegation of reductionism as a valid criticism in the present context. I myself see three rejoinders as persuasive (the reader may find others):

Firstly, *the logic of interpretation of world events* in psychodynamic inquiry here is very similar to the logic of interpretation for well-regarded and widely accepted projective tests, such as the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). Just as the nature of the drawing on the TAT card constrains the psychological response in important ways, so does the political and social context of a world event constrain the psychological reaction in certain ways. For example, the predictable disappointment of the losing Presidential candidate in an American Presidential election of 2016 is shaped by the particular circumstances of a

particular election: in this case, particular circumstances were the announcement by the Director of the F.B.I. of the finding of additional emails 11 days before the election, and the threats to jail the losing candidate, and the disclosure of hacking of the Democratic Party's files by Russian agents. Each of these external circumstances turned the usual resigned emotional response of the losing Presidential candidate and her supporters into something quite different.

Secondly, and consistent with the above argument, in many cases the psychodynamic interpretations refer to *intervening variables*, that transmit political and social causative factors to resulting political and social events. For example, it is generally accepted that the great loss of life sustained by British troops in the trench warfare of The First World War was a cause of the British consent to the Munich Accords of 1938. These Accords first gave the Sudetenland, and then the rest of Czechoslovakia, to Hitler, in an attempt to secure "peace in our time." But this causation was transmitted by the intense emotional reactions of the British people, media, and leadership, to the huge British casualties in the First World War (Beisel, 2003).

A third way of looking at the accusation of reductionism involves the philosopher C.I. Lewis's (1949) *coherence theory of truth*. This theory suggests that truth can be assessed by whether the proposed explanations fit together in a coherent way, rather than corresponding exactly one-to-one. One way of operationalizing Lewis' coherence theory of truth is William McGuire's (1983) theory of "*contextualism*" in which the aim of research is not to prove an assertion completely right or entirely wrong, but rather to do successive studies to establish the boundaries under which the proposition holds. In other words, instead of a single explanation existing in contradiction to competing explanations, the various explanations can be considered members of a set of mutually consistent explanations. Which particular ones apply to a specific instance will depend on circumstances. For example, in one situation, the phenomenon of premature drop-out from high school may depend primarily on family turmoil; in another set of circumstances it may depend mostly on the young person's need to produce income; in a third set of circumstances it may stem largely from a clash of the high school culture with the student's own cultural background.

Having responded to some of the objections to the use of psychoanalytic methods in understanding world events, it will be helpful now to explain more precisely how to use some of these methods.

USING SOCIAL SCIENCE CONCEPTS AND METHODS FOR MORE RIGOROUS PSYCHODYNAMIC INQUIRY

One of the core arguments of the book concerns the utility of concepts, insights, methods and measurement tools, originating in the social sciences, for the rigorous conduct of psychodynamic inquiry of world events. Below, I outline some of these, while also widening my lens to consider approaches not discussed in the book.

Empathy

One concept that I have found essential in my research and that I discuss in detail in the book is empathy, its developmental and neurological manifestations, and its relation to “having a theory of mind,” and to mentalization. Research has shown that empathic understanding requires introspection and free association to the phenomena, that is, one must pay attention to the trains of thought that these phenomena elicit in one’s own mind.

“Empathy” is a very widely used term, so in the book I illustrate what I mean by “empathy” by citing items from scales of empathy as examples. I then summarize my own research indicating that under some circumstances, and with certain groups, accurate empathy with certain other social groups is possible. I see this as an important finding, for according to psychodynamic theory and practice, accurate empathic understanding is the essential basis for psychodynamic inquiry.

Specifying a protocol for the research

It would be helpful for the researcher to specify, for his or her own benefit, *a protocol for the research*, listing the kind of evidence he or she seeks, and the reasons for those choices. In this case it will be a list of things to look for as we examine speech and actions. These might be organized as follows:

- a. barriers to valid inference on these matters,
- b. indicators of irrational *processes*, and
- c. some guidelines for interpretation.

In each case empathic understanding, based on introspection and on association to the phenomena, is essential.

Hermeneutics

It occurred to me sometime after I wrote the book that it would have been interesting to view this protocol for interpretation in terms concepts from the field of hermeneutics, a philosophy of interpretation of documents originally derived from Biblical studies, popularized in literary studies, and now used in the study of verbal productions of all kinds. I commend this line of inquiry to the reader although it did not occur to me to develop it in the book.

The presentation of the study and its natural history: Trying for greater openness and undefensiveness.

This approach helps the reader understand what we did, and whether to believe our findings; that is, how to judge them in terms of validity (justified inference). It thus also addresses the issue of credibility and believability. This approach involves several factors:

In presenting the study, we could begin by stating our bias or point of view, and telling the reader how this influenced the design of the study and the choice of data to examine. We then then explain how the process changed us (*reflexivity*) as well as changing the data, and how we adapted to that.

Then, we might attempt to describe the data we examined in terms of sampling. Even if we did not formally choose a sample, in retrospect what do our data look like in terms of sampling: was our study a detective story or snowball sample? Or a quota sample? Or a maximum variation sample, a random sample of some kind, an extreme cases sample, a stratified sample, a criterion sample, a deviant cases sample, or what? (See Patton, 2014, for a discussion of types of purposive samples).

We can also ask, what happened during the study? One could usefully give a *natural history of the study*, as explained by Everett Hughes (1971). Was there difficulty in getting access to the data, or in getting cooperation from participants or colleagues? Were there changes in the study design, the definition of the situation, or the kinds of data examined? Were there changes in the staffing of the study? Were there reflexive effects on the investigator? How did the study, as it turned out, differ from the study as originally designed?

All of this information can greatly increase the reader's understanding of the study and consequently help the reader assess its validity.

Symbolic Interactionist Methods

The symbolic interactionist perspective opens an important avenue for establishing validity and reliability. The sociologist W.I. Thomas led the way by means of his *social constructionist* viewpoint, arguing that "what is defined or perceived as real by people is real in its consequences" and "meanings are constructed by individuals from their experience, rather than pre-existing as a given" (Thomas, 1928, p. 571-572). The *symbolic interactionists*, led by Herbert Blumer (1969), go further: meanings and indeed our pictures of reality are formed as the result of interactions among people. Shared meanings gradually evolve from a series of such interactions, which can sometimes involve the negotiation of meanings (Blumer, 1969). In particular, Blumer advocated resolving differences in the meaning of research studies by collaborative interaction among knowledgeable social scientists, stating: "The depiction of key objects that emerge from such accounts should, in turn, be subject to probing and critical collective discussion by a groups of well-informed participants in the given world" (Blumer, 1969, p. 52).

Even before reading this last passage from Blumer, the symbolic interactionist perspective occurred to me as a way of resolving disputes about the validity of a clinically based interpretation of a world event or trend. Then I heard a paper by the historian and psychoanalyst Peter Loewenberg (2009) on the concept of “face” in Chinese culture. Even though Loewenberg grew up in China and is fluent in the Chinese languages, he asked three Chinese scholars to review a draft of his paper before he presented it. It turned out that their comments strongly supported his interpretation. This paper strengthened my resolve to attempt something analogous to this procedure myself.

Building on this idea, I produced a chapter summarizing repeated interactions between a psychoanalytically oriented historian and three Czech political psychologists, over a four year period, concerning the mentality of European leaders and the Czech leaders, media and populace in the period leading up to the Munich Accords that gave Czechoslovakia to Hitler without a shot being fired. We found, for example, that European leaders spoke of the newly created Czechoslovak republic as an infant that might not survive, and as a vermiform appendix that might have to be removed in order for the patient to survive.

The use of thick description

This approach, pioneered by Clifford Geertz (1973) helps the reader to decide whether he or she would draw the same conclusions from your data that you did. It therefore lets the reader judge the validity of your study, and therefore also affects your study’s credibility (believability).

Instead of adducing just enough data to illustrate your findings, this approach provides the reader with large numbers of verbatim quotations, well beyond what the researcher thinks is the minimum necessary. This is an effective method. The flood of startling quotations from the UK politicians and media during the period preceding the Munich Accords, essentially strongly confirms David Beisel’s interpretations in his outstanding book, *The Suicidal Embrace: Hitler, the Allies, and the Origins of the Second World War* (2003).

The reader, confronting an abundance of verbatim data, is then able to decide whether, on the basis of these data, he or she would have drawn the same conclusions as the researcher did.

Even in quantitative studies, for example of political opinions, the conclusions from the quantitative analyses should be accompanied not just by the usual illustrative examples of verbatim responses, but also by an abundance of verbatim quotations. These will illustrate the researcher’s point, and will also help the reader judge what the numbers in the tables from the quantitative analysis really mean.

Even more important, these myriads of direct quotations let the reader decide, “Given these data, would I have reached the same conclusions as the author did?” This is the key point in both validity and credibility in this situation: Because of the abundance of verbatim quotations, the reader is able to judge whether he or she would have reached the same

conclusions. In effect this method involves exposing the researcher's data to *a kind of disconfirmation*.

For example, a chapter in my book presents an analysis of world press articles on Vladimir Zhirinovsky, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and Georgios Papadopoulos, using a multitude of very extended verbatim quotations from the articles. These articles seemed to me to indicate that these authoritarian leaders intentionally created confusion in the world press about what is real. This a situation I termed "irreality," the intentional production of confusion about what is real. A more recent instance is provided by Donald Trump and his plans for giant walls between the United States and Mexico, mass deportations of Mexican-Americans, requiring identity cards for American Muslims, and refusal of entry to Muslims.

Supplementing the "Weight of the Evidence" with "Falsifiability"

The perplexing nature of the unconscious makes it very challenging to produce valid interpretations of the unconscious motives and fantasies underlying irrational events on the world scene.

And the intense skepticism and hostility with which psychoanalysis and "Freudian" perspectives are greeted in our society pose immense problems of credibility for studies in this area.

Consequently I believe that the usual criterion of "the weight of the evidence," so widely used in historical studies, is often not sufficient for these studies. To avoid error and the resulting invalid studies, and to rebut the skepticism and hostility that lead to problems with credibility, a higher standard of proof is often needed.

I suggest using Karl Popper's (1935 [1962, 2002]) criterion of "falsifiability" or "disconfirmation." Popper argues that if the theory or interpretation resulting from the study is to be deemed valid, it must have survived attempts at disconfirmation. That is, *risky predictions* must be made from the study results either to future events or to presently unknown and unexamined sources of data. In each case the expected predicted event must be unlikely to occur unless the theory is correct, hence it is a "risky" prediction. If the predicted outcome does not occur, the theory or interpretation must be deemed disconfirmed, according to Popper.

But even in the physical sciences, the weight of the evidence is an important criterion of truth, and with the exception of Einstein's prediction of the displacement of starlight during a total eclipse, and the Lee and Yang study that showed that symmetry is violated in some interactions, no single effort at disconfirmation is sufficient.

In the social sciences this is even more true, so there need to be a number of risky predictions that the theory or interpretation must survive before we can conclude that disconfirmation has failed and the study results can be provisionally accepted as correct. To illustrate this crucial argument, the book includes a number of case studies of risky

prediction, from sources as diverse as the treason trial of Marshal Pétain, the failure to warn the Jews of Budapest of impending shipment to Auschwitz, and the writings of Nassim Taleb.

Let us consider Taleb as an example. Taleb, a Levantine and a Wall Street trader, in his childhood and early adolescence lived through the disastrous Beirut civil war, spending much of the time crouched in his basement reading omnivorously while the bombs burst around him, a colleague suggested that Taleb's intense concern in his book, *The Black Swan*, with sudden disastrous unpredicted events might stem from these childhood events. If this were true, a risky prediction would be that other Levantine Wall Street traders would have similar views about the huge financial impact of unanticipated events. But an informal survey by Taleb to test this prediction found that among the 36 Levantine Wall Street traders who had lived through the Beirut war, Nassim Taleb was the only who espoused any theory about the overwhelming importance of rare events in the financial markets.

Using Concepts and Findings from Sociology and Social Psychology

I suggest placing the findings of psychodynamically-informed studies of world events in the context of

- a. social science concepts*, such as alienation, anomie, social class, social dominance, authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, dogmatism, social disorganization, modernity, etc.
- b. social science findings*, and
- c. parallel items from social science attitude scales.*

Connecting study findings to broader social science concepts and findings will make the study conclusions deeper and of more general application. An example is the following: David Beisel (2004) quotes the British leaders during the Munich crisis, as they talked about Czechoslovakia: "wretched little places half the size of Yorkshire...snuffling little countries....funny little people...." In my view, these quotations show a mentality that is related to a particular ruling social class in the United Kingdom: the social class that embraced colonialism. These quotations also express ethnocentrism, and social dominance, both of which have been extensively studied. I believe that we can strengthen a study's conclusions if parallels are shown to other studies and findings.

We can also make examination of verbatim statements in our own study more fruitful and more generalizable by comparing them to parallel items from relevant attitude scales. For example, a new edition of Beisel's fine study of the attitudes of British leaders could cite items from Neuliep and McCroskey's (1965) *Ethnocentrism Scale*: "Most other cultures are backward compared to mine." The sense of confusion and abandonment felt by the Czechoslovak leaders, people and media could be compared to the items on Leo Srole's *Anomia Scale*: "These days a person doesn't know whom he can count on." The meaning of

statements we find in our research is clarified if we find similar statements on a particular attitude scale. For example, we can be more confident that a quotation from our study indicates anomia in the speaker, if we find similar statements in an anomia scale.

Moving From Exhortation to Example

It is generally helpful to the reader if an author moves from giving advice to giving detailed examples of studies that actually use the methods the author recommends, and I have tried to do so in the book. One chapter examines methods of studying the fantasy of impunity, focusing on the personality and actions of Bernard Madoff as an example. Another chapter provides a study of irrealty, the intentional creation by a political leader of doubt in his hearers as to what is real, with Jean-Marie Le Pen, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Georgios Papadopoulos, and Nigel Farage as exemplars. Had I written the chapter a bit later, I could have included a study of Donald Trump's irreal proposals. As I mentioned earlier, a chapter was devoted to ways of studying the events leading up to the devastating Munich Accords of 1938. Another chapter used the method of narrative analysis to study two flagrant instances of journalistic fraud. Methods of studying irrational factors in urban design and management formed another chapter, and a final chapter was devoted to ways of studying climate change denial and corporate rapacity, both of which have substantial irrational components. It is my hope that the readers will find value in applying and refining some of these methods in their own studies.

CONCLUSION

My argument here and in my book has been that there are substantial components of feelings, motives and fantasies outside of conscious awareness in world events that are extremely destructive, self-destructive, or very bizarre. The question we have considered here is how to examine these unconscious components in a scientifically valid and credible way. I think that the approaches I have presented here do hold promise, but my suggestions are just a beginning, and other researchers will surely be able to modify, improve, and extend them on the basis of their own experience.

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