

The Psychoanalytic Activist

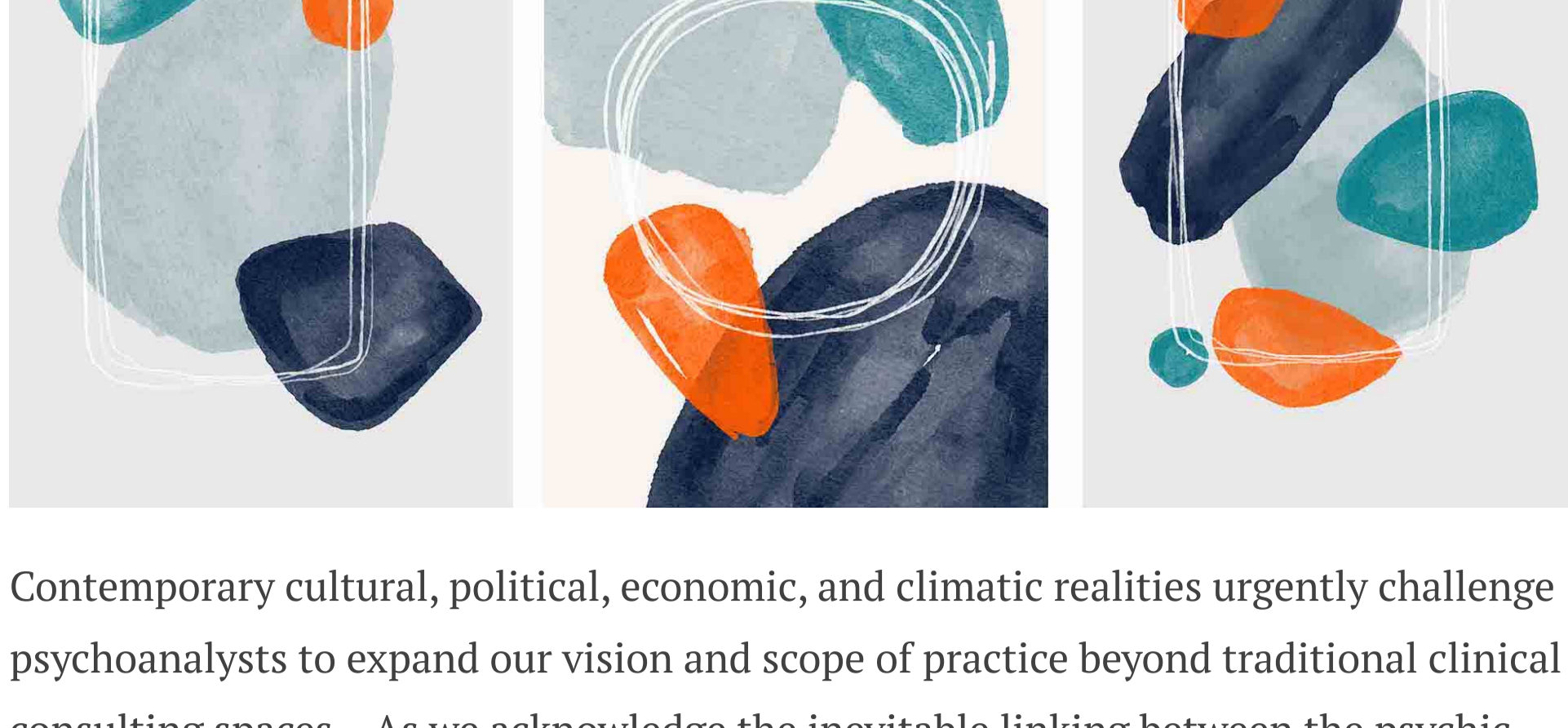
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OCTOBER 4, 2021 ROSSANNAE

The Psychoanalytic Community Collaboratory: A Methodology for Preparing Practitioners to Work in Community Spaces

By Jane Hassinger, LCSW, DCSW and Billie Pivnick, PhD



Contemporary cultural, political, economic, and climatic realities urgently challenge psychoanalysts to expand our vision and scope of practice beyond traditional clinical consulting spaces. As we acknowledge the inevitable linking between the psychic and social—the mutually constitutive connections among individual minds, the ‘group’, and cultural history—our psychoanalytic theories and methodologies offer rich possibilities for responding to these realities. Indeed, in institutes, universities, and community-based projects, many psychoanalytic theorists and practitioners are envisioning a *social psychoanalysis* informed by an understanding of how (dissociated) historical cultural trauma and social pathologies, (such as racism, xenophobia, misogyny, homo/transphobia), and extreme economic inequalities, threaten the integrity and health of communities (c.f., Layton, 2019).

Problematically, American psychoanalysis has almost entirely neglected *the group*, even as we recognize that psychosocial development is fostered in the crucible of multiple experiences of membership in groups and surrounding communities. By connecting individuals with *tasks* and *missions* that speak directly to needs and problems in the larger society, groups are the underappreciated and undertheorized sites for adult development. While struggling with often chaotic social impingements, we develop resilient identities, concern and compassion for others, and a public/political voice (Erikson, 1959, 1968, 1987; Tubert-Oklander, 2014).

Furthermore, although we live and function inside groups, training programs only rarely include theoretical and methodological preparation for interpreting and intervening in the psychologically complex group dynamics that often threaten to derail community-based efforts at remediation, reconciliation, and repair.

The Psychoanalytic Community Collaboratory was launched in 2014 by Jane Hassinger and Billie Pivnick to address these omissions and challenges for practitioners who work within (or want to work within) community settings (Hassinger & Pivnick, 2020). A facilitated 12-14 week web-based seminar, project incubator, and experiential laboratory, the Collaboratory is informed by relational and group psychoanalytic frameworks that highlight group process, multiplicity, intersectionality, historical trauma, enactment, and mourning (Bromberg, 1998; Bion, 1962; Dalal, 1998; Holmes, 2017; Pivnick 2017; Salberg & Grand 2017). Facilitation of the group is guided by democratic-humanistic values and norms that prioritize the value of all members’ contributions, difference/conflict, and empowerment (Glassman, 2008; Berman & Hassinger, 2012). Each Collaboratory session is linked to a curriculum of readings, members’ evolving projects, and group process observation and discussion.

Over its five iterations, participants from around the world have shared innovative projects and explored relevant interdisciplinary scholarship. Projects have included culturally-attuned mental health initiatives, economic development programs in resource-strapped communities, documentary films, theatre pieces, art installations, and the creation of new community organizations such as schools and youth centers. The Collaboratory’s mix of nationalities, cultural identities, disciplines, and methodologies offer rich material for an evolving set of tools and practice principles for community-based practice.

Collaboratory participants create a temporary community in which the value of all voices (Glassman, 2008) and their concern for and mutual implication in struggles and successes of all are foregrounded (Rothberg, 2019; Layton, 2020). As members increasingly ‘take up roles’ in the group (Shapiro, 2020), a sense of ‘self-in-the-group and group-in-the-self’ can be felt. Inspired by Eng and Han’s (2000) ‘psychic citizen’—an individual psychic development based on the immigrant’s struggle to preserve melancholic identifications during the process of assimilation—we term this intersubjectively constructed self state the ‘relational citizen’. Within this inherently relational experience, freighted with of historical trauma and culturally-normative unconscious processes (Layton, 2007, 2020), members reveal increased capacities for multiplicity, empathy, and interpersonal perspective-taking (Davoine & Gaudilliere, 2004; Holmes, 2017; Hopper, 2000; Salberg & Grand, 2017).

A vignette from one Collaboratory illustrates these group phenomena. In 2017, the group included 5 women and 5 men, 8 white and 2 participants of Latin American descent. A week after the Parkland shootings, everyone expressed shock and despair in response to the violence. Quickly however, discussion shifted to exploring the tensions between participants’ clinical and community-based identities. Violetta, a psychoanalyst of Latin American descent, whose former analytic training had provoked feelings of inferiority and shame about working in community mental health, admitted to feeling insecure about how to be helpful to the Parkland community. Offering reassurances and a long list of ideas, the group seized on her insecurity, appearing to make Violetta and her doubts its ‘project.’ During a somewhat manic discussion, Violetta participated very little, seeming more disheartened.

Throughout, Ricardo, a graduate student of Latin American descent and artist with limited access to internet resources, had been trying to connect by phone. For long stretches he could neither be seen nor heard. Suddenly, the Zoom chat box exploded with messages from Ricardo. Like the proverbial Greek Chorus, he called out from the margins, giving urgent voice to dissociated horror and grief over the murders in Parkland. Everyone else—facilitators and participants—were thunderstruck. In spite of efforts to show respect and compassion for one another’s unique histories, only then did they notice Ricardo’s absence. One facilitator pointed out the group’s erasure of Ricardo and suggested that in its intense focus on Violetta’s anxieties, participants were engaging in a collective defense against their own feelings of fear and helplessness, or what DiAngelo (2018) has labelled ‘white fragility’. Slowly and painfully, members began to recognize the group’s racialized/gendered erasure of Ricardo and projections of fragility and fear onto Violetta. By taking leadership and calling the group to attention, Ricardo enacted his relational psychic citizenship in the Collaboratory and awakened the group to its purpose.

During the next session, he presented his project—an achingly beautiful film about a group of migrant workers who for generations journeyed from Mexico to Colorado and back. Several workers spoke passionately about their ancestors’ cultural claim to the land, where colonial land-owners and politicians stripped the people of rights and criminalized their border-crossings. Members were deeply moved by his presentation. Later, excitement and a sense of ‘being in this together’ was evident as they discussed another member’s ‘safe haven’ project for undocumented immigrant university students. Several acknowledged their unconscious privileging of white voices that had pushed Ricardo into silence and rendered Violetta’s anxiety a problem to solve. As this defensive splitting between BIPOC and white members gave way, a thoughtful exploration of how hegemonic whiteness had permeated our assumptions about what constitutes legitimate forms of and sites for practice. Participation increased, and members re-engaged with their projects with greater depth and complexity. With an explicit mission to collaborate, the group provided a container for the multiple ‘groups-in-the-minds’ (e.g., races, genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations, cultural histories, etc.) of its members (Shapiro, 2020). The atmosphere was charged with excitement, curiosity, and creativity. Toward the session’s end, with renewed confidence Violetta shared her intention to organize a peer-based support project for Parkland families.

Over subsequent sessions we witnessed an emergence of an intersubjective emotional experience, what we have called, with a nod to Benjamin’s ‘Moral Third’ (2012), a *Collaborative Third*. In this shared state, participants identify with the ‘group-as-a-whole’ and thus move from self-centered concerns and defensive uses of splitting and/or projection to robust identification with the group’s task and mission. As members became more interdependent, both creativity and productivity increased and the sense described by Glassman of ‘we are good and able’ was palpable (Glassman, 2008; Hassinger & Pivnick, 2021 under review). The vignette illustrates how attending to the dynamic links between the psychic and social and the development of a *Collaborative Third* allow for increasing capacities for non-defensive reflection on, and repair of, inevitable enactments in the group’s dynamics

In the Collaboratory, participants’ early complicity with Ricardo’s invisibility and Violetta’s anxieties demonstrated how normative unconscious processes “reproduce inequality precisely where the link between the psychic and social has been disavowed” (Layton, 2020). When he signaled his erasure, Ricardo destabilized the grip of whiteness and avoidance, manifesting both his agency and responsibility to the group. The Collaboratory’s unique pedagogy offers emerging leaders in community psychoanalysis valuable experiential learning for becoming productive members of community-based projects.

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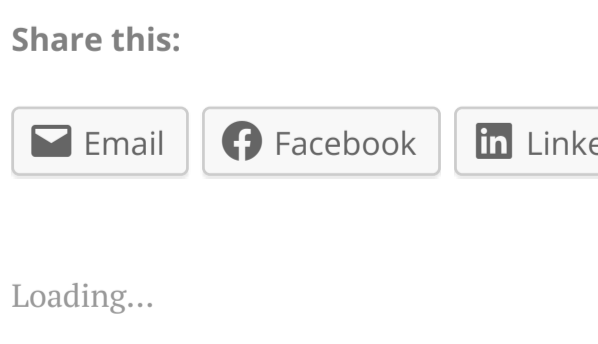
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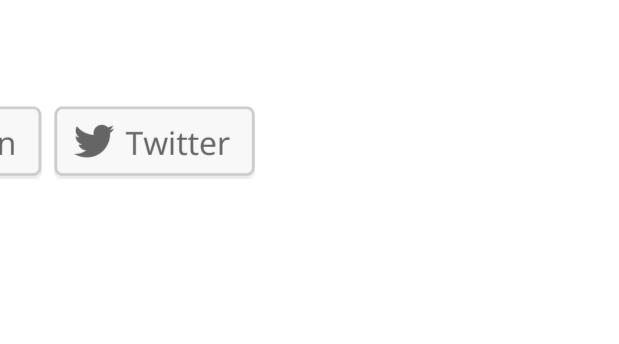


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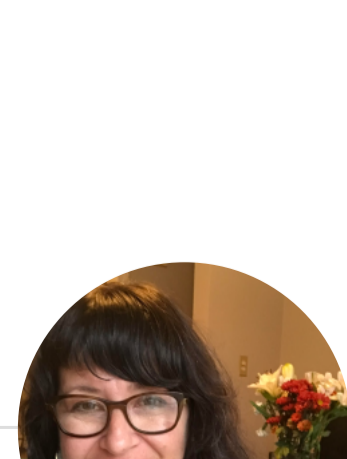


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