20 years of neuropsychoanalysis

Richard J. Kessler, David Olds & Maggie Zellner

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EDITORIAL

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This is quite a celebratory issue. Because this journal was founded in 1999, and the International Neuropsychoanalysis Society held its 20th Congress this year, we thought this year is a suitable time to celebrate two decades of neuropsychoanalysis.

These twenty years have been full of exciting meetings around the world, and an explosion of publications connecting the brain with psychoanalytic concepts – many of which have appeared in these pages. It has been a time of new ideas and of re-evaluating long-standing ones, sometimes supporting those older ideas in surprising ways, and sometimes updating or discarding them. Moreover, on a social level, this has been a time of developing important connections between disciplines that had been separated for decades, and deepening collaboration between colleagues around the world.

The celebration was kicked off in our last issue, which featured an interview of Oliver Turnbull by Christian Salas (Salas & Palmer-Cancel, 2019), where Oliver and Christian discussed a number of central ideas that have emerged in the neuropsychoanalysis community. In this issue, we expand on that foundation, with a series of invited personal essays from members of the community who have been involved with our interdisciplinary project in various ways, both individuals and coordinators of our vibrant regional groups.

In our Society Proceedings section, we invited our contributors to reflect on several questions: How has neuropsychoanalysis affected your members’ practice, thinking, or social/personal life? What has changed in the world of psychoanalysis, or in neuroscience, since the journal’s founding in 1999? Has neuropsychoanalysis played any role in those changes? What are some key contributions made by our interdisciplinary dialogue to date? What issues are now ripe for exploration? Have we made any wrong turns or mistakes that need to be corrected?

Without any coordination between them, our contributors ended up distributing the answers amongst themselves, responding to these questions with a mixture of personal histories, theoretical discussions, and historical narratives about the development of our community. In this impressionistic yet comprehensive overview, the landscape of neuropsychoanalysis – its antecedents, some of the key ideas and most influential participants, and the ways in which integrating brain and mind affect clinical practice and research – emerge in a poignant and sometimes provocative way.

In keeping with the sense of neuropsychoanalysis as a space of intriguing connections and boundary-pushing that emerges from the reflections, our two articles in this issue are suitably provocative and integrative, generating new hypotheses for further exploration.

Laurence Fischman’s Original Article “Seeing Without Self: Discovering New Meaning with Psychedelic-Assisted Psychotherapy” brings to mind an earlier attempt to enhance and yet shorten psychoanalytic treatment. Davanloo’s Short Term Dynamic Psychotherapy treatment was described as “the most aggressive form of psychic medicine to rest upon the principles of Sigmund Freud” (Sobel, 1982). At that time, this new variant of psychodynamic therapy suggested that the leisurely explorations of psychoanalysis, the plumbing of the depths of the human psyche which has profoundly affected 20th century society, art and culture), the elaboration of fantasies, the attempt to recall murmurings from the cradle – these seem to be giving way in psychotherapy circles to an emphasis on finding the keys to change. If human change requires unlocking the door of the unconscious (and some theorists believe it does not), then the psychoanalyst has traditionally waited with superhuman patience for the door to open by itself. In contrast, Davenloo and his followers are doing their best to forge a skeleton key. (Hellerstein, 1986)

A revolution appeared to be forming on the horizon. Yet although the next three decades surely witnessed changes in psychoanalytic technique, including more analyst activity and flexibility, emphasis on the “here-and-now” and the transference, and attention to patient-analyst interaction, nevertheless no such skeleton key was to be found.

In this issue, Fischman proposes that such a key already exists: psychedelic drugs. He offers an intriguing and scholarly thought experiment. Could psychedelic-promoted dreamlike imagery, symbols, and metaphors of the primary process, as well as regression to earlier ways of relating to objects, and feelings of love and connectivity unleashed from defensive restraint, be a more royal and easily accessible road to the unconscious? Building on previous neuropsychoanalytic work on psychedelics (e.g., Carhart-Harris, Erritzoe, Hajien, Kaelen, & Watts, 2018), he explores the neurobiology and metapsychology of ego dissolution, seen in both psychosis and psychedelic experience, and ultimately suggests that the therapeutic action already demonstrated in some psychedelic-assisted focal psychotherapies could be applied to psychoanalytic treatments. This article is nothing less than a “trip”! In publishing
this piece, we do not intend to endorse psychedelic treatment in and of itself, and certainly do not advocate for it to be used as a replacement for normal psychoanalytic work. However, the Editors think that Fischman’s survey of the subjective effects of psychedelics, and his hypotheses about the underlying mechanisms associated with the positive effects, make a useful contribution towards understanding the phenomena of treatment, as well as illuminating everyday defensive processes.

In our Clinical Reports section, we have a paper by Iftah Biran that beautifully illustrates the vitality and utility of bringing neuroscience and psychoanalysis together, to better understand the sequelae of brain injury and illuminate the psychodynamic functions of certain brain circuits in normal functioning. In a report entitled “Taphophobia and Resurrection Mania Following Left Parietal Stroke,” Biran makes observations of a patient with left parietal brain injury who believed that he was dead and buried, and that his son would be able to reach through his tomb to revive him. Biran’s hypotheses of the underlying processes happening in this painful situation are informed by a neuropsychoanalytic perspective, revealing possibilities of understanding that might be missed by conventional neurological or neuropsychological approaches. Although the conclusions are tentative, given the brief clinical material, the Editors feel that this paper makes an important contribution to a very scant and developing literature on this kind of brain injury and psychological presentation, which values the patient’s history and subjective experience as well as their behavior.

Returning to our Society Proceedings section, in this issue Daniela Flores Mosri achieves another heroic report of our recent 20th Congress in Brussels, managing to summarize the main points of all the nuanced and dynamic keynote talks and symposia at that meeting. Reading her report is the best thing to having attended the conference, and we hope it inspires readers to join us at our 21st meeting to be held in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in July 2020. The Abstracts of the keynote talks, symposia, and research sessions also appear in this issue, as usual. And in the Bulletin of the International Neuropsychoanalysis Society, regional groups from Brazil, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Turkey, and the United States continue to report their active explorations of the brain-mind connections in a variety of ways, showing how important the regional groups are to the vitality of the Society, and the development of neuropsychoanalysis.

Finally, we have another important reason to celebrate – a new co-editor is coming on board as we move into our third decade of publishing. Iftah Biran is supremely well qualified to serve the readership of our journal, as he is steeped in three disciplines: he is a neurologist, a psychiatrist, and he is currently in psychoanalytic training. He also is deeply knowledgeable about neuropsychoanalysis, being a long-standing member of the Israeli Neuropsychoanalysis Group and member of the International Neuropsychoanalysis Society. Finally, he has been a contributor to the journal and a peer reviewer. Readers can see from his Clinical Report featured in this issue that he has a truly neuropsychoanalytic approach – in his interactions with, and observations of, a patient with brain injury, he brings a sensitive and integrative perspective to thinking about both the patient’s inner world and the “infrastructure” of his affective and cognitive functioning.

Iftah joins a proud line of editors in our two decades of publication, which has been, and continues to be, a vital space for new perspectives and interdisciplinary dialogue. Beginning with Mark Solms and Ed Nersessian, the founding editors, the lineage of editors continued with Yoram Yovell, Oliver Turnbull, Maggie Zellner, and Richard Kessler, while David Olds has been serving a vital role as Target Articles Editor. Richard and David look forward to collaborating with Iftah on the content of the journal in the next chapter of the our development, as Maggie moves into a managing role.

We hope readers are inspired by the celebratory reflections and integrative explorations in this issue, and we look forward to many more years of stellar interdisciplinary work in these pages and around the world.

References

Richard J. Kessler
The New York Psychoanalytic Society & Institute, New York City

David Olds
Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research, New York City

Maggie Zellner
The Neuropsychoanalysis Foundation, New York City

mzellner@npsa-association.org