Challenges in theory and practice

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Jung + activism = oxymoron?

This chapter attempts to address the conference theme, ‘Jung and Activism’, from one specific perspective based on my own endeavours, over many years, in working in contexts outside the analytical consulting room. At the outset, it is important to address the obvious question as to whether Jungian psychology and ‘activism’ are at all compatible. The question is appropriate because, prima facie, any connection between the two appears to be incongruous; if anything, ‘Jungian activism’ is an oxymoron because nothing about Jung could be construed as connected with activism, as it is commonly understood.

Without elaborating over the various definitions and forms of activism, I propose that we understand activism as the questioning of existing power relations and the contesting ‘of regimes of authority that seek to govern us’ (Rose, 1999, p. 60). Both the terms ‘regimes of authority’ and ‘govern’ should be understood in the widest possible way, to cover not only governmental politics but also societal discourses and professional ideologies with reference to theory and practice (Norris, 2002 and 2007).

Jung is known for his notorious conservative outlook with regard to his political and social views and, therefore, he can hardly be considered as an activist. During the cold war, he identified totally with the polarised view that everything that did not conform with the outlook of the ‘free western world’ was a product of ‘communism’, which he condemned outright (cf. Papadopoulos, 2002a). Uncharacteristically to the complexity of his thinking and cultural sophistication, he seemed to be incapable of affording any critique of his own political position. There is no evidence that he was involved in any movement for any consideration
for social justice at any level – certainly, not in terms of any form of activism but not even at any theoretical or speculative level. Moreover, he used his own theories to support his conservatism. Characteristically, he argued that ‘only those individuals can attain to a higher degree of consciousness who are destined to it and called to it from the beginning, i.e. who have a capacity and an urge for higher differentiation . . . Nature is aristocratic’ (Jung, 1917/1943, para 198).

It should not be forgotten that the concept and very process of individuation, the cornerstone of his theory of personal development, is focused exclusively on the individual, despite his attempts to claim that (being) an individuated person does not exclude social awareness.¹ Jung’s emphasis was almost entirely on the intrapsychic realm, arguing firmly for the simplistic formula that ‘society is the sum total of individuals’ (Jung, 1956, para 536). Moreover, he repeatedly maintained that ‘every man is, in a certain sense, unconsciously a worse man when he is in society than when acting alone; for he is carried by society and to that extent relieved of his individual responsibility’ (Jung, 1928/1953, para 240). This illustrates Jung’s privileging the individual over any issues of social consideration.

I have long argued for the importance of realising and taking seriously the fact that Jung’s view of the social realm was purely negative, and to consider studiously the multiple implications of this (Papadopoulos, 1997a, 1997b, 1998a, 1999a, 2000a, 2006a, 2009, 2011). Jung equated the societal dimension with the ‘collective’ that he simply considered negatively. The ‘collective’ he had in mind was identified with the amorphous masses that ‘relieve’ man ‘of his individual responsibility’. This view represents the prevailing understanding of the time, propagated by the French writer Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931), who put forward the idea that in the crowd the individual loses his/her identity and becomes a small particle of the herd, which is led by unscrupulous demagogues. In the crowd, the individual becomes an anonymous entity, is prone to suggestibility and contagious negative influences (Le Bon, 1895). Jung was aware of the destructive effects of the masses not only in the context of the abhorrent fascist movements he experienced during his lifetime in Germany and Italy, but also in the ‘collectivism’ of the Soviet communism that he equally opposed, most vehemently.

No wonder that within this unfavourable perspective, Jung found it difficult to form any positive inclination towards anything associated with the social realm and one’s involvement within it. Yet, it is important to remember that his actual theory of the collective unconscious clearly has a potentially positive and, indeed, rejuvenating role for the collective, when the individual integrates the archetypal elements in an appropriate way. Even on the seemingly destructive occasions when the collective unconscious ‘floods’ the individual psyche, Jung still saw its positive and renewing function, likening it to the ‘flooding of the Nile’ that ‘increases the fertility of the land’ (Jung, 1946, para 479).

At this point, it is instructive to pause and reflect on the significant confusion in distinguishing between Jung’s attitudes towards the collective unconscious and towards the actual social collective. For Jung, the collective unconscious along with its archetypal elements has an unmistakably compensatory function, refreshing the
withered psyche of the individual.Repeatedly, Jung lamented the current state of modern living that did not provide the vital connection with collective/archetypal forms that could nourish the modern person’s psyche. In dramatic terms, he continually warned of the dangerous effects of this lack. At the same time, he expressed serious concern at people’s attempt at resorting to fake substitutes for these positive archetypal forms. He drew a sharp distinction between appropriate and inappropriate expressions of these revitalising collective forms and it is telling of his mistrust for the social collective that he clarified this distinction as follows:

Anyone who has lost . . . [the nurturing contact with these positive collective forms] and cannot be satisfied with substitutes is certainly in a very difficult position today: before him there yawns the void, and he turns away from it in horror. What is worse, the vacuum gets filled with absurd political and social ideas, which one and all are distinguished by their spiritual bleakness.

(Jung, 1934/1954, para 28)

This typical quotation testifies to Jung’s detesting of ‘political and social ideas’ that he considers ‘absurd’ and as characterised by ‘spiritual bleakness’, contrasting them to appropriate archetypal forms that are genuinely spiritual. This distinction is deeply rooted in Jung’s own specific context, i.e. the historical times he lived in, the intellectual tradition within which he was educated, the sociopolitical realities of his time and his geographical location, and his own personal and family experience.

Accordingly, Jung seemed to idealise an intangible form of archetypal spirituality and demonise anything connected with the actual societal dimension. This sharp division was reflected in the way he conducted his psychotherapeutic/analytical practice: he worked exclusively with individuals in professionally delineated and defined settings (i.e. state mental health services and private practice) and did not engage with any group or family therapeutic activities, or even with individuals outside these settings. Admittedly, no models of such practices were available at the time and, therefore, one may argue that this is the sole reason why Jung did not extend his practice to those domains. Conversely, the claim of this chapter is that the main reason is not the lack of existing models of such practices but Jung’s own firm prejudice against anything that he (mistakenly) considered was violating the sanctity of the individual. Jung was fairly iconoclastic in many respects and pushed many boundaries and applied his creativity in many spheres, so he could have done the same in relation to extending the range of his therapeutic practices. He was not able to do so, due to his own limiting specific context, but not due to any inherent limitations of his theory.

Therefore, my argument is that Jung’s theories can be expanded to accommodate such extensions in practice, and I consider my own modest work with adversity survivors outside the consulting room as examples of such attempts. This would be in line with Jung’s own dictum that the pupil serves the master better if he takes the master’s work further and does not just keep imitating it.
In order to undertake this task, it is imperative to differentiate between what Jung himself thought and did and what one can develop on the basis of his theoretical premises and entire approach. Often this distinction is not made and, instead, analytical psychology tends to identify entirely with Jung the person, with what he said and what he did not say, and with what he did and what he did not do. Once this distinction is made (as well as some additional ones), it would be possible to illustrate that a connection between Jung and ‘Activism’ is not only feasible but also of considerable heuristic value.

Important differentiations

Traditionally, in contexts where so-called ‘mental health’ assistance is required, appropriately trained practitioners (analysts, psychotherapists, counsellors, etc.) provide their services in structured settings. However, in contexts where people experience various forms of human distress, disorientation, psychic ache, etc., due to being exposed to various forms of collective adversity (political/military conflict, involuntary dislocation, natural disasters, etc.), offering services that are conceptualised and developed for ordinary settings is inappropriate. Experience shows that even offering various forms of ‘trauma counselling’ is inappropriate as, inadvertently, they tend to fix a ‘victim identity’ on the persons they intend to assist; moreover, the epistemological basis of these types of ‘counselling’ is not culturally sensitive and it is not fitting for emergency situations or for unusual settings (e.g. refugee camps etc.). In these contexts, what is required is opposite response to the plight of the people who experience what is usually referred to as ‘normal responses to abnormal circumstances’.

My own experiences in these contexts and settings has shown that what is required is not to offer psychotherapy or analysis or counselling but to provide contact with the adversity survivors that is essentially therapeutic (e.g. Papadopoulos, 1998b, 1999b, 2011). Thus, it is imperative to make a distinction between ‘doing psychotherapy’ and ‘being therapeutic’. Whereas the former needs to be delivered by suitably trained analysts, psychotherapists, counsellors, the latter can be offered by anybody who has any type of contact with adversity survivors, as long as she or he is sensitised to the psychological complexities of the overall phenomena involved, and this is one of the main activities that I am engaged in: designing projects that enable workers to introduce a therapeutic dimension to whatever contact they have with adversity survivors.

An additional differentiation that needs to be made is between therapeutic ideologies, therapeutic techniques and therapeutic frameworks.

Therapeutic ideologies

Each school of psychotherapy or analysis is based on a set of theoretical presuppositions not only about their methods of intervention but also about the way they conceptualise the very phenomena they observe (in particular, the way they identify what is ‘the problem’) as well as, directly or indirectly, shaping the
stance of the therapist. For example, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy focuses on the interactions between behaviour, thinking and feeling, and, therefore, the way they would conceptualise both their identification of the problem, as well as the methods of treatment and stance of the therapist, would be in line with this theoretical schema. Comparably, a psychodynamically oriented therapist would consider the unconscious as central to any understanding of the problem and the method of treatment as well as the way the therapist would relate in order to access and address unconscious material.

Inevitably, these therapeutic ideologies are present, explicitly or implicitly, in all forms of interventions with adversity survivors, thus imposing their assumptions onto every situation, especially when they are applied to 'trauma' intervention contexts.

**Therapeutic techniques**

By and large, these techniques are specific applications of therapeutic ideologies, e.g. free association (psychoanalysis), active imagination (analytical psychology), empty chair (Gestalt), writing self-statements to counteract negative thoughts (CBT), etc. However, what is of great significance is that, almost imperceptibly, the landscape of psychotherapy has been changing, and whereas before the profession was dominated by established schools of psychotherapy or analysis, now there is an endless plethora of specific therapeutic techniques, seemingly independent of therapeutic ideologies. Propagators of these techniques (some of them are even called 'therapies') claim that it is not necessary for one to embark on a long, arduous and expensive form of training, but, instead, a few weekend trainings would suffice to enable one to apply these techniques. Examples of these techniques include Mindfulness, Narrative Expressive Therapy, Tree of Life, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Coherence Therapy, Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR), Mode Deactivation Therapy, Nonviolent Communication, etc.

Often, the most successful and most enduring of these techniques, eventually, develop theoretical perspectives to support them and, consequently, they extend and formalise the training they offer to the prospective of these techniques. Thus, gradually, these techniques begin to resemble the traditional schools of psychotherapy.

When applied to working with adversity survivors, these forms of therapeutic interventions tend to be more rigid insofar as they apply the set technique to any given situation, regardless of the setting and complexity.

**Therapeutic frameworks**

Different from the above, a therapeutic framework consists of a set of basic principles, not at a theoretical or applied/practice level but, instead, aimed at providing an epistemological perspective that can then be used with, almost, any theoretical ideology and/or theoretical technique. It is this that emerged from my experience in working with adversity survivors, in unusual settings outside the
consulting room and away from traditional mental health services, as the most useful set of guidelines for this work. The advantages of therapeutic frameworks are that, free from therapeutic ideologies and fixed techniques, they are adaptable to any situation and they can be used by persons of any cultural, educational or work background.

The present therapeutic framework

The basic elements of the therapeutic framework that emerged during my work with adversity survivors in non-traditional settings and outside the consulting room include the following:

(a) Conceptualisation of ‘the problem’

The predominant way of perceiving human distress in the face of any forms of adversity has been in terms of trauma. My investigations into this field revealed that trauma is an inaccurate and crude term to capture the fine shades and uniqueness that each individual, family or community respond in, in each given adverse situation (Papadopoulos 2000b, 2002b, 2006b, 2007, 2010, 2013). There is a persistent but erroneous assumption that all phenomena of human distress involve psychological trauma and, moreover, most traumatic experiences are equivalent to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

It should not be forgotten that the prevalence of PTSD following exposure to most forms of adversity is not much more than 10% (Arnberg et al., 2013; Berger et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2012). This means that the overwhelming majority of people respond in non-pathological ways. Yet, this fact is hardly addressed in the literature. This does not mean that they do not suffer or do not experience forms of distress and disorientation; certainly, they do and it is our responsibility to develop ways of grasping the specificities of these phenomena without confusing them with psychopathological or psychiatric conditions.

It is within this perspective that my experiences led me to develop the concepts of ‘nostalgic disorientation’ and ‘onto-ecological settledness’ (Papadopoulos, 2012, 2015) to account for non-pathological ways of responding to adversity. Under ordinary circumstances, people experience a state of relative stability where life is fairly predictable. I call this state ‘onto-ecological settledness’, referring to the familiar arrangement and relationship ‘between the totality of one’s being and the totality of one’s environment’ (Papadopoulos, 2015, p. 40). This is not an ideal state but it is predictable and creates a sense of settledness that is disrupted once adversity strikes. Then, people experience a sense of disorientation that includes a strong nostalgic element in it, insofar as it creates a yearning for returning to the disrupted state of settledness, and this is what I call ‘nostalgic disorientation’. Although ‘nostalgic disorientation’ is not a psychiatric disorder, the felt discomfort and distress are real and should not be underestimated.
(b) Conceptualisation of the intervention

Consequently, it is inappropriate to offer psychotherapy to the overwhelming majority of adversity survivors because of the nature of their suffering, and the cultural and situational contexts. Therefore, what is required is to provide ‘therapeutic input’ via suitable ‘therapeutic encounters’ within the existing settings. Short and focused trainings can equip all who work with adversity survivors to add a ‘therapeutic dimension’ to the work they already do, by becoming sagaciously aware of the psychological complexities of

1. the relevant phenomena (definition of ‘the problem’)
2. the beneficiaries (clients) and their contexts
3. the workers themselves and their contexts
4. the interaction between them
5. the organisational/systemic and sociopolitical contexts within which the encounters between them take place
6. the epistemological assumptions and methodology that are used in these encounters, and
7. the interaction of all the above.

(Papadopoulos, 2013)

Finally, instead of focusing exclusively on the negative responses to being exposed to adversity, this therapeutic framework is drawing from the obvious reality that, in addition to (not instead of!) their pain and suffering, persons do retain some of the positive functions, characteristics, abilities, relationships, qualities they had before their exposure to adversity, as well as developing new positives as a direct result of the fact that they were exposed to adversity. The existing positives I call ‘resilience’, and the new positives that are activated by the very exposure to adversity, I call ‘adversity-activated development’ (AAD). The three groups of responses to adversity (i.e. negative, resilience and AAD) are accounted for in the ‘Adversity/Trauma Grid’ that represents a formalisation of my experiences and it is now used widely (Papadopoulos, 2002b, 2006b, 2007, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013).

These are the key ingredients of the framework that I use to design consultancies and interventions at both macro and micro levels in various contexts with adversity survivors. The framework is, essentially, an explicit epistemological perspective to conceptualising all the relevant phenomena (including the ‘identification of the problem’) in situations of societal adversity and all the required interventions.

Jungian reflections

This framework was not intended to apply Jungian theories, instead, it evolved from my experiences in the field; however, some key Jungian themes are easily discernible in it (Papadopoulos, 2009, 2012, 2013).

Jung encouraged creative ways of conducting therapy beyond the traditional frame of verbal exchange. Known for his attempts at depathologising psychological
difficulties, he 'emphasised the transformative function of suffering and its renewing effect. In this way, he appreciated the complexity of individuals having more than one response to painful events and experiences' (Papadopoulos, 2013).

Finally, this framework includes a not-so-obvious but still extremely significant contribution by Jung to these situations – the multiple implications of polarisation. Situations of adversity in mass catastrophic contexts create polarised phenomena at all levels, where Jungian reflections can be most fruitful.

Under ordinary conditions, with our 'onto-ecological settledness' relatively stable, we experience archetypes in their bi-polarity, in a balanced and 'human' way, i.e. 'in forms that combine not only the two polarities (positive and negative) but also both collective and personal dimensions'. However, under polarised conditions, archetypes tend 'to lose their flexibility and nourishing abilities' and, instead, 'pure archetypal dazzling energy' is released that 'can exert an irresistible fascination, often of a numinous nature' resulting in individuals and groups becoming 'totally gripped by their power', losing their ability to bear complexity and resorting to crude and destructive oversimplification at all levels (Papadopoulos, 2013).

This framework illustrates an approach that includes 'activism' not only in terms of engaging within the social realm, but also in terms of contesting the 'regimes of authority' that 'govern' conceptualisations and work in this field. Moreover, it illustrates how Jungian theories, once extended, can be used fruitfully in 'activism' endeavours.

**Note**

1 'As man is not only an individual but also a member of society, these two tendencies inherent in human nature can never be separated, or the one subordinated to the other, without doing him serious injury' (Jung, 1912/1955, para 441).

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