

Isn't psychoanalysis an exact science?

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In our cartel whose title is “How to write a psychoanalytic case”, we have read the text “The Case, from Unease to the Lie” by Eric Laurent¹. In it, there is the sentence “psychoanalysis is not an exact science.” This sentence rubbed me the wrong way, it itched me.

Firstly, I asked myself the question, whether psychoanalysis is science, because science as I was taught at university has to meet certain criteria: objectivity, validity, reliability. It is completely clear that a psychoanalytic case does not fulfill these criteria. But is psychoanalysis therefore not a science?

It took the work in the cartel for me to realize – somewhat ashamed – that there are of course different kinds of science, like for example philosophy or political sciences. A colleague helped me in a decisive way to understand this when she told me about the example one of her professors gave during her studies at university: you can compare books in a bookshelf concerning for example their covers, blurbs, their size, genres, etc. and this would yield a certain kind of information that will seem somewhat superficial. If you however read the books one by one, you will of course gain impressions of a quite different kind of quality. You will experience its uniqueness, for example in the style in which it is written, the words used, which story is told and how. In other words, when my colleague was a student about 30 years ago, what was understood by the term science was different than it is today and it made me realize that there can be different kinds of science, not just the empirical one that is so prevalent today.

After it became clear to me, however, that psychoanalysis indeed is a science, I wondered what it means that psychoanalysis is not an *exact* science. I've always had the impression that psychoanalysis is very exact in working out in detail what is singular, contingent, unique about each case. Categories only serve as a frame of reference in the sense of a working hypothesis. How can E. Laurent call something inexact that is so highly oriented towards the singular? Surely, only in terms of the current dominant scientific discourse that calls for an exactness in the form of measuring, calculating and predicting, which is not how psychoanalysis operates.

Maybe this also has to do with my question that I formulated at the beginning of the work in the cartel – how to write a case without the idea that there is a right and wrong way to do it?

Often the following comparison was made in the cartel: If a patient hypothetically were to go to two different analysts, the case presentations of both analysts would most likely differ greatly from one another. This comparison has helped me in understanding that what is created in an analysis, session by session, is unique and can never be reproduced again, not even by the same two people. The analyst, in the course of the analysis, becomes

1. E. Laurent : “The Case, from Unease to the Lie”.
< <http://www.amp-nls.org/nlsmessage/2010/017.html> >



part of the symptom. This happens in an absolutely unique and unpredictable way. It is a process of construction on the side of the analysand, as E. Laurent writes in “The Case, from Unease to the Lie”. Therefore, every case description is an original one. It is something new that perforates the prior knowledge. There is no big Other that guarantees a certain outcome. Strictly speaking, it is impossible to reproduce the same result. In the practice of empirical sciences, what might lead to different outcomes is simply omitted – the singular, the unique. Lacan’s objection to science is exactly this: by means of objectivity, the truth of the subject is covered. However, it is not reducible to the objective. Even though it is clear that no science can cover everything: psychoanalysis, to me, is highly exact.