

“Art meets Science” - GASI Symposium Lisbon

Tuesday, 29th July 2014, from 9am - 11am

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Group Analyst and Jungian Analyst

Thank you for inviting me to chair today’s particular conference theme ‘Art meets Science’. I feel really honoured.

I am sure we are all aware how important and inspiring the things are that we have heard this morning.

The latest discoveries in medicine and neuroscience – and neuroscience is by definition these days the science par excellence – are met by the contribution from architecture, which may be seen as an art, but which also needs a solid grounding in science, if any construction is to remain standing.

I have been asked to provide some connecting ideas for a discussion and for your questions, and I have been given this job, because I was an architect myself before I changed to study psychology and became first a Jungian psychoanalyst and then a group analyst. The Idea was that I know how to combine the two disciplines of this morning, and that I would also be able to function as a mediator between our two speakers.

Giacomo Riolatti and Eduardo Souto de Moura are both professors in their respective specialities; Professor Riolatti is head of the department for Neuroscience in Padua in Italy, and Professor Souto de Moura at the University of Oporto in Portugal. Both men have in addition been teaching as visiting professors all over the world, and also both received numerous awards, often prizes that are the highest in their field. You can find the details in their biographies.

I feel quite humbled being up here on the podium with them.

My job, in addition to linking the two fields of art and science as areas of enquiry, is to make a connection with group analysis. There is a debate in therapy that asks, if our work is an art or a scientific undertaking. Does it matter how we as group analysts define our work in that respect?

The world of the psyche can be perceived as akin to a building, a house, since the psyche too needs sound foundations, clear walls or boundaries, and certainly a roof for protection from the elements, that is, all the stuff that life throws at us.

The psyche also needs windows and doors to provide access and exits for information and communication, for their reception and disposal.

Can we open the shutters or will others need to break in to get close?

Are we open for connections or are we locked in?

It is said, that eyes are the windows of the soul. Are windows the eyes of a house? Or are windows, as Souto de Moura suggests in one of his essays, traumata, wounds and holes, where wall should be?

We build walls to protect and defend ourselves, concretely and symbolically. But walls can be breached. Our emotional skin, our psychic envelope, can be pierced. And to make the situation even more complex, as I understand it, we need holes in the walls. Interchange or intercourse is indispensable for life. We need holes in the walls so that the light gets in. Windows are necessary. Our eyes are essential for the mirror neuron mechanism to work. It is the capacity to see the other and to perceive them that produces in the brain of the viewer representations of the observed actions and emotions. And it is this that allows us to understand the actions of others and their emotions.

Below ground, to go back to my comparison between psyche and house, buildings are usually wired up to all kinds of public services. Pipes, channels and cables connect with the rest of the community and the world – and this, as I understand it, is the realm of the Social Unconscious.

Thinking in architectural terms, keeps you grounded in the world of the real. It is a useful discipline, especially in relation to the importance of the role of foundations, the level where the concrete and the symbolic meet and are one.

Applying architectural terms to psychological thinking helps us to recognise the realm of the real in outer and inner worlds. This fosters the appreciation of form and beauty.

Thinking in psychological terms, throws emotional experience into relief. It offers an understanding of the emotional qualities of external facts and realities and their impact: a wall can be cold or warm or it may display 9 shades of grey, as one of Souto de Moura's walls does.

In most groups, we create an architectural structure by setting up chairs in a circle, creating a space between people, in the middle of the group.

Within that space, translated by and through the medium of that space – a structure that we as group analysts call the matrix – comes into being.

Within that space, mirroring – one of the most important group analytical activities – takes place. I believe that it is the visibility of each group member to each other - including the conductor - that makes group analysis such a potent mode of therapy. Most aspects of communication in any given group - our gestures and facial expressions and what has been called body language – depend on visibility and probably rely on the use of mirror neurons. I imagine our theories will need some reformulating on the basis of the discovery of the activity of mirror neurons as a major means of human communication.

Terms like transference - and even more so counter-transference - may well turn out to be concepts that can be much more easily understood than thought before. One of the major therapeutic mechanisms - projective identification- , I believe, will lose its complicated mystery, now that we have the neuronal mirror mechanism that explains how we are able to know how others feel and what they are planning to do.

I want to hand over at this point to you and open up this podium for questions from the audience.

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