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A Comparison of Early Freudianism with the Psychohistorical Movement

Paul H. Elovitz—Psychohistory Forum

For some time I have been writing the book, *Pioneers of Insight: The Makers and Making of Psychohistory*. Michael Clifford's interesting presentation on January 31st to the Psychohistory Forum on Freud's style of leadership set me thinking of a comparison of aspects of the early Freudian and the contemporary psychohistorical movements. It is fruitful to compare and contrast these related, yet very different, undertakings in terms of acceptance, creativity, followership, leadership, openness to divergent ideas, splitting, and other issues. I will start with a brief description of each of these.

Sigmund Freud was such an original thinker who wrote beautiful, understandable German that people were drawn to him. He was a healer and creator of a new way of viewing individuals and society. His success resulted in the development of an international movement which put pressure on him to react differently than as a healer/intellectual, and brought out the more rigid side of his personality. Early biographers, such as Ernest Jones, depicted Freud as a heroic figure struggling against intense criticism and opposition. Most Freudian clinicians have followed in their appreciative footsteps, based mostly on their idealized transference to the originator of their field. In contrast, Paul Roazen, Michael Clifford, and so many others within and outside of the movement have written at length about Freud's limitations as a leader. Perhaps part of the unconscious and sometimes conscious motivations for this focus on Freud's leadership shortcomings is a process of de-idealization of the "good father," thus demonstrating one's independence from or even hostility to him.

How the early history of Freudianism relates to organized psychohistory is my primary concern. Clearly, there are many differences, along with similarities. Leadership in the psychohistori-

cal movement was never as focused on one individual as it was in Freudianism. Psychohistory is a movement that gradually came together over a period of time before becoming an organized entity in the 1970s. While a rudimentary psychohistorical literature appeared early in the 20th century, a cohesive and significant movement developed only in the 1950s and '60s in the face of the valuable work of a variety of colleagues, including Dodds, Erikson, Brown, the Georges, and Lifton.

Psychohistory became a strong current in the 1970s, showing signs of acceptance by mainstream publications, although there were always very active naysayers. The prestigious *American Historical Review* (*AHR*), under the editorship of Robert K. Webb (1968-1975) and to a lesser extent under Otto Pflanze (1977-1985), published some explicitly psychohistorical articles, including two by Peter Loewenberg in 1971 on Heinrich Himmler and Nazi youth. The '70s were alive with interest in and struggles over how to institutionalize this new knowledge in the face of a growing resistance. In this period, Lloyd deMause was working very hard to get psychoanalysts to focus on the history of childhood and beginning the process of building institutions through the *History of Childhood Quarterly:* the *Journal of Psychohistory* (1973), the Institute for Psychohistory (1975), the Psychohistory Press, the International Psychohistorical Association (IPA; 1977), and the *Journal of Psychoanalytic Anthropology* (1980-1987). A week after I attended the first International Psychohistorical Association meetings in the spring of 1978, the International Society for Political Psychology (ISPP) also had its inaugural meeting in Manhattan, which I briefly attended. It created its own journal, *Political Psychology*, unlike the IPA, which has a newsletter but never had a formal relationship with the *Journal of Psychohistory*.

The psychiatric institutions of Vienna and Europe were *not* eager to welcome Freud and his followers into their fold, so the Freudians developed their own institutions, such as the International Psycho-Analytic Association, various journals, and a large variety of training institutes. In my lifetime, a central issue has been the relationship of psychohistory to the existing disciplines. Academic psychology, but not clinicians, overwhelmingly slammed their doors on those who were open to this new methodology. History departments were more ambivalent in their response. In 1957, they were cool to the American Historical Association (AHA) Inaugural Presidential Address of Harvard's William L. Langer calling the

application of psychoanalysis to history as "the next assignment" for young historians. However, some younger historians began to consider this approach. Still, in the 1970s most PhD historians interested in the field were anxious and nervous to openly declare themselves to be practitioners of psychohistory.

Most members of the American Historical Association's Group for the Use of Psychology in History (GUPH) were excited by their new methodology but quite concerned about the reactions of the elders of history and uncertain about their relationship to the psychoanalytic clinicians they were reading and meeting. Their ambivalence was heightened by Erik Erikson being uncomfortable with the term psychohistorian and Lifton changing the name of the Wellfleet Group for the Study of Psychohistorical Process, which he created with others in 1966, to simply Wellfleet. This oldest psychohistorical group still meets annually in the fall as an invitation-only seminar.

Charles B. Strozier, who was one of the key members of GUPH, editor of the *Psychohistory Review*, and the only person I know of who was hired with an appointment specifically in psychohistory, insisted that one could not function properly as a historian if you trained as a psychoanalyst. This opinion was formed by the Chicago Training Institute he attended, allowing historians to attend classes but never see patients and never become a psychoanalyst. However, after Strozier moved to New York to a position established for him by Lifton, he rapidly concluded his training, opened a practice, and became very active in the psychoanalytic community.

Lloyd deMause had the mentality of a businessman when it came to developing the field of psychohistory in that he did not usually take rejection personally, but continued to invite people to write articles, serve on the editorial board of the *Journal*, and publish their work through his press. The subsequent *Journal* editor reported that in the 1980s it had 8,000 subscribers, making it the only profitable psychohistorical publication. *Political Psychology*, the journal of the ISPP, came into existence in 1979 and continues to thrive. The *Psychohistory Review*, which had an impressive group of academics on its editorial board, had built its subscription base to about 500 through word of mouth and colleagues requesting that their libraries subscribe to it. Regrettably, Strozier decided to terminate its publication in 1999 because he and the then editor were, to quote him, "tired of it," and more fundamentally, they

thought, again to quote, "that psychohistory was never going to be recognized within the discipline of history as more than ephemeral…[with] 'very few people' having appointments in the field" (Strozier e-mail to David Cifelli, May 2015). GUPH, which had met sporadically for years, also ceased to meet at approximately the same time.

Even when there was an enthusiastic, although small, group of supporters for psychohistory among academics, no one in psychohistory had anything like the authority of Sigmund Freud in the psychoanalytic movement. This helps to explain why the rivalries within it did not result in institutions splitting apart or dissidents starting their own groups. The founder of psychoanalysis could split with and ostracize Adler, Jung, Rank, Silberner, Stekel, and others. In contrast, Lifton and Strozier might "bad mouth" deMause, Volkan, and those associated with the Institute for Psychohistory, the *Journal of Psychohistory*, and the IPA, but the most they could do was influence some colleagues to stay away; they had no direct control.

Lloyd deMause, the most controversial leader of psychohistory, did not exclude colleagues. However, he sometimes offended colleagues by his editorial judgment, leading with theory, organizational decisions, sensational advertising, and the extremity of his theories, such as fantasy analysis, the fetal origins of history, independence of psychohistory, poisonous placentas and mothers, and psychogenic theory. In fairness to him, he did not react negatively when colleagues set up new organizations and publications, such as the Psychohistory Forum, the Group for the Psychohistorical Study of Film, and Clio's Psyche. On the other hand, he also encouraged a sense of "us" who have the truth of a scientific psychohistory and the courage to pursue it, versus those lacking in these attributes.

While both psychoanalysis and psychohistory are intellectual disciplines, they differ in important respects. Psychohistory lacks the healing power of psychoanalysis. Quite importantly, the discipline created by Freud provided a way of making a living since so many of its adherents became therapists, but psychohistory never provided an economic base. This diminished the cohesion of the field and caused some to become disillusioned with it. Furthermore, despite Freud's exaggeration of the enemies he faced, psychoanalysis was much more favorably received than psychohistory, which has always had mixed reviews. Norman Kiell in 1988 published *Freud without Hindsight: Reviews of his Work (1893-1939)*,

revealing a far more positive reaction than one would gather from Freud's letters and the early biographies of Jones and others.

Neither Freud nor the other early analysts and advocates of analysis were psychoanalyzed, while many drawn to psychohistory were analyzed and even well-trained psychoanalysts. Lloyd deMause's expectation that establishing group process sessions at the end of Institute for Psychohistory and IPA meetings would prevent the acting out of destructive unconscious emotions did not work as planned and was at times quite damaging to the unity of the group. Difficulties with group process analysis centered on the unevenness of the quality of group process analysts and the fact that some participants came to these sessions with no or little therapeutic experience and minimal emotional awareness. They wanted to talk about content, not feelings. This whole group process experiment seemed crazy to most historians. While there was certainly acting out among his colleagues and acolytes, Freud's enormous emotional and intellectual authority as the founder of psychoanalysis kept much of it in check.

To continue with comparisons, psychoanalysis was started by a Jew and Freud's early followers were overwhelmingly Jewish, while psychohistory has always had a greater mixture of Jews (Gay, Lifton, Loewenberg) and gentiles (deMause, Langer, Strozier, Volkan) among its advocates, leaders, and prominent practitioners. If we compare Freud with deMause, we find that both had a sense of specialness as young children, since Amelia Freud called her son "my golden Sigi" and deMause spoke of having been the youngest child to read, according to *Ripley's Believe it or Not!* Clearly, both had major issues with their fathers. Both saw themselves as scientific, yet each had strong speculative inclinations, although throughout most of his career Freud did a better job than deMause in controlling these impulses. Freud's pessimism, strengthened by WWI and the rise of totalitarian communism and fascism, led him to develop the idea of the death instinct, while deMause's optimism led him to develop the concept of "helping mode parenting" resulting in children who are "gentle, sincere, never depressed…and strong willed." Both leaders were inclined to have favorites, such as Adler and Jung for the Austrian and Henry Ebel and Casper Schmidt for the American. With great insight, the founder of psychoanalysis recognized that "My emotional life has always insisted that I have an intimate friend and a hated enemy" (*Standard Edition*, 1900, 483). Such splitting was not unknown to the American who spoke

about splits being normal among groups. Freud, born in the Victorian era, could be tyrannical at times in dealing with his followers, while deMause could make abrupt changes as a leader, which alienated some of his colleagues. Lloyd deMause sometimes saw himself as the Freud of psychohistory.

In choosing deMause for this comparison with Freud, I do not mean to argue that he was *the* leader of psychohistory, just the one who was organizationally and theoretically most prominent and who I know the most about. Other psychohistorical leaders to consider are Lifton, Volkan, Loewenberg, and Strozier. Robert Jay Lifton was much better known and accepted in the intellectual community generally, but he did not involve himself in psychohistorical organizations beyond his Wellfleet group. Vamik Volkan created a center and a journal, and did such yeoman service for peace that he has been nominated repeatedly for a Nobel Peace Prize. Peter Loewenberg was the key person in creating the University of California Interdisciplinary Psychoanalytic Consortium and much more. Charles Strozier became the leader of GUPH and the *Psychohistory Review*.

An additional point of importance is that psychohistory has a fair number of supporters coming from anthropology, clinical work, literature, political science, sociology, and elsewhere.

Neither movement was able to ensconce itself within the academic departments in the USA, although in Vienna as of 2005 there is a Sigmund Freud University teaching psychotherapy. Despite this academic resistance, both have had a profound impact on our thinking and offer great insights into individuals and society.

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Commentaries on the Five Papers

Psychohistory is a Valuable Approach

Jay Y. Gonen—Independent Scholar

Reading the five excellent papers that were written by old hands in psychohistory gave me a chuckle as I asked myself in