ABSTRACT: This paper explores some of the history of psychoanalysis as it has been influenced by and has influenced the cultures in which it exists. There was a time when the profession was almost antagonistic to considering that which lay outside of the intrapsychic. Partly in response to a sense of crisis, today it is busy incorporating a “fourth leg” into its training programs: the sociocultural surround. Those who would bring about these modifications are moving from an individualist model toward one in which self is the product of relationships, that is, toward a universal model.

KEY WORDS: culture; individualist model; universal model.

INTRODUCTION

Although, as one prominent psychoanalyst has written, “In the analysis of every patient, the analyst hears a group interacting” (Rangell, 1999, p. 1), this profession appears to some of us to have been rather slow in coming to attend deeply to the sociocultural and socioeconomic influences in every human life. We have left that largely to anthropology, where the focus is primarily on the group, or perhaps to social work, whose very name affirms an attention to the surround where we live and function. The dialogue of which I will speak today is not only that in therapy sessions, where we are forced to recognize the effects of both similarities and differences in the reference groups from which each of the participants have emerged, but also the increasing dialogue between the two professions, now that psychoanalytic institutes welcome us social workers as candidates and members.
I am going to assume that this audience knows a lot about its own historical development, including the years when schools of social work welcomed into their curricula psychoanalytic theories. So I want here to focus on some of the ways culture prominently affected the early development of psychoanalysis, its changes over the decades of its unfolding, and—as we all know—the present ‘crisis’ of the profession.

It was in an effort to understand more deeply the inevitable intertwinings of the psyche and the environments in which it unfolds and functions that the four IPA societies in Los Angeles established three and a half years ago a Study Group on Psychoanalysis and Culture. We hoped both to begin to think and to build cultural concepts into the curricula. Each of the participating societies could be seen to have a subculture of its own. Although there had in the past been occasional thoughts of mergings, each group had wanted to hold onto its separate identity. We in the Study Group thought there would be advantages in our discourse in having both commonalities and divergences among us. We met monthly, assigned ourselves readings, indeed accumulated a list of relevant books and papers some 6 pages long and still growing. We discussed our own personal and professional backgrounds, invited outside others who had contributed ideas about essential aspects of their cultures, especially those that are most in evidence in the multicultural city which is Los Angeles. We worried about why few persons from some of the most numerous ‘minority’ groups either come for psychoanalysis or for psychoanalytic training. We contemplated the near future in which we ourselves would be the minority. Our focus was, first, on the ways these cultures had cultivated and socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions: the intracultural domain. Then we concerned ourselves with how those patterns affected relationships with peoples and cultures of different origins and design, complicating intercultural dialogue—not only in our consulting rooms but even between whole ethnic or racial groups, even nations.

Indeed, in the last meeting of the third year, we gave birth to a new baby, without even realizing we were pregnant. We called it “Psychoanalysis for Social Action.” Clearly we had found ourselves in agreement with Leo Rangell (1999) that, if we are aiming to “optimize the future” the surrounding milieu needs care and nourishing as much as does the internal world. We have introduced our offspring to the professional community in our city, via showing a documentary film made by two of our members, together with the Academy Award winning husband of one of them (Jones, Jones, & Stern, 1999). It depicts what we consider to be a pathological aspect of the culture in which we live, one that most of us would prefer to disavow. We will show it here today and invite dialogue with you as to whether psychoanalysis, out of its clinical learning, has theories that could enable it to contribute to amelioration not only of individual problems but of social ones.