Psychoanalysis and the United States research university: Current trends

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In this essay the author describes the status of the humanities within United States research universities, and notes that there is a place in the research university for clinical analysts with non-quantitative research interests, who are seen as humanities scholars by other humanities specialists. He discusses the current trend in psychoanalytic research in the United States, which perpetuates an historically well-known divide between quantitative and non-quantitative investigators, and causes non-quantitative clinician–researcher analysts to seek a workplace outside organized analysis, as it exists within the American Psychoanalytic Association. He goes on to describe the way a clinical analyst with a strong non-quantitative research commitment has found a supportive home for his investigations in a humanities institute in a research university. That analyst has been welcomed as a colleague by university-based humanities scholars, and has found that those collegial relationships offer creative freedom and interdisciplinary stimulation. The author notes that a cadre of analysts, enriched by such experiences, will be better equipped to bridge the divide which exists between non-quantitative and quantitative analytic researchers, for the benefit of psychoanalytic research in the future. The author also illustrates the benefits experienced by university-based humanities scholars when they collaborate with clinical analysts, and suggests this makes stronger ties between psychoanalysis and research universities more likely in the future.

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Introduction

Kuhn (1962) has provided the self-conscious scholar with a way to navigate his/her place in a discipline, and understand the evolution of that field. While Kuhn was most familiar with science, his ideas are relevant to all fields of knowledge. Previously, I have used the prism of the shift in a paradigm to understand the role of interdisciplinary collaboration in advancing clinical analytic technique (Sonnenberg, 2005).

In this essay I will address the possibility that in the United States the time has come for psychoanalysts to enter the world of higher education as humanities scholars. Doors are now opening for clinical psychoanalysts with non-quantitative research interests to find a home in the humanities in major research universities, and some analysts might eagerly seek those points of entry, if they are aware of them.

The complex relationship of psychoanalysis and the university has been the subject of important recent inquiry (Camden, 2009; Gilman, 2009; Levy, 2009; Wagner, 2009; Wallerstein, 2009b). These discussions often begin with the recognition that Freud wanted psychoanalysis to be based in the...
university although anti-Semitism in Vienna, and his fear of destruction of his canon by those opposed to his radical theories, led him to warn against enthusiastically integrating private training institutes and existing institutions of higher learning.

In sum, various authors now advocate a full-time, university-based venue for analytic studies; see old university-based prejudices against analysis because it is a profession as no longer insurmountable; extol the advantages of humanities scholarship as a basic part of the education of analysts; and illustrate the advantages of being an humanities scholar when doing clinical analytic work.

I will describe two recent trends in the United States which converge in a way which opens up the possibility that eager clinical analysts will find themselves welcomed as humanities scholars in today’s United States research universities. One of these is not the kind of trend with which analysts frequently concern themselves. It involves the economics and politics of higher education, and the effect that these have had on the place of the humanities in academic institutions (Brown, 2006, 2010a, 2010b; Newfield, 2008; Strong, 2010). I believe it is important for analysts to understand these forces, if they are to eventually reside effectively as members of university communities.

The second trend involves the relationship of different forms of psychoanalytic science as it is practiced by members of the American Psychoanalytic Association (APsaA). The proper conduct of psychoanalytic research and its place in the world of science have been in focus among thoughtful analytic educators, who favor an integration of quantitative, technology-based research with non-quantitative research in the conduct of analytic science (Shapiro, 1989; Wallerstein, 2009a). Yet the ways in which scientific research has been translated into organizational structures within United States psychoanalysis, and the ripple effects those organizational structures have on the work lives of individual analysts, are important sources of motivation for some analysts to seek alliances with university humanities scholars. It is in that regard that I cited Kuhn (1962), who has placed that kind of process in an understandable context.

Because of the trajectory of my career as an analyst, doing a great deal of interdisciplinary work, I am positioned to perceive the trends which I will describe. However, it would be wrong to think of what I will convey in this essay as idiosyncratic and not applicable to many psychoanalysts. Many of us have had formal relationships with humanities scholars, and many of us will be able to take advantage of the opportunities I will describe, when informed of the possibilities.

**What’s happening in the universities?**

The first trend involves the current relationship of science and the humanities in United States universities (Brown, 2006, 2010a, 2010b; Newfield, 2008; Strong, 2010). One unifying characteristic of these scientific disciplines is that they involve technology and quantification. They are funded by large grants which make possible the creation of programs led by highly paid
scientists. Under their leadership elaborate research protocols are developed and new campus laboratories are built.

Every university in the United States has an indirect cost formula which allows it to retain a percentage of every dollar brought in by faculty members in the form of grants. This money is intended to support infrastructure and physical plant. The indirect costs retained by universities when large grants are obtained by science faculty are substantial parts of the working budgets of these institutions.

University budgets in the United States have shrunk in recent years, either in absolute or relative terms. By absolute and relative I mean the available money allocated to the education of each student, as measured absolutely and then filtered through the prism of inflation. Some of the causes of this are familiar: a failing economy and reduced tax revenues, the costs of conducting two wars in the Middle East, and dishonest or irresponsible behavior by money managers, which has reduced endowments. States and cities, as well as the federal government, have less money to spend on higher education. This even affects private universities which also rely on publicly generated funds in their budgets.

An additional complication is a culture war which has divided the citizens of the United States. The focus of this battle in the world of higher education is what is perceived by one side as the elitist thinking which exists within public flagship universities, as well as major private academic institutions. That elitist culture is seen as promoting values which are more liberal than those advocated and embraced by the American mainstream. This trend has many ripples, most notably referenda and public opinion which limit public funding of higher education (Brown, 2006, 2010a, 2010b; Newfield, 2008).

A regular consequence of all this is pressure on university administrators to search for money to balance budgets. Often administrators hope that the search will end when they lean heavily on the indirect costs generated by scientific research grants. A fact that is often forgotten or misunderstood in this process is that seemingly generous grants and indirect cost allocations do not actually cover the costs of university research: the idea that grants and indirect costs create a net financial gain for a university is simply incorrect. The actual result of research heavy budgeting is that deficits within science departments grow, and parent institutions operate increasingly in the red (Brown, 2010a, 2010b; Newfield, 2008).

The result of this situation has been a transfer of funds from departments in the humanities to departments in science and engineering. How does this come about? University budget balancers rely to an ever-increasing degree on the tuition generated by student bodies, and many of these students concentrate in areas outside of the sciences. Of course, it is common sense that costs per student per hour of humanities instruction is much lower than in the sciences: maintaining a lecture hall or seminar room costs much less than equipping a laboratory; supporting graduate students in the humanities teaching undergraduates is much cheaper than in the sciences for the same reason (the science graduate students also require laboratory space and equipment); and the salary scale for senior teachers in science and
engineering is much higher than in the humanities because, in science and engineering, the academy competes for the best practitioners and researchers with private industry. On the other hand, professors of philosophy have few places to go if they leave the academy and wish to practice their discipline. They earn less because they simply lack the salary bargaining power of professors in the sciences.

Administrators know all this but err when they place all tuition revenue in a common pot, and use it to cover the total cost of running a university. They seem unaware that by doing this money is taken from humanities programs, in the form of transfers of tuition generated by humanities students into a university’s general operating budget. They seem unaware that this effectively transfers money from humanities departments to science programs. Most importantly, they seem unaware that standards in the humanities are compromised because these budgetary manipulations result in reductions in student–teacher ratios, increased workloads of instructors and professors, and reduced time each will have to spend with each student. For example, if the number of section instructors in a literature course is decreased, and the number of students per section is increased, there will be less time available for each student to spend rewriting essays with a hovering instructor at her side. These students do not then learn the skills of critical thinking that are imparted by the close working relationship of skilled humanities teachers and eager students (Brown, 2010a, 2010b).

In this zero sum game there is acrimony between the sciences and the humanities within universities, because budgeters have effectively encouraged an unhealthy competition between the scholars in each category. Both groups have felt besieged and circle their wagons. Sciences do so because they are constantly reminded that they work in the red. But it is the humanities which are in greater danger of an erosion of quality within the academy, and the humanities scholars are very aware of this. The circle of their wagons is tighter (Brown, 2006, 2010a, 2010b; Newfield, 2008; Strong, 2010).

An unexpected benefit

An unexpected benefit has emerged from this wagon-circling. Humanities disciplines, while commiserating, have begun to embrace their common ground more than in the past, and practitioners have come to interact more often and more enthusiastically. In addition, for many reasons, but probably in part because of pressure to prove a publicly relevant value, humanities professors have taken it upon themselves to venture forth from their ivory towers, and self-consciously become public educators and public intellectuals. After all, these scholars are no fools and have figured out that they must help the community at large, or perish without the popular support generated by such activities.

A related development is a broadening within the academy of the definition of a humanity. Social scientists who work with a strong humanities orientation are welcomed into this circle. An example would be a political scientist or a psychologist whose research involves reflection on the
human condition, rather than primarily on quantitative analysis. Even a discipline such as social work that was once regarded as professional or service oriented, and was once considered unwelcome in the university by scholars, is seen as within the humanities (Brown, 2010a, 2010b; Strong, 2010).

The traditions of commonality within the humanities which make this consolidation smoother include a common orientation which relies not so much on technology, machines, devices and quantification in the conduct of research, but relatively more on processes of deliberation which occur when scholars observe a problem, read and think about it, define and discuss it, and then write about it. Sometimes, the method of research includes establishing a protocol for exploration and observation (Wallerstein, 2009a).

Also, along the way scholars have learned that new ideas are more likely to be generated when one works on the cusp of a discipline, or the common border of two or more disciplines. This too motivates collaborations.

An economic and political description and explanation alone, then, do not do justice to the traditions of common ground which have led to interdisciplinary humanities efforts. It does help in understanding why contemporary scholars in different areas of the humanities have recently become so much more aware of each other, and have come together at an accelerating pace.

This communion of experts in the humanities has fostered not only interaction, but also the establishment or enhancement of research efforts emerging from the formal establishment of interdisciplinary programs within universities. The rise in the number of humanities institutes and interdisciplinary programs in research universities in the United States in the last 30 years is a by-product of these currents (Strong, 2010). Institutes which foster interdisciplinary conversation and research in the humanities, and are committed to public education, were founded and thrive today at such institutions as Stanford (institute founded in 1980), Yale (institute founded in 1981), UC Berkeley (institute founded in 1987), Northwestern (institute founded in 1992), and the University of Texas at Austin (institute founded in 2001) (Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes, 2010).

**What’s happening in psychoanalysis?**

The second trend, already briefly noted, concerns the way in which psychoanalysis has embraced a new research paradigm (Kuhn, 1962). A part of that paradigm is quantification, often in the form of the randomized controlled trial (RCT), while a second part of the model involves the use of technology. Often both are combined in research efforts.

Because of a focus on economics and the pressure of politics (in this case on the costs of healthcare worldwide, and the intention of governments to control those costs), medicine and related healing disciplines have come to focus on evidence-based practice. For a procedure to be supported by a healing profession and institutional funders of care (direct government funding programs and government regulations which oversee private insurance...
programs), its algorithmic process and measureable outcome are established. Once an algorithm is defined the process can be studied using the RCT research model, and funding decisions can be based on the efficacy of the treatment as determined by the research.

In the area of psychoanalytic research this trend has had a profound effect. RCTs and the use of technology, such as brain scans, exploring the effects of talk therapies on behavior, brain activity, and brain function are exciting forms of clinical research conducted by psychoanalytic investigators.

Of course, analysts dedicated to such forms of research were motivated to work in this way before the current economic and political climate I have described (Engel, 1968; Wallerstein, 2009a). These analytic scientists are drawn to this kind of work because of their visions of a scientifically based psychoanalysis. They know that investigating the efficacy of every form of psychotherapy is necessary if the field is to evolve, as it should, and treatment methods are to be refined and perfected. I could not agree with them more. What is unfortunate is that some of these researchers have long felt marginalized and isolated within organized psychoanalysis in the United States, and for many there are memories of old wounds and insults. In fact, they were marginalized and insulted. This history contributes to the tone these researchers demonstrate when dealing with the broader analytic community. It is a tone which discourages a spirit of partnership and collaboration. It is a tone which reflects an undercurrent of old, unsettled scores. It is divisive, and it marginalizes clinical analysts who are dedicated to non-quantitative research.

I, myself, have heard many discussions confirming the impressions I have summarized, by the group of analysts I have described. I have heard serious quantitatively oriented researcher–analysts complain about the disrespect they still feel from their clinician colleagues. They assert that this is because analysts do not understand research, do not know how to do it because they have never been trained to do it, and do not care to invest the time and effort to learn about it in even an elementary or introductory fashion. These researchers have felt so disempowered that they do not even want to join APsaA, but prefer a membership organization of their own. In fact, they lobbied hard for it, and it has been established, with APsaA’s blessing.

This organization is called the Psychodynamic Psychoanalytic Research Society (PPRS), and it holds its scientific meeting at the same time as APsaA’s January meeting. It competes directly with APsaA for attendees, even as its leaders establish APsaA’s science policy as members of APsaA’s Committee on Scientific Activities. I see the establishment of PPRS as an event which widens the divide between research analysts who do quantitative work, often involving technology, and those who use the old non-quantitative clinical research methods.

Those analysts with a research identity who remain interested in that older form of exploration, who have a serious commitment to that form of research, who consider it a form of scientific psychoanalytic activity, have found themselves relatively less comfortable in the present-day world of psychoanalytic science in the United States. I am referring here to clinical
analysts whose cognate disciplines are in healthcare, and who at the same
time have a serious interest in non-quantitative systematic research. For
these analysts investigating a topic in clinical analysis, or art, or literature
has always been serious business. These colleagues have thought of them-

selves as practitioners of psychoanalytic science and research. Their work
would pass muster if judged by the criteria of serious analytic research
methodologists (Wallerstein, 2009a).

Today, such clinician—scholar—investigators do not find within the
structures of APsaA expert, dedicated colleagues with whom to work in a
congenial, ongoing, and systematic way, with whom to share ideas over
time, with whom to share a process of thinking through a problem of theory
or technique. If they are looking for colleagues who have strong identities as
psychoanalytic scientists, researchers and clinicians, they do not find them
within the world of organized United States psychoanalysis.

To illustrate this point vividly I reviewed the abstracts of the scientific
poster sessions which are a part of every APsaA January national meeting,
as reported in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*,
volumes 56, 57, and 58 (Various Authors, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d,
2010). Those abstracts report on the poster sessions for the years 2007,
2008, 2009, and 2010. I counted 39 published abstracts, and there was only
one which did not rely heavily on quantification, measuring instruments, or
technology. Almost all of the time these 38 abstracts relied on more than
one of those research tools. This, I think, clearly demonstrates the isolation
within APsaA of clinical analysts interested in non-quantitative studies.
They are in search of a place in which they can flourish in their pursuit of
new knowledge through their research efforts.

I do not believe it is a coincidence that at the same time as the PPRS
came into being the American Psychoanalytic Association formed a new
Education Department. The initial motivation for creating the Department
was an awareness on the part of APsaA’s leaders that closer ties among
APsaA analysts, college undergraduates, and university-based scholars who
 taught undergraduates was necessary if these young people were to under-
stand the nature of modern-day psychoanalysis. This awareness was the
result of APsaA’s 10,000 Minds Project. In that spirit the Department
developed a mission statement, and the resulting document focuses on the
establishment of ties between psychoanalysis and every level of the educa-
tion system in the United States (American Psychoanalytic Association
Education Department Mission Statement, 2010).

The Department does provide potential ties to the university system, and
although its exclusive purpose is not to facilitate ties to the humanities for
clinician–researcher analysts, it will, as it matures, clearly provide conduits
for the formation of such relationships. It is striking, then, that within orga-
nized psychoanalysis in the United States, at the same time, two new entities
were formed, one facilitating ties between analysts and university-based
humanities scholars, and one facilitating ties among analysts interested in
quantitative, technology dependent research. Within APsaA a divisive split
has been institutionalized. This, then, summarizes the second trend to which
I referred at the very start of this essay.
The result of the two trends: A fellowship for a clinical analyst at the University of Texas Humanities Institute

It is here that we find the point of convergence of these two trends. This saga of intellectual history includes the opening of a door to the world of humanities researchers within universities in the United States, for a group of newly eager and sometimes marginalized clinical psychoanalyst–scientists. Those analysts, doing non-quantitative, traditional psychoanalytic research have a new place in which they can comfortably settle down.

What I shall offer now is a description of my own experience as a Faculty Fellow during the 2009–10 academic year at the Humanities Institute (HI) of the University of Texas at Austin (UT), and a description of that relationship as it continues now that my tenure as a Faculty Fellow has drawn to a close. I believe that my role as a participant in the HI is a function and reflection of the two trends which I have described. Not surprisingly or inconsistently, being a non-quantitative clinical analytic researcher, I offer this description in the same spirit as I have previously offered single case studies of analysis in my contributions to our literature (Sonnenberg, 1995). I believe its value is that it illustrates what is possible in the relationship between an analyst and a group of academics, in the same way as a case study illustrates what is possible in the relationship between an analyst and an analysand. It is also a description which has similarities to Camden’s (2009) account of how her background in the humanities has relevance to her clinical work in a single case.

I shall now describe certain formal aspects of the HI and how I was appointed. I shall also illustrate with a selection of specific experiences the way my tenure enriched my colleagues at UT, enriched me, and created a lively relationship between psychoanalysis and the fields of study of the other HI Faculty Fellows. I shall describe how I and my colleagues at UT came to better appreciate psychoanalysis as a humanities discipline, in which clinical work is analogous to the way other humanities scholars focus on primary sources in literature, or music, or history. As we worked together we all saw that what I encounter in my consulting room is data which parallels what a musicologist experiences when listening to music, or an expert in cinema and theater experiences when watching a film or a performance. I shall describe ongoing research relationships with colleagues at UT, involving psychoanalysis and their humanities disciplines. These are taking place now that my tenure at the HI has ended, and hold the promise of robust interdisciplinary collaborations in the long term.

The HI at UT was founded in 2001. The description I gave earlier of trends in the humanities applies to the situation at UT. Humanities departments here feel under siege, and the HI was formed in that atmosphere. From the start it embraced a community service mission, and conducts many projects to enrich the lives of Austin residents. One of its most important activities is the sponsorship of one or two Faculty Fellow seminars each academic year, which seek to investigate a subject of importance to the humanities (Strong, 2010).

My appointment as a Faculty Fellow of the HI was a direct result of a relationship I have with a classicist at UT, with whom I have discussed and
studied issues of violence and war. That scholar, who investigates such issues in both the ancient and modern worlds, knew of my interest in war trauma, and several years ago sought me out to begin an academic relationship. Because of that shared interest, in the spring of 2009 he nominated me for an appointment as a Faculty Fellow, though I am not a member of the UT faculty. I was offered the Fellowship after my qualifications were reviewed. This meant that I was invited to many lectures and other activities sponsored by the HI during the entire academic year, and to participate in a semester-long Faculty Fellows seminar. The other seminar Fellows were UT professors who had been selected in a competitive process with other UT faculty applicants.

The group of HI Fellows with whom I studied included junior and senior faculty. They came from a wide range of disciplines. Area studies were represented by three Fellows, one a student of Asia, one of the Middle East, and one of Germany. There were two musicologists, one who studies the music of the Roma population of Turkey, and one who studies hip hop in the United States. There was an expert in international relations who has a particular interest in peace-building initiatives, and my colleague the classicist who I have already noted is interested in violence and war in both the ancient and modern worlds. There was a business school faculty member who studies the ways business models embrace commodification, and in so doing influence society to do the same. A physical anthropologist who studies evolution came with a special interest in the culture war over evolution in the United States. Two members of the School of Social Work faculty participated. One is interested in resiliency theory, and issues of human development, while the other focuses on crisis intervention. The director of the HI participated. She is an anthropologist with an interest in the culture of the United States. Her current focus is on the way youth organizations contribute to the development of racial and gender attitudes, and is interested in particular in the experience of Native Americans. I was the 13th member of the seminar, with interests in violence and war.

The subject we investigated, predetermined by the HI, was ‘Intellectual Life at Moments of Crisis.’ In addition to working with distinguished visitors in two of our weekly, three-hour seminars, our method called for each participant to lead a weekly seminar. That participant was asked to choose a topic which was consistent with the overarching subject of the seminar, and put together a set of readings, which reflected her or his related research interests. The readings might include works by the participant, by others, or both. Readings were usually of published work, or work in press, but more preliminary manuscripts were sometimes included. On a number of occasions films, videos, podcasts, or visual displays were a part of the weekly material we studied, and some of the readings came from public sources such as newspapers, as opposed to academic journals or manuscripts.

The first seminar meeting was led by the HI Director. Her focus was on the nature of public intellectual activity, and was intended to bring into our collective focus the seminar’s central theme: as intellectuals how do we see ourselves and our colleagues as private and public actors in moments of crisis? The readings she offered were from philosophy, education, anthropology, and
environmental studies. The discussion which this material stimulated covered a range of subjects, including the responsibility of scholars to be present in the world outside the university, and when there to define what falls within their specific expertise and what lies outside it, but is informed by their scholarship and their capacities to think creatively and critically. Violence and war were already on the minds of most seminar members, both because of the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, and because the group already knew that week two was to be led by my colleague the classicist, and then week three by me. The group knew that he and I would focus on violence and war, and that we were already collaborating on studies of war and speaking out publicly about it.

What was most impressive to me about this first seminar was how it was an exercise in self-consciousness, which was very much like what I experience with a group of experienced analysts when we discuss clinical material. Introspection was a central characteristic of each participant’s contributions to the group discussion. Consideration of one’s responsibilities as a scholar and a teacher to our students and our society, during a time of crisis in American life, unified the discourse. I left this first meeting feeling very much at home, very much in a familiar place, very much in my element.

The next week the classics professor spoke of his work as a public intellectual, as well as a student of the ancient world. He had become interested in violence and war after teaching classical texts which dealt with such subjects, and studying the history of ancient Greece, where warfare was a part of the way of life. Over many years he had educated himself about the lives of soldiers who fought in America’s wars, and had learned about the way American society deals with veterans of combat, including those with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In his seminar we focused on the life and apparent suicide of Col. TW, a former student of the seminar leader, when TW studied classical Greek in an accelerated summer program at UT. At the time he was successfully pursuing his Ph.D. at another university. Later, W and his Greek teacher became colleagues, while W taught philosophy and English as a full professor at West Point. While there he also maintained his active duty status.

W was a distinguished graduate of West Point, having graduated third in his class, and was on track for a successful career in the Army, teaching there. However, since America was at war, W thought that his intellectual offerings would lack authenticity among the future officers he was teaching, without personal service in combat. He sought an assignment in Iraq, and his wish was granted.

Our seminar leader presented a careful account of W’s psychological deterioration in Iraq, and his eventual suicide while deployed. Central to this process was his well-documented disillusionment with American war fighting policies, including the reliance on contractors whom he saw as profiteers out only for themselves. All this flew in the face of W’s moral and ethical standards as a West Point graduate and an army officer.

In a suicide note found on W’s bed, in the room where he shot himself in the head, he wrote: “I cannot support a msn [mission, sic] that leads to corruption, human rights abuse, + liars. I am sullied no more. I didn’t volunteer to support corrupt, money hungry contractors, nor work for cdrs
[commanders, sic] only interested in themselves. I came to serve honorably + feel dishonored.” He went on to write: “Death before being dishonored any more.” The original suicide note had been scanned into a computer, and this was shown to us in the seminar (Palaima, 2010).

Despite the note, W’s parents and wife were mystified by his suicide, and to understand it, and perhaps discover foul play, they had pushed for a careful investigation of what had occurred. Using the Freedom of Information Act W’s records had been obtained, and these were turned over to the seminar leader, who had studied them in detail. He, in turn, included them in his reading package, and asked us all to study them. I, of course, was struck that once again I was on home turf. As a psychoanalyst co-directing a university-based medical–legal program for Viet Nam veterans decades before, I had conducted many such reviews of historical material documenting the lives of combat survivors with PTSD.

But like the classicist, I was puzzled by what I read and learned. W was a devout Catholic, and a devoted family man. He was within a month of completing his tour in Iraq when he died, and though shortly before his suicide he had emailed his family that: “[I] didn’t think I’d make it last night,” his wife asserted that she had in no way expected him to take his life.

The reactions to my contributions to the discussion we had that week at the HI made clear to me that in the eyes of my seminar colleagues my perspective as a clinician-researcher was highly valued. Each seminar member elaborated on her/his own perspective on the W story, as we tried to understand the mental decline and suicide of this previously successful, well-functioning husband, father, son, professor, soldier. Here, for the first time, as I and the other Fellows shared perspectives on W, I recognized that in their eyes I was a humanities student whose research data was my clinical contact with my analysands. One of my colleagues studied Japanese cinema and depictions of suicide in Japanese movies, and tried to understand W from that vantage point. Another studied themes of cannibalism and bodily destruction in the literature and history of the Middle East, and applied that to his attempt to understand W.

But I was not satisfied with what I was able to contribute in our discussion of W’s death. Upon reflection, I realized that in my more than four decades of clinical practice as an analyst I had not had a single suicidal patient in treatment. I realized that this was partly a reflection of the outpatient setting of my work, but I also realized that within psychoanalysis there was relatively little attention paid to suicide. I went to the PEP-WEB to consider the validity of that conclusion, and searched for articles in the International Journal of Psychoanalysis during the last 10 years, in which the word suicide appeared (Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing, 2010). Only 203 such articles were found, and perusal of these revealed that in only a handful was suicide a major concern. I concluded that my giving relatively little thought to suicide in my clinical work paralleled my encounters with it as a focus of clinical inquiry, when I studied contemporary analytic literature. And my dissatisfaction with my ability to be helpful to my colleagues nagged at me.
The following week I led the seminar, and I titled my topic ‘Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Violence, War, Trauma, and Redemption.’ I had authored, co-authored, or co-prepared everything I assigned. I divided my readings and other offerings into three categories: readings on violence and war; public intellectual contributions regarding violence and war; and as an optional segment two readings and a demonstration of a three-dimensional architectural model for assessing human development, which illustrated the way interdisciplinary or collaborative research enhances analytic theory building and the knowledge base within a second field.

Of the four public intellectual offerings two were statements I had prepared and used as testimony before the US Senate regarding PTSD in Viet Nam veterans, and the need for government support of their treatment (Sonnenberg, 1981, 1988); one was a newspaper opinion piece on the recent Fort Hood shootings which I had written with the classicist (Palaima and Sonnenberg, 2009); and one was a podcast on war done with him, which appeared on the UT website (Palaima and Sonnenberg, 2010).

Our discussion returned to the trauma of war, and again W’s death found its way into our conversation. But because I also introduced the broader subject of the nature and advantages of interdisciplinary collaboration, and much of our time was spent discussing that, the subject of suicide remained on the periphery of our meeting (Sonnenberg, 1993, 2005).

Because my goal in this essay is to illustrate the way I, a clinical psychoanalytic researcher, interacted with my seminar colleagues for our mutual benefit, I will now briefly mention two other experiences in the seminar. In these my unique experience as a humanities scholar, whose research focuses on his patients, was of particular value. Both these experiences involve scholarship which focused on the human body and on ways it was acted upon, and ultimately brought me and particular colleagues back to the study of suicide.

The presentation of the colleague who is a student of the Middle East focused on the way the West has denigrated Arabs, and included ideas about the way Westerners have cannibalized and mutilated Middle Easterners, both literally and metaphorically, now and in the past. Records of the Western practice of cannibalizing Arabs go back to medieval romances about Richard the Lionheart, and his exploits on the Third Crusade. Richard, waging war against Saladin, the brilliant military leader, reputedly boasted of eating Saracen flesh in an effort to frighten his foes.

The seminar leader, in connection with his focus on the mutilation of the body, and the seminar’s focus on violence and war, brought with him a member of the faculty of the UT film department, who showed the group her documentary Tattooed Under Fire (Schiesari, 2008). This vivid account of the tattooing practices of soldiers at Fort Hood spellbound the seminar, and led to a discussion of the ways these young men and women expressed themselves through the pictures they first designed, and then had placed on their bodies. It was clear that these soldiers were thinking about their tattoos, and in designing them attempted to make meaning out of their war experiences, and their lives, as they inscribed what they thought and learned about themselves on their skins.
A discussion about Lacan’s ideas about the mirroring function in development ensued. This discussion focused on tattooing as creating a mirror, a way a soldier could separate her/himself from her/his body and, using that body as a kind of canvas on which to paint a picture, look at and examine her/himself, and deliberate on her/his existence. I made a major contribution toward articulating this idea, while making it clear that I was leaning heavily on my observations of clinical situations, where patients had struggled to look at and understand themselves. Yet despite my reliance on clinical experience, and the appreciative responses of my seminar colleagues, I felt uncertain about this formulation.

I do want to emphasize that I detected no difference in the way my ideas and those of other seminar members were considered. My clinical evidence was treated in exactly the same way as the evidence others offered from their research efforts.

The next example I will offer is the seminar led by the colleague who studies Japanese cinema and culture. She has a particular interest in hara-kiri, or seppuku, the method of suicide practiced by the Samurai, involving disembowelment. She showed a film made by Yukio Mishima (1967), a distinguished Japanese author, who later committed suicide in the same way as the character he himself played in the film. Our seminar leader explained her interest in the relationship of the film and the later act, a relationship she thinks of as scripted suicide.

The film we watched was ghastly, as the depiction of the disembowelment was vivid. The way Mishima the actor used the knife on himself, cutting into himself and repeatedly thrusting and twisting the blade, and the way intestines and blood were shown to pour out of his abdomen, was realistic and revolting.

As I participated in our discussion, I realized that we had been observing variations on a theme. The subjects we studied acted on their own bodies, in one case to create an illusion of what was to be a later reality, in another to add a permanent picture to the cover of the body, in the third to destroy the body. I wondered about the similarities and differences among changing the appearance of one’s body with tattoos, of simulating self-mutilation on film, of cutting oneself open with a knife, and of ending one’s life with a bullet. As I considered all this I experienced a glimmer of hope that by absorbing all this I might begin to better understand what may have been going on in W’s mind when he took his own life.

I have written in the past that when I work outside the confines of my consulting room I often feel a freedom to speculate and imagine that is less restrained than what I feel when I am in a clinical situation, with a live patient. For me that goes hand in hand with collaborating with a scholar from another field. I also experience it as a vital part of the process of non-quantitative clinical research (Sonnenberg, 1993).

Over the next several days, with W, Mishima, and the tattooed soldiers of Fort Hood very much on my mind, I was able to further reflect on the similarities of a person placing a tattoo on her/his body, of thrusting and twisting a knife into his body on film and in reality, or firing a bullet into his head. It made sense to me that in each instance the person creates a split
in her/himself, thinks in a dissociated way about a body which exists as a separate entity, an entity which can be punished, mutilated, destroyed, left behind, or inscribed with a message which can be death defying, celebratory, or commemorative. And I began to wonder about the relationship of a person to her or his hopes, ambitions, ideals, and life purpose, and the consequences when that person feels that she or he has betrayed that purpose, or been betrayed by those who might empower or disempower her or him from achieving that purpose. I wondered how such feelings and experiences might motivate the separation of thought and bodily experience.

As all this was happening suicide reports from the Pentagon became alarming. Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan were killing themselves in alarming numbers. Adding to my very palpable discomfort over not understanding W’s suicide was the knowledge that I was looked to as a psychoanalyst with expertise in PTSD and war trauma. I knew, for example, that I was scheduled to visit an analytic society in the coming months to speak about PTSD, and I knew that I was scheduled to appear at an event celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the IPA, where I planned to speak about the processes through which I have gained insights into the nature of violence and war. So I very much wanted to understand what puzzled me about Mishima, W, and the Fort Hood soldiers.

The next step in this intellectual and clinical journey came when my colleague, the Middle East scholar, invited me to speak to his graduate seminar about Freud’s (1917) *Mourning and melancholia*. He was teaching Arab intellectual history, and was interested in the way obstructions to successful mourning prevented advancement of thinking in the Arab world. An added benefit for me was the participation in the seminar, via Skype, of a distinguished scholar in Qatar.

To prepare for the seminar I reread *Mourning and melancholia* several times. This is a text I had read countless times before. Each time I read it I find news ways of understanding it, and this time, since I was preparing for a seminar focusing on the Middle East, I was struck by a special meaning of a metaphor in the text which I have compared to the most beautiful lines found in poetry. What I am thinking of, to no analyst’s surprise, is Freud’s description of identification: “Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object” (1917, p. 249).

No doubt I was thinking about the experiences I have had in the Middle East, in Petra, in the Jordan Valley, and in the desert. I was thinking of the Bedouin tent communities I have seen in the desert, of the shifting desert sands, of the play of light and shadow as dusk settles over the desert, and over the Jordan Valley. I was thinking of the changing colors of the tombs of Petra as the day draws to a close, and shadows appear. Amidst all this I wondered if that shadow metaphor of Freud’s would have the same meaning to a Middle Eastern Arab reader of the text as to a Central European, or an American.

I went to the seminar prepared to explain the text to the dozen graduate students gathered to discuss it with me. Yet there was a difference, this time, in how I understood the text, for my thoughts about it, so influenced by
my anticipated audience and my recollections of the Middle East, caused me to think that Freud was not writing only about internal object relations. For as I read it this time it occurred to me that for Freud it was the shadow of a living being, recently lost and then imagined, which fell across the actual body of the person who would soon suffer from melancholia. I entered the seminar with an orientation which focused on the existence of real people in the external world, and the presence of powerful memories of them, after their real departures. I thought that the shadow of which Freud wrote was experienced first as a concrete, real world event by the future melancholic. Only then did identification occur, and only then was that shadow caused by an object representation which became a part of the self-representation, within an intrapsychic representational world. I am prepared to demonstrate from the text why I see it that way, but that is beyond the scope of this essay. What is most important here is that this perspective would not have been possible had I reread *Mourning and melancholia* in a different context, without the geography of the Middle East very much in my mind’s eye.

Next, I realized that this newly articulated interpretation of the text was related to what I had been struggling with as I thought about W, Mishima, and the Fort Hood soldiers. For in each case I had been thinking about them in a more embodied way than has been my usual custom. I was not thinking in terms of internal object representations, and of internal self-representations, but rather in terms of the relationship of their thoughts, feelings, and bodily experiences. I wondered what light might be shed on my formulation about them from this view of Freud’s explanation of mourning and melancholia.

I wondered if suicide could involve the relationship of the real body and the mind, a relationship between them as separate entities. My next step was to reexamine the analytic literature, to see whether other analysts had thought about suicide, as I was now, as an effort to separate the body and the mind. I wondered if others had thought of suicide as an effort to kill the body to get relief from emotional agony. It was then that I found what I was looking for. While I had noticed the article before, in my previous searches about suicide on the PEP-WEB, it was now that I brought into focus and read carefully Malsberger’s (2004) essay *The descent into suicide*. I found a description of how suicide could represent a jettisoning of the body. What Malsberger was saying about the relationship of what goes on in the mind, and the way it can be played out using the body as though it were a separate entity, was compatible with what I thought I knew about the tattooing practices of the Fort Hood soldiers, and about Mishima. I now felt I could offer a possible explanation of W’s suicide to my colleague the classics professor. W’s disillusionment might not have seemed a powerful enough force to lead to his ending his life, but because he separated himself from his body he behaved toward it brutally, in an effort to rid himself of it and purify his soul. Of course, the result was his tragic death. Having brought some clarity to the situation of W, I now also felt I could discuss the potential for suicide among our veterans of war, with clinicians treating them. I now had the conviction that I could offer a helpful perspective.
which might be tested over and over again by mental health practitioners responsible for treating veterans with PTSD.

I believe there are parallels in this description of the process of illumination I have experienced, and the insight Camden (2009) described when she leaned back on her knowledge of a poem to understand her patient. Certainly, what I have just described bears witness to the mutually enriching experiences I have shared with my colleagues in the Fellows seminar. Though I have stressed my own experience in this description, the ideas I have expressed reflect a process of mutual encouragement to think creatively, in which all the seminar Fellows shared, to which all of us contributed. Just as depth was added to my thoughts about suicide and the relationship of the mind and the body, the same is true for the ideas about those subjects which emerged in the minds of the other Fellows.

Finally, it is no surprise that I am engaged with the Middle East professor in ongoing examinations of how Freud can be understood in that region, and with the Asian scholar on how together we can further understand scripted suicide.

**Discussion and conclusion**

In this essay I have discussed the relationship of science and the humanities in contemporary universities in the United States, and the relationship of what I will now call contemporary science and traditional science within psychoanalysis in the United States. In the case of psychoanalytic science these are terms I am using to designate two models of inquiry, and I offer them without value judgment. By contemporary science I am referring to quantitative studies, often of treatment efficacy, often employing the methodology of randomized controlled trials, and other, often related research efforts employing technology. By traditional science I am referring to non-quantitative explorations which often begin with clinical observations. These traditional efforts may also start with phenomenological observations made outside the consulting room. However, in all cases of traditional research scientific rigor is employed, as prescribed by certain experts in psychoanalytic science (Wallerstein, 2009a). The changing relationship between traditional and contemporary psychoanalytic science reflects a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962). Because I myself have been a participant in that shift I have written of specific tensions within organized psychoanalysis, which I have observed directly. These tensions are normal when fields of study change over time, and my description of them is not a condemnation of anyone. Everyone involved is simply human.

There have been numerous calls for a closer relationship between psychoanalysis and the university, by important analytic educators (Camden, 2009; Levy, 2009; Wallerstein, 2009b). Among these educators there are also those who appeal for a blending of quantitative and non-quantitative research within psychoanalysis (Shapiro, 1989; Wallerstein, 2009a). While the calls for transforming psychoanalytic training into a full-time university-based enterprise are considered utopian, what I have suggested here, that individual psychoanalysts can find comfortable homes as humanities scholars in
United States research universities, is not at all a pipe-dream. Such a presence may clear a path for more elaborate university-based collaborative activities in the future.

It is imperative for psychoanalysts to be aware of the status of psychoanalysis in the culture of the university in the United States. Based on everything I experienced at the University of Texas and described in this essay, psychoanalysis is seen in the university as an important branch of the humanities. It is seen as a valuable intellectual tool, a valuable body of ideas, a valuable prism through which to view the human condition, a valuable non-quantitative research method. This view has previously been embraced emphatically in essays by university-based scholars (Homans and Jonte-Pace, 2005).

What I can add to that well-accepted perspective is that psychoanalysis as a clinical research discipline is valued by university-based humanities scholars. These scholars believe that the work of the clinical analyst parallels what they do when they study their primary subjects, such as music, literature, culture, or international relations. They are hungry for insights developed in the analyst’s consulting room, especially when these insights reflect non-quantitative scientific rigor.

Humanities scholars have assumed a public mission. They are committed to working for the public good, and for becoming public intellectuals. They believe that speaking out is part of their mission (Strong, 2010). They see psychoanalysts as partners in making such commitments, and they want our participation. I believe we analysts actually have something to add to this process, because we are trained as healers committed to helping others, and in that sense have a public commitment imbedded in our identities as psychoanalysts. We also have something to add because, as part of our training, many of us have studied the ways the public can be approached, talked to, influenced, encouraged to think.

In previous essays (Sonnenberg, 1993, 2005) I have discussed the freedom to think outside the box, and the clinical insights I have experienced, when I work on the cusp of psychoanalysis and other fields. I have also written (Sonnenberg, 1993) of how, with the exception of some true geniuses, most of us simply cannot master two fields with equal expertise. In that regard I have emphasized the advantage to both when a psychoanalyst and a scholar from another field collaborate. New knowledge and ongoing interdisciplinary research are the gifts to both disciplines. My UT experience is consistent with these assertions.

If I am correct, too, that traditional psychoanalytic research benefits from contact with serious humanities scholars, then it certainly follows that research analysts who have been enriched by those contacts can play an important role in the blending of quantitative and non-quantitative psychoanalytic scientific inquiry. I believe what I have described is an example of that enriching experience, and this has the potential to produce benefits for our field as I and others like me interact with quantitative researchers in creating the psychoanalytic science of the future. It goes without saying that it is imperative that non-quantitative and quantitative psychoanalytic researchers bridge the divide which has existed between them for so long. I believe, unfortunately, that divide has recently been widened.
I have tried to show that the trends I described have contributed to an eagerness among some psychoanalysts to enter the world of university-based humanities scholarship, and to an eagerness on the part of those university-based scholars to welcome us into their midst. I have described my own experience at the Humanities Institute at the University of Texas to illustrate what is possible. Exactly how many university-based humanities institutes there are currently in the United States is not known, but a conservative estimate puts the number at over 100 (Strong, 2010). That constitutes an opportunity for psychoanalysis. While I have restricted my observations concerning research universities to the United States, and I know nothing about what is happening in this regard in Latin America or Canada, I am told by knowledgeable colleagues that in Europe the situation is very much the same as it is here. Whether analysts there are motivated to take advantage of that situation I cannot say, but it may well be there for the taking. It clearly is in the United States, and I believe that, when informed of the possibilities, there will be takers.

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