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Relationality as institutional ethic: bridging psychoanalysis, group psychotherapy, therapeutic communities, and complexity theory through the group turn

A relacionalidad como ética institucional: un puente entre el psicoanálisis, la psicoterapia de grupo, las comunidades terapéuticas y la teoría de la complejidad a través del giro grupa

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that relational psychoanalysis must be understood not only as a clinical orientation but also as an institutional ethic. Its central claim is that psychoanalytic institutes often teach relationality in the consulting room while reproducing hierarchy, institutional deafness, and resistance to critique in their own structures. Against this contradiction, the paper proposes institutional literacy as the capacity of organizations to recognize unconscious dynamics, contain conflict symbolically, and transform dissent into creativity rather than expelling it. Drawing on psychoanalysis, group analysis, therapeutic communities, and complexity theory, the article frames institutions as living matrices shaped by social unconscious processes, transference, rivalry, authority, and collective anxiety. Myths such as Cassandra, Laocoön, and Theseus are used as allegories for institutional failure and institutional renewal. Cassandra and Laocoön represent the silencing of critical voices, while Theseus's synoikismos symbolizes the creation of civic forms capable of holding difference. The article examines historical and contemporary examples, including the British Psychoanalytical Society's Controversial Discussions, Group Analytic Society International, Eastern Group Psychotherapy Society, International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy, and the Athens Institute for Relational and Group Psychotherapy. It argues that large groups, rotating supervision, pluralist leadership, collaborative authorship, and shared institutional rituals can function as symbolic containers for unconscious institutional conflict. The Athens Institute is presented as a working paradigm of the "group turn" in relational psychoanalysis, in which critique is treated as fidelity rather than betrayal. Ultimately, the paper calls for psychoanalytic institutions that can metabolize disagreement, sustain plurality, and embody the relational principles they clinically advocate.

Keywords: relational psychoanalysis; institutional literacy; group turn; social unconscious; psychoanalytic training.

RESUMEN

Este artículo sostiene que el psicoanálisis relacional debe entenderse no solo como una orientación clínica, sino también como uma ética institucional. Su argumento central es que los institutos psicoanalíticos a menudo enseñan la relacionalidad en la consulta, al tiempo que reproducen la jerarquía, la sordera institucional y la resistencia a la crítica en sus propias estructuras. Frente a esta contradicción,el artículo propone la alfabetización institucional como la capacidad de las organizaciones para reconocer las dinámicas inconscientes, contener el conflito simbólicamente y transformar la disidencia en creatividad en lugar de expulsarla. A partir del psicoanálisis, el análisis de grupo, las comunidades terapéuticas y la teoría de la complejidad, el artículo concibe las instituciones como matrices vivas moldeadas por procesos Sociales inconscientes, la transferencia, la rivalidad, la autoridad y la ansiedad colectiva. Mitos como Casandra, Laocoonte y Teseo se utilizan como alegorías del fracaso y la renovación institucional. Casandra y Laocoonte representan el silenciamiento de las voces críticas, mientras que el sinoikismos de Teseo simboliza la creación de formas cívicas capaces de acoger la diferencia. El artículo examina ejemplos históricos y contemporáneos, incluyendo las Debates Polémicos de la Sociedad Psicoanalítica Británica, la Sociedad Internacional de Análisis Grupal, la Sociedad Oriental de Psicoterapia Grupal, la Asociación Internacional de Psicoanálisis y Psicoterapia Relacional, y el Instituto de Atenas para la Psicoterapia Relacional y Grupal. Argumenta que los grupos grandes, la supervisión rotativa, el liderazgo pluralista, la autoría colaborativa y los rituales institucionales compartidos

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pueden funcionar como contenedores simbólicos para el conflicto institucional inconsciente. El Instituto de Atenas se presenta como un paradigma de trabajo del «giro grupal» en el psicoanálisis relacional, donde la crítica se considera fidelidad en lugar de traición. En definitiva, el artículo aboga por instituciones psicoanalíticas capaces de procesar el desacuerdo, fomentar la pluralidad y encarnar los principios relacionales que defienden clínicamente.

Palabras clave: psicoanálisis relacional; alfabetización institucional; giro grupal; inconsciente social; formación psicoanalítica.

In a time when psychoanalytic institutions confront both crises of identity and global interdependence, the call for a *relational institutional* ethic is urgent. Relationality, once confined to clinical technique, must be reimagined as an epistemological and organizational imperative. When integrated with group dynamics, therapeutic communities, and complexity theory, relational thinking can reshape not only psychoanalytic practice but also how we train, supervise, and govern ourselves. Yet, many institutes that embrace relational principles in the consulting room remain hierarchical and resistant to self-examination. As Kernberg (1986 *apud* Reghintovschi, 2021) noted, the "radioactive atmosphere" of institutes fosters diminished creativity and amplifies unresolved conflicts within their structures. Similarly, psychoanalytic institutions often breed mistrust rather than confidence, weakening social bonds and silencing dialogue (Jaques, 1976 *apud* Reghintovschi, 2021).

Against this background, *institutional literacy* becomes crucial: the capacity to think reflexively, to recognize blind spots, and to work with the unconscious life of institutions rather than deny it. It requires cultivating openness to critique and symbolic containers, such as large groups or rotating leadership, in which unconscious forces can be thought about. In this way, literacy transforms destructive repetition into a resource for creativity, resilience, and pluralism.

A Greek myth that vividly illustrates the notion of institutional illiteracy, beyond the well-known story of Cassandra, is the myth of Laocoön. Laocoön, a Trojan priest, warned his people not to accept the Trojan Horse, uttering the famous phrase: "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts." Despite his urgent warning, the institutional collective—the leaders and citizens of Troy—failed to hear and metabolize his insight. The Trojans, already consumed by hubris, exhaustion after years of war, and a desperate yearning for closure, chose instead to embrace the illusion of peace. Laocoön's voice was not only dismissed but violently punished: he and his sons were struck down by sea serpents sent by the gods. This suppression became a powerful symbol of how institutions silence or annihilate critical voices when consensus is threatened. The myth of Laocoön has often been represented visually as the violent punishment of a prophetic voice that could not be heard (Fig. 1).



Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain.
Figure 1. Laocoön and his sons being attacked by serpents.

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By contrast, the myth of Theseus and the foundation of Athens offer an allegory of institutional literacy. After unifying Attica, Theseus established the *synoikismos*, bringing scattered villages into a single polis. Crucially, he created structures—most notably the assembly—where every citizen had a voice. As I have noted (Charalambides, 2024), large group processes allow institutes to recognize unconscious dynamics, counter idealization, and tolerate disagreement as part of growth. Similarly, Stamenova and Hinshelwood (2018) emphasize that unconscious institutional forces, if symbolically contained, can become a resource for renewal rather than repetition. Theseus's act of transforming fragmentation into cohesion thus prefigures institutional literacy: the ability to integrate dissent and difference into an ongoing communal life.

Viewed through this lens, the British Psychoanalytical Society's post-war resolution of the Anna Freud–Klein controversy, particularly the formation of the Middle Group and the presidency of John Rickman, can be seen as an early form of institutional literacy. Though born from crisis, this gesture created bridges between warring factions, offering not just administrative compromise but a symbolic space for multiplicity and mutual recognition. The society did not dissolve its differences, but it found a way to contain them—a primitive but significant act of institutional self-reflection that allowed psychoanalysis to survive and evolve into a more pluralistic and relationally attuned field. The Melanie Klein Trust presents the photograph as showing Melanie Klein, Anna Freud, and Ernest Jones with a kitten in 1949 (Fig. 2).



Source: The Melanie Klein Trust.
Figure 2. Melanie Klein, Anna Freud and Ernest Jones with a kitten, 1949.

On September 27th, 2025, at the annual conference of the Hellenic Society for Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy, founding member and training analyst Epameinondas Aslanidis delivered a fiery speech that left a deep impression. He recalled an incident at the society's previous conference, when the then-president demonstratively walked out as he was elaborating on institutional transference. Publicly denouncing this gesture, he asked with irony, "I wonder where that former president is today, to hear the continuation of my thinking."

Walking out was not only an interpersonal affront but an enactment of institutional deafness: a refusal to hear what was unbearable. As Kerr (2004) shows, unresolved issues of authority and power have haunted psychoanalysis since its founding, and these patterns continue to "lurk while informing contemporary malaise." Wallerstein (1988) similarly warns that training institutions often reproduce rigid structures that silence innovation, even though they must "confront the paradox of preserving analytic identity while adapting to changing demands." These dynamics echo Cassandra's curse: truths are spoken, yet leadership refuses to hear. And yet, paradoxically, the very act of giving Aslanidis the platform in 2025 marked a tentative crack in that curse, a gesture of institutional literacy. As Wallerstein (1988) concludes, psychoanalysis can only survive if it creates symbolic spaces in which critique and plurality can be contained rather than expelled.

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During the 19th Congress of the International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Group Psychotherapy, held in Athens, Greece, this past June, I co-chaired the symposium with the colleagues Alkinoi Lala and Fotini Doumoura. A critical institutional moment occurred during the membership meeting, intended for open dialogue among members. At the scheduled start, only three of 18 Executive Committee members were present. Exercising my authority as acting co-chair, I began without them, a small but symbolic act of institutional literacy, resisting the paralysis of waiting for absent authority. The later arrival of leadership and their defensive rationalization echoed what Desmond (2004) calls the "hidden power dynamics" of training analysis, in which authority structures mask anxiety while undermining genuine dialogue. Similarly, Eisold (2004) argues that the faculty system operates less as a student-centered model and more as a "collectively elaborated social defense," designed to preserve faculty security rather than cultivate pluralism. This defensive rigidity was visible when leadership dismissed a candidate's critique as "freedom of participation," enacting what group analysts in the room recognized as a repudiation of the group turn. Beneath this dynamic lay the generational struggle Desmond (2004) describes: a clash between entrenched authority and younger analysts pressing for a more relational, accountable ethic. Thus, what unfolded in Athens was Cassandra's curse replayed: truths spoken but not heard. Yet, the act of starting without absent authority signaled a crack in the curse, a moment of institutional literacy that insists critique is fidelity, not betrayal.

As many of you know, Group Analytic Society International (GASi) now stands at a critical turning point in its history, in which the issue is not dissent itself but the institution's inability to metabolize it. The example of the British Psychoanalytical Society's "Controversial Discussions" is instructive: the Middle Group served as a symbolic container, holding irreconcilable differences without dissolution. The urgent question is whether GASi can foster a similar creative solution, a genuine institutional form that safeguards unity while cultivating plurality, dialogue, and relational thinking. Bornstein (2002) reminds us that psychoanalytic organizations have long been shaped by "secrecy, insularity, control of power, and intolerance of diverse opinions," patterns that fuel institutional deafness when critique arises. Skolnikoff (2002) similarly highlights that entrenched groups often maintain their authority by clinging to "pure psychoanalysis," resisting pluralism and treating new theories as threats rather than opportunities for renewal. Hopper (1996) deepens this view by showing how the "social unconscious" manifests through unacknowledged cultural and political forces, ensuring that institutions unconsciously repeat unresolved traumas until they are symbolically contained. The emergence of the Concerned Members—a self-organized group of GASi members who have raised formal concerns about institutional governance, relational accountability, and the organization's capacity to metabolize internal dissent—should therefore be read not as destruction but as a necessary institutional process. To break Cassandra's curse, GASi must create symbolic spaces in which critique is recognized as fidelity to the institution, dissent is embraced as vitality, and plurality becomes a resource rather than a threat.

The crisis within Eastern Group Psychotherapy Society (EGPS) reflects not only administrative missteps but a deeper failure of institutional literacy. The decision to abolish the Large Group from the 2025 annual conference—framed as an act of safety—signals, as the Open Letter to the Board argued, a profound misreading of psychoanalytic function. The Large Group is not a forum to be feared; it is a vital container of the institutional unconscious, in which issues of race, gender, power, and belonging emerge as lived dynamics. To silence this space is to enact Cassandra's curse: truths are spoken, but leadership refuses to hear. Hopper (2020) emphasizes that scapegoating is the "main pillar of massification," showing how groups defensively expel difference when they cannot metabolize anxiety. Reed and Levine (2003) trace this impulse back to psychoanalysis itself, noting how dissent and innovation were historically met with exclusion, a legacy that institutionalizes rigidity and deafness to critique. Kernberg (2018) adds that hierarchical training cultures, centered on the figure of the training analyst, reproduce contradictions that stifle creativity and undermine the very reflexivity institutes claim to cultivate. The economic fragility of EGPS thus mirrors its psychic fragility: financial collapse as an enactment of unprocessed guilt, envy, and abandonment. Replacing the Large Group with performative alternatives illustrates the slide from analytic containment to spectacle, privileging comfort over truth. To break Cassandra's curse, EGPS must reclaim the analytic ethic of symbolization and containment, creating spaces in which discomfort becomes dialogue and fragmentation transforms into renewed belonging.

The institutional changes introduced at the Institute for Relational and Group Psychotherapy in Athens represent a decisive shift toward embedding the relational ethos in the very structure of psychoanalytic training. In contrast to the traditional Eitingon model, which privileges hierarchy and vertical authority between analyst, supervisor, and candidate, the Athens Institute has sought to cultivate horizontal structures that acknowledge the inevitability of group dynamics and the social unconscious in analytic life. Unlike the Eitingon system—which Eisold (2004) criticized for reinforcing the "faculty system" and perpetuating vertical authority—, the Athens experiment deliberately decentralizes supervision and distributes symbolic power across faculty and candidates. This redistribution models the principle that relationality is not confined to the consulting room but extends into how a psychoanalytic community organizes itself.

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From the first year of training, candidates participate in small, medium, and large groups, ensuring that sibling transference, rivalry, and intergenerational tensions are not left latent but are actively worked through within the institutional fabric. Such practices echo my argument that psychoanalytic institutes must integrate group theory into training if they are to prepare analysts for the relational field (Charalambides, 2017). They also resonate with Tubert-Oklander's (2006) broader thesis that the individual, group, and society form one indivisible matrix, making institutional life itself analyzable. By embedding these processes structurally, the Athens Institute foregrounds institutional transference and countertransference as inevitable forces shaping the analytic field.

Large groups, facilitated by a triadic leadership team, serve as mirrors in which unconscious anxieties, resistances, and conflicts can be thought about rather than defensively split off. Hopper (2007) describes such spaces as vital for metabolizing the "social unconscious," allowing institutions to face collective anxieties of exclusion, power, and belonging without disintegration. In this setting, dissent is legitimized and autonomy fostered, echoing Ashuach's (2019) emphasis on the centrality of sibling dynamics and peer relations in psychoanalytic formation. Candidates report that disagreements with senior members are not punished but explored, transforming conflict into an analytic object rather than an institutional fracture.

Supervision, rather than being tied to a single training analyst, is rotated across faculty, exposing trainees to multiple technical perspectives and encouraging the development of independent judgment. This practice resists the authoritarian tendencies that Auchincloss and Michels (2003) identify as endemic to psychoanalytic education, in which the patriarchal inheritance often centralizes authority in ways that undermine creativity. By diversifying leadership across gender and generation, the Athens Institute does not only symbolize inclusion but enacts it structurally. Involvement of candidates in authorship, editorial projects, and decision-making about institutional rituals further redistributes symbolic authority, embedding responsibility across the community.

In this sense, the Athens Institute embodies what I have described as the "group turn" in relational psychoanalysis: an institutional literacy that transforms rivalry into creativity and critique into fidelity (Charalambides, 2024). Cassandra's curse becomes an allegory for this ethic. In myth, Cassandra saw the truth of impending catastrophe but was condemned never to be believed. Similarly, in psychoanalytic societies, those who name institutional blind spots or unconscious conflicts are often dismissed as disloyal or disruptive. This silencing is itself an attack on institutional literacy, for it excludes the very voices that could help metabolize conflict. The Athens Institute counters this dynamic by treating critique not as betrayal but as fidelity to the analytic project.

This approach also situates Athens in dialogue with broader psychoanalytic societies, GASi, International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy (IARPP), American Group Psychotherapy Association (AGPA), whose own struggles with authority, inclusion, and group process mirror its internal dynamics. By innovating internally while remaining engaged internationally, the institute demonstrates how relational psychoanalysis can reimagine not just clinical technique but the very institutions that sustain it. In this way, Athens is aligned with the legacy of the British Psychoanalytical Society's "Controversial Discussions," in which the creation of the Middle Group offered a container for irreconcilable difference without collapse. Contemporary institutions face similar challenges: to create forms that bear diversity without fragmentation.

The Athens experiment shows how this is possible. Large groups, rotating supervision, pluralist leadership, and collaborative authorship are not simply organizational reforms; they are symbolic containers that allow difference to be held without schism. Relational psychoanalysis, informed by group theory, thus emerges not only as a clinical orientation but also as a vision of institutional life itself, one that situates psychoanalysis in community, dialogue, and complexity.

At its heart, the Athens Institute models a culture of reflexivity. Candidates are not isolated learners, but subjects formed within the symbolic and emotional matrix of their community. Winnicott's maxim, "there is no baby without a mother," can be extended to say: there is no candidate without an institution, and no institution without dialogue with other institutions. Just as the infant exists within a matrix of relationships, so too does psychoanalytic training unfold within an inter-institutional field in which survival depends on exchange, recognition, and mutual transformation.

By embedding group processes into its structure, the institute demonstrates that psychoanalysis survives not by repressing conflict but by metabolizing it symbolically. To honor Cassandra's curse is to cultivate institutions that hear critique, welcome plurality, and transform dissent into vitality. In this sense, Athens provides a working paradigm for the future: a relational, literate institution in which dialogue replaces orthodoxy and psychoanalysis survives as a living, plural, and ethically grounded practice.

Marina Mojović—psychiatrist, group analyst, and founder of the Reflective Citizens movement—, whose concept of *koinonia* and the conference's effort bring diverse entities into dialogue, exemplify institutional literacy: the capacity to build symbolic spaces in which difference can be contained, voiced, and transformed (Mojović, 2022). Rather than silencing or fragmenting plurality, this approach protects it, allowing dialogue itself to become a vehicle of cohesion and renewal.

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Conflicts of interest

Nothing to declare.

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Stavros Charalambides is a writer, theatrical producer and playwright, a supervising and training relational psychoanalyst and group psychotherapist. He is an associate editor for The New International Library of Group Analysis, Routledge. He has been an elected Board Member of the IARPP since 2018, and since February 2024, also serves as an elected Board Member of the American Group Psychotherapy Association (AGPA). Together with Gila Ofer, he co-chairs the IARPP Special Interest Group on Couples, Families, and Groups. He is the founder and director of the Greek Institute for Relational and Group Psychotherapy (established in 2016), where he has also developed and currently oversees four specialized training programs in relational psychoanalysis and group psychotherapy. Charalambides works extensively with individuals, couples, siblings, small and large groups, and institutional systems. His main clinical and theoretical interests focus on sibling dynamics, envy, mourning and hatred in the transference and countertransference across different analytic and group settings — from the dyad to the multicultural social field. His first individual book, The Envy Executioner, was published in Greek in 2022 (Disigma Publications). His second book, The Enraged Slaves, came out in March 2025, also by Disigma Publications. He is the editor of the first, second, and third collective Greek volumes on relational psychoanalysis and group dynamics, published in July 2023 and September 2024, respectively. He is currently editing the fourth collective volume, and his third book.