

## Research as a challenge for the psychoanalyst

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Noting the difficulties in the scientific dialogue between different psychoanalytic currents, even within Italy, the Italian Psychoanalytic Society created a National Research Committee as long ago as 2002 to reflect on these phenomena. The members of this Commission then published a monograph for the *Rivista di Psicoanalisi* entitled «The scientific dialogue about psychoanalytic observation and experience» (Vergine *et al.*, 2006) which brings together some significant chapters on the subject. A growing number of books and articles were then published in Italy, and the IPA recently made the third edition of *An Open Door Review of Outcome and Process Studies in Psychoanalysis* (ODR-III) (Leuzinger-Bohleber M., Kächele H., 2015) available in the Research section of its own website. In this third edition there are thousands of research projects approved or funded by the IPA Research Committee, but very few of them feature Italians.

Much has changed since 2002, especially on the international scale. Work in this field has expanded greatly and specified its objectives and its methods. Nowadays, interest in research certainly constitutes a differentiating element between many psychoanalytic schools of thought, between those psychoanalysts who see our discipline as being solely in dialogue with philosophy or the literary arts, and those who instead believe that its engagement with psychiatry and the neurosciences is indispensable, with the obvious consequences deriving from these positions.

A problem which is always with us is that of the epistemological status of psychoanalysis: whether it can be considered a science – as Freud did, after all – albeit different from the hard sciences – a science with a special status, according to the definition given to us by Bolognini, among others; or alternatively, whether it would be better returning to the field of the humanities like literature or philosophy, keeping its hermeneutic dimension in view but perhaps calling into question its aspiration to be a cure, a therapy for mental suffering.

Such radicalised positions take no account of changes in the way science itself is conceived, including the fact that the distinction between hard and soft sciences – with no pejorative connotation to the latter term – is widely criticized today.

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## THE CHALLENGE OF COMPLEXITY

As Bocchi and Ceruti (2007) claim in their book *The Challenge of Complexity*, the past twenty years have been characterized by the transformation of ideas and world views which has occurred hand in hand with the development of modern science. For example, the traditional hierarchical order, which saw the physical or chemical sciences as fundamental methodological norms, has been called into question. Conversely, an interdisciplinarity has arisen in the exchange of theories and concepts, and a network created for unifying particular perspectives into a general view: hence, it is now being observed that even in the animal world there is a learning that is not only individual but collective, «a sort of diffused intelligence».

In an interview with *Interazioni*<sup>2</sup>, Edgar Morin criticized the stances of the scientific world, empiricist on the one hand and rationalist on the other, saying that, «While a solely empiricist view of science may result in a blind pragmatism, a solely rationalist outlook could entail a rationalisation of the real which expels as insignificant anything that eludes its systemization» (Morin, 1997, 16). It seems to me that we run similar risks in our world, where dogmatic and authoritarian positions often expel whatever feels threatening or incomprehensible or out of tune with pre-established theoretical bases while, on the other hand, many analysts marginalise themselves in a clinical practice without self-reflection. And yet one of the accusations made against us is the absence of empirical research to substantiate our work, the price of which is our steady disappearance from universities and healthcare institutions.

Following Edgar Morin's line of thought, the fact is that we cannot confine the indispensable imaginative component of psychoanalysis, or of science, within the empirical domain. As Freud, Milner, Winnicott have taught us, we psychoanalysts are not afraid of the imagination. Einstein spoke of it too, saying it is more important than knowledge. Of course, this looks like a catchphrase, but in fact Morin, Edelman, Prigogine, Maturana, Varela, Von Foester, and many others accept the challenge of complexity, inviting us to rediscover the path of multidimensional thinking and dialogue which allows two natures, two principles, two logics to be connected without duality dissolving into unity.

According to these scholars, and not only for them, all this results in a principle of uncertainty and incompleteness, an assertion rather like Freud's when he warned us that

psycho-analysis is not, like philosophies, a system starting out from a few sharply defined basic concepts, seeking to grasp the whole universe with the help of these and, once it is completed, having no room for fresh discoveries or better understanding. On the contrary, it keeps close to the facts in its field of study, seeks to solve the immediate

<sup>2</sup> With which the Editorial Board of the journal and I as Editor in chief had decided to begin the second issue of 1997.

problems of observation, gropes its way forward by the help of experience, is always incomplete and always ready to correct or modify its theories. There is no incongruity (any more than in the case of physics or chemistry) if its most general concepts lack clarity and if its postulates are provisional; it leaves their more precise definition to the results of future work» (Freud, 1922, 253-4).

Allow me to emphasize some of these claims: Freud reiterates that it is not a philosophical system, as it has nevertheless been called by some historians of philosophy, but instead reclaims an empirical basis for psychoanalysis and urges it to give immediate answers, however temporary, while inevitably accepting that, in the end, its premisses are provisional and far from clear. Freud is thus describing a continual basic process which calls his theories into question and also a method for the functioning of the analyst's mind. Besides, the unity of science and the scientific method is itself a myth which infringes the reality of subjectivity and relativity, leaving us with the question, «What kind of research for psychoanalysis?»

## **DISTINCTION IN THE FIELD OF RESEARCH**

As is well known, many writers have pointed out that there are several distinct types of research, however much they may influence each other. We owe to Daniel Widlöcher an interesting distinction between research *in* psychoanalysis and research *on* psychoanalysis. He calls the former «any work that aims to know better what happens during the treatment – that is, to understand better the analytic process itself», as Roger Perron (2003) comments in the same volume.

By contrast, research *on* psychoanalysis is work which approaches psychoanalysis from outside or from adjoining territory. Hence, this includes critical analyses of our concepts, our hypotheses, the hermeneutics of Freud's writings, and studies about the history of psychoanalysis.

Then there is the apposite distinction to be made between clinical, empirical, and conceptual research. Taking up a position and embarking on one or other of these often expresses a specific orientation in how one thinks about psychoanalysis itself and one's position in the worlds of culture and of social institutions. I regard all three milieus as valuable.

We have a great need to clarify concepts and the different use that is made of them by the various psychoanalytic schools of thought. Indeed, «conceptual research is concerned with the systematic investigation of the meanings and uses of psychoanalytic concepts, including their changes» (Dreher, 2003) and certainly requires careful historical work and a clarification and comparison of the babel of the schools.

It also presupposes the study of the changes which a concept has undergone over time. However, there are those for whom conceptual research risks becoming sterile

(Kernberg, 2016) or an end in itself, if it fails to engage with clinical research. The two also use opposite methods: conceptual research is based on a deductive method since it always refers to an already established body of theory, while the starting point for clinical research is the basis provided by experience, by the «clinical facts», in order to hypothesise new theories or to correct current ones. Precise distinctions like these are obviously artificial, given that both these models use the other in a virtuous, self-correcting circle.

But it is definitely not conceptual research which poses problems for psychoanalytic institutions. Much more debate seems to be stirred up by empirical and clinical research.

For many practitioners, though it would immediately open the doors of the healthcare institutions and universities, empirical research has little connection with the complexities of the field we should be examining, with the infinite multitude of conscious and unconscious data present in the analytic object, and it does not seem capable of attuning itself to the depth of the level of mental functioning which we have under examination.

Comforted by the Freudian legacy, which emphasizes the *Junktim*, «the inseparable bond between cure and research» (Freud, 1926, 256), the most important field for us is represented by clinical research, though it is also the most difficult because of the multiplicity and variety of the factors in play.

There are many difficulties to be faced when we decide to undertake clinical research. I will mention a few of them: using a single language comprehensible to clinicians and researchers for describing the distinctiveness of each person who consults us and who, because of the particular nature of analytic work, cannot be simplified into a symptom, or a specific defence mechanism or conflict, as is the case when a physician is studying an infection of Koch bacillus and its interaction with the prescribed antibiotic. Among the further difficulties, we must mention the therapeutic function which the analyst applies to him or herself, the similar therapeutic effect of specific and non-specific factors in treatment, and the subjectivity and non-verifiability of our assertions, which are based, as Fonagy (2015) says, on «inductive inferences» which we believe are valid because we believe that they work, even though this is neither generalisable nor stable over time. Nevertheless, the value of clinical research is enormous, given that it has the task of improving our therapeutic tools and, I believe, of making our discipline progress as a cure for suffering. To illustrate this, I want to recall how the study of many post-traumatic pathologies has contributed to stimulating research into the infant and his environment and caregiver; and today infant research is the example of a clinical and empirical research which has greatly enriched us and, even if we are unaware of it, changed many of our theories and clinical practices.

The fact is that, immersed in the setting and in relating to our patient, we use implicit and explicit theories and also techniques that do not fit with the theories, and

we are also immersed in our subjective impressions which, as we know, constitute an enormous area for study in themselves.

When I finish a treatment, I tend to ask the patient, «In what way do you think you have changed?» Some of the answers that patients give me are the ones I would have expected, but other patients list aspects that I had not considered, or had underestimated, or which surprise me. Overall, there are areas on which analysis works but which are outside the analyst's awareness, so that even seeing and observing them is problematic, let alone diagnosing them.

For this reason, there are strong elements in the analytic relationship which cannot be evaluated, as is only to be expected in any deep human relationship. In our field of practice, we have tools available which perhaps a 'hard' scientist would not consider usable, but we use them nonetheless and communicate with each other about them in our scientific community.

What does all this mean? That we should give up on research? That it cannot be practised in psychoanalysis? We must not give up because there are many cogent reasons for persisting with it. Kernberg (2006) listed some of them: «The scientific need to reassess and advance our knowledge... our social responsibility to reassure the public regarding the effectiveness of psychoanalysis and the psychoanalytically based psychotherapies we are developing, and to demonstrate our ongoing efforts to increase the range and efficacy of these treatments... We must increase our professional and scientific relationships with boundary sciences and disciplines, and strengthen our relationships with the clinical and the academic world» (Kernberg, 2006, 919). To these, I would add the necessity of overcoming and avoiding explanations which achieve validity only within ourselves and are therefore self-referential, tautological, and only useful for the psychoanalytic corpus to confirm itself.

But how are we to do this? Is the relationship between psychoanalysis and empirical or clinical research really so idiosyncratic? Are we only permitted conceptual research?

## **PROCESS RESEARCH**

In a review updated in 2005, Wallerstein divides research in this field into four generations. He shows that third generation studies are research programmes which examine both the outcome of analysis of numerous cases and «the processes through which these outcomes have been reached via the intensive longitudinal study of each of the individual cases» (Wallerstein, 2005). These also examined the follow-up of the cases and studied the post-analytic phase, and the further changes which occurred in this phase. Incidentally, some of these studies have revealed the importance of the analyst-patient encounter, of the «mesh of the analyst's personal qualities with those of the patient» (Kantrowitz, 1986, 273) in determining the result.

Very few of these studies have dwelt on the failures of the process and the reasons for them, even though we are all aware that a certain number of failures occur in every analyst's work and that patients may sometimes get worse during an analysis. For all I know, these are the outcomes sometimes described by the term «negative analytic reaction», although I find Heimann's (1979) definition, «negative analytic relationship», more appropriate since it shows up the failure of the relationship in which the analyst too is participating. Research into process, and therefore into how change comes about, has had an exponential growth: especially those researches which use audio or video recordings, and those which use the examination «of narratives as vehicles for expression of emotional experience and as vehicles for change» (Bucci, 2005, 351).

The use of such techniques represents the attempt to give empirical endorsement to clinical research. So, thanks to recordings, a clinical fragment can be seen at a later date, evaluated by a third observer, and even subjected to a micro-examination, fragment by fragment. Naturally, many analysts are puzzled by the use of these tools. In reality, what eludes us in experiences of this kind may be the most important part of analytic work – the analyst's subjective experiences, the climate of the consulting room thick with verbalized and non-verbalized meanings – although Wilma Bucci claims that, «Just as a physicist makes inferences from readings on a meter to the movements of particles that cannot be observed, so the analyst makes inference from the language and behavior of the patient (and the analyst's own experience) to the patient's inner experience, both conscious and unconscious – and so the psychoanalytic researcher makes inference from the language and behavior that are preserved on recordings to the emotional meanings of events for the patient – and for the analyst» (*ibid.*, 350).

The following questions inevitably arise: are there other possible ways to study and research these phenomena? Can we rise to the challenge of studying these themes while remaining faithful to our working methods?

The history of science has taught us that in some scientific revolutions, it has been the instrument itself which has had to adapt to the object being studied. «Every scientific procedure must necessarily accommodate itself to its objects» (as Emilio Fava asserts in his 2017 interview with Giorgio Mattana published on the SPI website<sup>3</sup>) and, adopting this viewpoint, many others have begun to develop methods of verification which respect the characteristics of psychoanalysis (Lingiardi & Del Corno, 2015). The work of Ricardo Bernardi responds to these characteristics. In several articles and over many years of research, Bernardi has studied the evaluation of positive and negative changes in the patient using the three-level model which he suggested to the IPA's Clinical Observation Committee coordinated by Marina Altmann, and which has been

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.spiweb.it/ricerca/ricerca-empirica/ricerca-empirica-in-psicoterapia-intervista-a-emilio-fava-a-cura-di-g-mattana/>

disseminated across many psychoanalytic societies. Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber is one of the most prolific writers on this subject. She speaks about how, in clinical psychoanalytic research, the striving for intersubjectivity (Leuzinger-Bohleber, Bürgin, 2003) can be used as «a yardstick for scientific quality.» Systematic supervisions or interviews, and interdisciplinary groups researching clinical topics are useful tools for psychoanalytic research and understanding «how the minds of the analysts work in the clinical situation and how theoretical concepts are applied» (ibid.). Both these psychoanalysts, among many others, propose this methodology with the aim of «preserving the possibility of a profoundly empathetic understanding of the therapeutic relationship and, at the same time, the possibility of an intersubjective control which guarantees a greater validity to the observation» (Bernardi, 2015, 6).

Besides, defining what we mean by change in psychoanalysis and what tools will achieve it are objectives which stand at the centre of psychoanalysis itself and are much debated, given that different writers define them in different ways.

### **WHY RESEARCH IS HELPFUL AND SHOULD BE TAUGHT: OR, «RESEARCH AS COGNITIVE DISTURBER»**

Lastly, I would like to note one of the objectives connected to research in the psychoanalytic institution, and why it is important to teach research in the Training Institutes and to include research projects in our candidates' training programme, besides stimulating research into all our professional lives. I have already dwelt on this in an address at the SPI elections, and in a newsletter published on the Society's website, 23 June 2017 (Nicolò, 2017).

Now that the question of research in psychoanalysis has been posed, both by its proponents and its detractors, it has become a substantial part of our discussion, of our conferences and published books, and for some us of our clinical work.

Although there is a drastic difference between being a researcher who uses a specific working method and has a hypothesis to verify, and being open to research in every session, ready to catch new and unexpected features in the patient and in ourselves, we must not forget that the mind of the researcher is, in fact, like that of the analyst who uses curiosity and doubt in the setting. The analyst does not know what to expect as the analysis evolves, and session by session will construct her intervention in search of a never completely achieved or completely achievable truth, making sure that her intervention is not founded on apodictic positions, derived from a predetermined theory and taken for granted once and for all.

Bion used to claim that the urge for knowledge is determined by curiosity, and that the human being needs truth inside himself and as a response from the other because truth is essential for mental growth (Bion, 1962; Grotstein, 2010). And again, it was Bion, quoting Kipling in his introduction to *Seven Servants*, who spoke of the seven

pillars of wisdom, the seven servants, «“What and Why and When/And How and Where and Who...” The missing one completes the seven» (Bion, 1977). As Grotstein says, the last of the seven is the «truth principle» which he equates with curiosity and its dangers (Bion, 1992, 136; Grotstein, 2007, 140-141).

Curiosity and the search for truth seem to me to be two characteristics shared by the minds of the researcher and the analyst, and yet the implications of these attitudes are often forgotten in practice. Today, psychoanalysis is in danger of being destroyed by the heated debates between advocates of different disciplines or different idealized analytic models treated as if they were religious creeds. The fanaticism generated by the need to feel safe, and also the fantasy of being alone in possessing the truth, are stopping us recognizing that there is a richness in the diversity of models and theories which also helps us in our clinical work.

We forget that the different theories and models arose from the encounter with different pathologies, from our curiosity about them, and that they opened us up to areas and states of mind that are different from those we had been trained to address. This is how psychoanalysis has changed. Whereas at first our tools were useful for the neuroses, today we can work with the borderline, the psychotic, groups, institutions.

Like the researcher, the analyst works at the meeting point between the theories she brings with her and which pre-ordain her reading and understanding of the object, and on the other hand the unpredictable event which happens before her eyes and which she would risk not seeing or neglecting if she was unable to doubt, to be curious.

So, we need research, not only to respond to the demands made on us by the scientific world but because we must not waste the enormous potential for growth which analysts have as a group. We need research because doubt, curiosity, and humility are important qualities both for researching and for being analysts. Humility in particular, as Winnicott and Ferenczi remind us, compels us to learn from the patient and not impose our theories on the clinical material.

At this point, research is not only an objective but becomes a model of the mind's functioning, an activator of its transformation, and establishes itself as a vehicle for achieving it.

For example, the setting up of research groups in which analysts of different orientations and with different levels of experience and training can participate, fosters continual comparison and the development of a peer-review culture (Tuckett, 2002) which we need not only for scientific purposes, but also for questioning ourselves and the false belief that we are the bearers of a pre-existing truth. Like the researcher, I do not think the analyst always needs more information about the patient, but instead needs to activate a process of continually formulating questions. The encounter with scientific discovery seems to me to be like what happens in the analytic couple when it is confronted by change accompanied by a new knowledge, an event always marked

by emotions of surprise and astonishment. Indeed, new knowledge, discovery, opens up new mysteries and new questions.

We are very influenced by our institutional contexts, and these reflections should be extended into the institutional environment.

Research is a «cognitive disturber» (Fava, 2017), but also the emotional disturber of an institution, a disturber which stimulates our growth. For this reason, we cannot neglect its presence in the Training Institutions. As far as the development of candidates is concerned, Kernberg (2016) hypothesizes the creation of a research department that might be able to interact with university faculties, and endorses the organization of research projects in training institutions carried out jointly with university departments. Seminars and forums on research methodologies are the natural consequence of this approach.

All these operations should have the effect of creating a culture of work among peers which enriches training, given that they are set up outside a hierarchical structure. Alongside the development of a healthy dependency which the candidate can experience in his personal analysis and in formal seminars, this work among peers can become a valuable experience which candidates need if they are not to repeat ad infinitum the pseudo-adaptive and compliant behaviours which sometimes characterize the ways training institutions function.

If we are to achieve all this, we cannot deny that we are faced with very substantial obstacles and important questions, some of which are intrinsic to the goal we seek and which I have already cited. However, we also have internal obstacles which are determined by the fear that a new approach may make us lose our unity. Another fear is certainly implicit in the fact that, given such a diversity of models, present research may not provide us with a structured and all-inclusive model, and so we may be plunged into chaos.

What I have said leads to the proposal we have made, to introduce research groups both into the life of the psychoanalytic society and into training.

I want to hope that this proposal will be helpful in increasing psychoanalysts' passion and sense of unity, however much they are divided by different orientations, because they share a common interest and a common basis for their work; and I also hope it will teach candidates freedom of thought and a capacity for comparison, to feel authorised to challenge theories and discoveries in such a way as to continue on a path which takes us all further forwards.

Personally, I believe we have entered a new phase of research in psychoanalysis, in some ways one that is more respectful of our ideology, but which represents a challenge to be accepted so that we can respond to what present society and culture are asking from us. They challenge us on many levels, about the objectives to be achieved and the methods to be used, but above all about the meaning of time.

There are certainly vast areas of uncertainty and many contradictory aspects of research in psychoanalysis because, not only must we search for the object but, even

while the work is in progress, we need an ever more effective method available for seeking it. Green tells a nice story about this subject, although his aim is the opposite of the one I am suggesting. He says, «it is important for us not to duplicate in our discipline the anecdote of the man trying to find his lost keys under the gaslight on one side of the street, “because at least there is some light in this place”, though he knew he had lost them on the opposite, dark side, where it was useless to search for them because there was no light at all there» (Green, 2003, 31).

This is exactly what I think: we need to look for our keys on the dark side of the street because that is where we will be able to find them, even though we do not yet have perfectly efficient instruments for lighting up our field of investigation. It's more comfortable to go on looking under the light of the lamp, and we certainly won't get our hands dirty, but nor will we ever find anything.

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#### ABSTRACTS AND KEY WORDS

Research in psychoanalysis represents a challenge for psychoanalysts due to the many elements that cannot be evaluated in an analytic relationship. An analyst's tools might not be considered utilizable by empirical science, but there might be other ways to study emotional events. A researcher's and an analyst's mental functioning are similar because doubt, curiosity, and humility are important qualities both for doing research and for being a good analyst. Research is not only a goal but becomes a model for the mind's functioning, an activator for its transformation and can become a tool for reaching it. Work in groups made up of analysts of various schools and with varying degrees of training and experience can foster constant comparison and contribute to developing a culture of inquiry among peers.

**KEYWORDS:** Clinical research, complexity, psychoanalytical institutes, research, research groups, training.

**LA RECHERCHE COMME DÉFI POUR LE PSYCHANALYSTE.** La recherche en psychanalyse est un défi pour les psychanalystes à cause des forts éléments de subjectivité dans la relation analytique. Les outils de l'analyste pourraient être considérés comme n'étant pas utilisés par la science empirique, mais il existe d'autres possibilités pour étudier les événements émotionnels. Il y a une similitude entre le fonctionnement mental du chercheur et celui de l'analyste car le doute, la curiosité et l'humilité sont des qualités importantes à la fois pour faire de la recherche et pour être des analystes. La recherche n'est pas seulement un but mais devient un modèle du fonctionnement de l'esprit, un activateur de sa transformation et constitue un véhicule pour y parvenir. Par exemple, le travail dans des groupes de recherche, auxquels peuvent participer des analystes de différentes orientations et avec différents degrés d'expérience et de formation, favorise un dialogue continu et le développement d'une culture d'évaluation parmi les pairs.

**MOTS CLÉS:** Complexité, formation, groupes de recherche, instituts de psychanalyse, recherche, recherche clinique.

**LA INVESTIGACIÓN COMO DESAFÍO PARA EL PSICOANALISTA.** La investigación en psicoanálisis es un desafío para los psicoanalistas debido a los elementos que no resultan evaluables en la relación analítica. Las herramientas del analista podrían ser considerados como no utilizables para la ciencia empírica; no obstante, existen otras posibilidades de estudio de los hechos emotivos. Hay una similitud entre el funcionamiento mental del investigador y el del analista porque duda, curiosidad y humildad son calidades importantes tanto para hacer investigación como para ser analistas. La investigación no es únicamente un objetivo, sino también un modelo de funcionamiento de la mente, un activador de su transformación y se constituye en vehículo para llegar hasta allí. Por ejemplo, el trabajo en equipos de investigación, en los que participan analistas de orientaciones diferentes y con distintos grados de

experiencia y formación, favorece una constante confrontación y el desarrollo de una cultura de comprobación entre iguales.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Complejidad, equipos de investigación, institutos de psicoanálisis, investigación, investigación clínica, training.

**DIE FORSCHUNG ALS HERAUSFORDERUNG FÜR DEN PSYCHOANALYTIKER.** Die Forschung in der Psychoanalyse stellt aufgrund starker Elemente der Immensurabilität in der analytischen Beziehung eine Herausforderung für den Psychoanalytiker dar. Die Instrumente des Analytikers können von der empirischen Wissenschaft als nicht verwertbar erachtet werden, dennoch existieren andere Möglichkeiten der Erforschung emotionaler Ereignisse. Es besteht eine Ähnlichkeit zwischen dem mentalen Funktionieren des Wissenschaftlers und dem des Analytikers, da Zweifel, Neugier und Bescheidenheit wichtige Eigenschaften sowohl für die Forschungs- als auch für die Analytikertätigkeit sind. Die Forschung ist nicht lediglich ein Ziel, sie wird zu einem Funktionsmodell des Verstandes, einem Auslöser seiner Transformation und Mittel, dorthin zu gelangen. Die Arbeit in Forschungsgruppen beispielsweise, denen Analytiker verschiedener Richtungen und unterschiedlichen Erfahrungs- und Ausbildungsstandes angehören können, fördert eine stetige Gegenüberstellung und die Entwicklung einer Verifikationskultur unter Gleichen.

**SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER:** Forschung, Forschungsgruppen, Institute für Psychoanalyse, klinische Forschung, Komplexität, Training.

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