Fifth Annual John Bowlby Memorial Lectures

ATTACHMENT THEORY AND THE PSYCHOANALYTIC TRADITION: REFLECTIONS ON HUMAN RELATIONALITY

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I very much appreciate the invitation to present this year’s John Bowlby Memorial Lecture. I have always found Bowlby’s work stimulating and very important; he directed himself quite literally with what has seemed central to me both in terms of theory and technique practice. I met him once in the 1980s, when I served as a discussant of a paper on attachment and detachment; he presented at the William Alanson White Institute, and have vivid memories of the stories he told about his Psychoanalytical Society in the 1930s and 1940s, the early years of his intellectual maturity. I remember him commenting that ‘the pressures against looking at real life experiences were something ferocious’. In the discussion I wrote at that time, I noted that:

At a time when psychoanalytic theory often seems to be growing more and more jargonized and arcane, Dr Bowlby’s work has been an inspiration for those hoping to see psychoanalytic theorizing remain open to other intellectual disciplines and informed by advances in research and clinical observation.

I would like to take this occasion to reflect on the relationship between the flourishing attachment tradition Bowlby’s work established and the psychoanalytic tradition. I want to show how Bowlby’s virtual expulsion from mainstream psychoanalysis in the early 1960s makes some sense in terms of psychoanalytic ideas, since he was several steps ahead of his own time. I then want to consider the ways in which other major psychoanalytic authors, Fairbairn and Loewald, as well as the American psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan, struggled with the same problems Bowlby was dealing with. There is now a very marked receptivity among psychoanalysts to the same ideas that earned Bowlby his place in the psychoanalytic Gulag along with Fairbairn and Sullivan. Finally, I want to consider the way in which an integration of these different angles on the same phenomena can be helpful both conceptually and clinically.

Psychoanalysis has always been centrally concerned with human relatedness. The domain of psychopathology – psychoneurosis – that Freud wrested from the neurology of his day was a realm in which mental events, rather than the purely physical, had become problematic, and the mental events Freud concerned himself with from early on had largely to do with relations with other people. The early
seduction theory established the impact of others as a powerful force in the formation of human experience. In the abandonment of the seduction theory in favor of drive theory, the significant others became largely fantasized others, extrapolations from inborn drives. But Freudian drive theory always remained, necessarily, a kind of object relations theory.

Similarly, the clinical process of psychoanalysis has always been fundamentally relational. Freud’s self-analysis took place within the ambivalent intensity of his relationship with his friend Wilhelm Fliess. The peculiar structure of the analytic setting, a surrender to self-absorption in the presence of a very significant but largely quiet other, was shaped in no small measure by Freud’s correspondence with his quasi-analyst. Letter writing, a largely lost art, provides for a particular kind of intense self-reflection in the context of addressing a very significant but non-intrusive other, who doesn’t interact in the usual fashion.

So, even though relationality was salient in psychoanalysis, both in theory and in clinical practice, from the very beginning, there were long stretches in the history of psychoanalytic ideas in which the nature of human relatedness was not studied and theorized about directly. As drive theory replaced the seduction theory as Freud’s generative conceptual framework, the impact of events with real others, although never disappearing entirely, faded into the background. The content of the patient’s mind was understood to derive from body-based, constitutionally wired primal fantasies. Psychoanalysis became definitively intrapsychic, and mental life was understood to arise in each individual, monadic mind, drawn only secondarily into relations with others. Other people were what Freud called ‘accidental’ factors, attaining importance only through serendipitous linkage with drives. And the mother was understood to be, in the beginning, a ‘need-gratifying object’, accruing psychical meaning only gradually through her function in reducing drive tensions. It is important to note that great advantages came from the abandonment of the overly simplistic seduction hypothesis – it opened the way for the extraordinary, unprecedented exploration psychoanalysis provided in the first half of the twentieth century into the subtle textures of human fantasy and imagination. But that journey into what was understood to be purely intrapsychic did leave relationality bracketed for many decades.

Similarly, in the psychoanalytic situation, the importance of the analyst as a significant other became partially occluded by Freud’s establishment of the analyst as the authoritative interpreter of the patient’s mental processes. The content of analytic sessions was understood solely as the expression of the intrapsychic material of the patient, with the analyst positioned outside that material, interpretively reading its deeper meanings. In recent decades, this classical vision of the analytic situation as comprised of one mind providing content for an interpreter has proved increasingly untenable. It is important to note that the scientific properties of the classical analytic set-up contributed to the establishment of psychoanalysis as the most disciplined and dedicated method ever devised for the study of human subjectivity. But that methodology for the exploration into the workings of one mind did leave relationality, the intersubjective nature of the analytic situation, bracketed for many decades.

Why is the centrality of the relational so easy to miss? to forget about? to relegate to the conceptual background? It must have something to do with a confusion of minds with the ways in which bodies operate as functional units. Although human infants are dependent for many years on the physical care of adults, our bodily properties are more or less pre-wired, unfolding in a maturational sequence – from immobility, to turning over, to pulling ourselves up, to crawling, to walking. Apart from severe pathology, we eventually attain an almost complete physical functional autonomy. It is so easy to think of our minds in similar terms. We tend to take for granted an independent psychical existence in much the same way as we take for granted our independent physical existence. If I am living by myself, I must decide if I want to interact with others today; social interactions are intentional choices. And we tend to think of our minds similarly as our exclusive property, under our omnipotent control, with our intersubjective exchanges with others a product of our intentions. Thus, traditional theorists of motivation tend to feel they have to supply us with reasons why people are drawn to each other and hang out together, like: pleasure-seeking, the need for security, the desire for recognition, the division of labor, and so on.

These monadic, individualistic assumptions have been fundamental to Western culture over the past several hundred years and are taken for granted as part of ordinary experience. It is only relatively recently that they have been systematically called into question. Perhaps, minds do not develop independently, and secondarily, seek each other out. Perhaps, contemporary philosophers, linguists and analytic theorists are suggesting, minds are fundamentally interconnected. Perhaps the question, “Why I am hanging around with these other minded creatures?” is fundamentally misconceived, predicated on an inattention to a more basic interpenetrability of minds which makes individual mindedness possible in the first place.

Recent developments in the philosophy of mind provide a relevant parallel. Most historians of philosophy date the modern philosophical era at the point when Descartes dismantled and called into question everything he knew, in an attempt to anchor his understanding in certain knowledge. The only thing left standing after his radical scepticism had done its dirty work was doubt itself, leading him to proclaim, famously, ‘I think, therefore I exist’. I’ll start with my consciousness, which I can know for sure, Descartes reasoned, since this very doubting I am doing is an expression of it. He then proceeded to rebuild his beliefs in the world around him, including other minds. Most contemporary philosophers tend to believe that Descartes made a wrong turn early on in his self-reflections. He took his thinking for granted, as a simple, basic, irreducible fact. We now believe that thinking, certainly the sort of thinking that Descartes involved himself in, is actually a complex achievement, not solely of an individual, but of a community – not any sort of community but, specifically, a social, linguistic community. As Marsha Cavell (1993), drawing on Wittgenstein, Davidson and others, has put it:

Subjectivity arises along with intersubjectivity and is not the prior state... doubting the world and other minds, one must be in possession of all one needs to put the doubts to rest.’ (p. 40)

Descartes did not have to derive the external world and other minds from his direct experience of his own mind; the very fact that he had a mind that could raise such questions presumed other minds and an external world they had in common. This is why solipsism, the belief that the only reality is one's own mind, even though a logical possibility, has never become a philosophical school. (The philosopher John Searle notes that a dedicated solipsist would not feel there would be any point to declare his beliefs, since the rest of us do not exist.) One mind presumes other minds.
There are some contemporary postmodern critics of object relations, the establishment of relati

They argue that the relational turn in psychoanalysis, the establishment of a universal, normative feature of human development, is fundamentally about human beings becoming human beings through their engagement in relationality and attachment. The fascinating thing about this critique of relationality is that it takes for granted the fact that it is the only way to be because human beings are in a way human beings. It can only be because human beings are human beings. But why would culture be so important?

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psychoanalysis and its language remains its focus on internality, the description of conscious and unconscious subjective states.

Bowlby, like Sullivan, had a more behavioral sensibility. Neither was a behaviorist, in the strict sense of the term, but both were much more interested than the average psychoanalyst in what actually goes on between people in the real world. The roots of this sensibility for Sullivan were in the philosophical Pragmatism, which dominated the American social science of his day. There is no use talking about what you can’t see or measure operationally, Sullivan believed. In trying to understand ‘human difficulties in living’ it is much more conceptually economical to study what people actually do with each other. The roots of this sensibility for Bowlby were in the neighboring discipline of ethology, which provided such powerful explanatory concepts for understanding what Bowlby had been observing in children’s reactions to separation and loss.

No single author has had nearly as much impact on the Western intellectual history of the past 150 years, including the history of psychoanalytic ideas, than has Charles Darwin. Both Freud and Bowlby were extremely involved with Darwin’s contribution, but their Darwins were very different. Freud’s Darwin was part of the first wave of reaction to the extraordinary implications of the theory of evolution; one of Freud’s projects was to work out the implications for human psychology of Darwin’s demonstration of the continuity between so-called ‘lower’ and so-called ‘higher’ forms of animal life. Freud’s fascination with primativism and his reliance on bestial metaphors have a recurrent thematic consistency throughout his writings. And Freud’s structural model of the psyche is a recreation, on a microcopic scale, of Darwin’s sweeping macroscopic account of the evolution of species — lower-level, primitive energy of the id is transformed by the reality-oriented ego into higher-level, aim-inhibited resources for activities consistent with the cultural values of the superego. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.

Bowlby draws on a different Darwin. Like Heinz Hartmann, Bowlby was most interested in what Darwin taught about animal adaptation to environmental conditions and niches. In the second volume of his attachment trilogy, Bowlby refers to Freud as an antediluvian, because he did not grasp the importance in Darwin’s theory of the evolution of species of the principle of ‘natural selection’. Bowlby, like Darwin, was interested in what animals do to maximize their chances for survival. He found in the principles of ethology tools for conceptualizing the concerns he had developed in his early work with autistic children and his study of childhood health and pathology for the World Health Organization. Whereas Freud’s Darwin lent himself to the study of internality and unconscious, primitive states, Bowlby’s Darwin lent himself to a behavioral analysis of what small children and mothers actually do with each other. Thus, among the most vivid of Bowlby’s contributions are his descriptions of the five component instincts that insure the baby’s proximity to the mother, and his accounts of reactions to childhood separations and loss. The advantage of this behavioral emphasis has been that Bowlby’s ideas have been applied, with extraordinary effectiveness, to the empirical research tradition which Mary Ainsworth and Mary Main have done so much to develop. The disadvantage of Bowlby’s behavioral emphasis has been the relative underdevelopment of the psychodynamic dimension, which has made the bridge to mainstream psychoanalysis more difficult. As Jeremy Holmes (1996) has recently pointed out, attachment theory has been more productively applied to research than to clinical work.

Bowlby’s concept of ‘working models’ was an early, undeveloped effort to depict the psychodynamic residues of the vicissitudes of attachment experiences. Holmes makes the interesting point that working models, ‘although a useful bridge between psychodynamics and cognitive science, are too masculine and mechanical to capture adequately the world of affective experience’ (1995, p. 31). Mary Main has noted a recent ‘relational turn’ by attachment theorists in their efforts to depict those internal residues. This development within the attachment tradition, like the turn towards relationality in the psychoanalytic tradition, makes this a particularly appropriate time to explore the convergence between these quasi-independent lines of theory-making. Peter Fonagy’s important recent contributions on ‘reflective self-function’ and ‘mentalization’, drawing both on the attachment tradition and psychoanalytic developmental theory, reflect the fruitfulness of this convergence.

Some of the conceptual divergences that have divided the psychoanalytic and attachment traditions were historical artefacts that have been rendered obsolete by recent developments. The psychoanalysis that Bowlby rejected privileged fantasy over actuality, deriving back to Freud’s own reversal, in 1897, of his original seduction theory. Bowlby always seemed to have regarded the choice between privileging ‘real events’ versus ‘fantasy’ as a key fork in the road separating attachment theory from psychoanalysis. As he put it in an interview late in his life, ‘I was told in no uncertain terms that it was not an analyst’s job to pay attention to real life events – as explicit as that’ (Hunter 1991, p. 173). Fantasy became a problem for Bowlby because in his day fantasy, in its link with drive theory, meant distortion, primal patterns that were imposed on real life. Some of the more innovative psychoanalytic theorizing, these days, links fantasy not with drives, but with imagination. In this view, developed especially by Loewald and Winnicot, reality is encountered, inevitably, through imagination and fantasy. Fantasy and actuality are not alternatives; they interpenetrate and, potentially, enrich each other. Two other dichotomies that Bowlby struggled with have also been transcended, particularly in contemporary relational thinking: the contrast between the intrapsychic and the interpersonal, and the location of the therapeutic agent in insight or relationship. Mace and Margison in 1994 that there has been a tension within the attachment literature between a ‘cognitive effort towards understanding of the unsatisfactory working model and a fundamental attempt to offer recapitulation through a positive attachment experience’ (Mace & Margison 1997, p. 213). Current relational authors tend to regard the analyst’s interpretative understanding as part of the particularly analytic form of positive attachment experience and, conversely, the kind of attachment experience the analyst offers as containing interpretive and meta-interpretable dimensions. Again, these developments suggest that this is a particularly timely moment to explore convergences.

In the remainder of this paper I want to use various facets of my clinical work with a woman I will call Connie in the service of this project. Connie had had a quite successful earlier experience in psychotherapy with someone else that ended about 10 years before she came to see me. She had suffered an early, catastrophic loss of her major attachment figure when she was 5 years old, and in many ways both her earlier therapy and her work with me were largely concerned with the implications of that loss. However, in our work, various other psychodynamic facets emerged that I found useful to conceptualize in terms of the contributions of Fairbairn, Winnicot, Loewald and Interpersonal Psychoanalysis. Therefore, this work lends itself to an
exercise in juxtaposing and playing with Bowlby’s concepts together with those of other psychoanalytic authors. I don’t want to suggest that all these theories are congruent and integratable at all points. I believe Winnicott, for example, locates the core of the individual in a solitary privacy, which is quite different from the more interactive self of Loewald and Sullivan. But I believe that these authors all have illuminated crucial features of human relatedness that taken together, selectively, have generated a powerful and compelling alternative to classical Freudian theory.

Clinical Material

Connie came for treatment in her mid-forties for two reasons. First, the chronic sadness that had haunted her her whole life, that had been somewhat alleviated by psychotherapy in her thirties, had returned. Her mother had died suddenly in a car accident when she was 5 years old. In her first therapy it had become clear that her persistent sense of sadness and episodic tearfulness were connected with an aborted mourning for her mother that had never been able to take place. Her father had felt that the loss of their mother was just too painful for Connie and her older brother to speak about, so she was never mentioned throughout Connie’s childhood. In her therapy, she began to speak about and feel her loss directly for the first time. She remembered finding a picture of her mother hidden away in a closet when she was a child. She recalled going into the closet and searching that picture longingly, trying to stir up memories of the mother who had quickly faded from her experience. That therapy was very important to her: it provided an opportunity for a mourning process that had never been allowed to take place, and it placed her sadness in a context of meaning. But considerable sadness remained, and increased in severity when she married in her late thirties and had a son, who himself was now 5 years old. This boy, not surprisingly to us, but very disturbingly to her, had extremely intense separation problems. She knew this must have something to do with the loss of her mother at the same age he was now, and was concerned about imposing on him the tragedy of her own early life.

The second reason Connie sought another analytic treatment was that she had always felt there was something different about her, something other people had that she lacked. They seemed to have a ‘self’, it appeared, some much more grounded sense of who they are. Even though she was objectively an extremely accomplished and creative person, she felt she lacked that inner sense. She knew that lack had something to do with the loss of her mother and the ‘hole’ she felt in her experience ever since. She imagined that one of the things a mother does for a child is to help them recognize who they are, what they are like, and tried especially hard to do that with her own son. But would it ever be possible to find that missing experience for herself?

One of the first things that became apparent in our work was that Connie’s early loss went way beyond the loss of her mother. Her father felt completely overwhelmed by the death of his wife and his responsibility for his two young children. He decided the only possible plan was to send them both to boarding school. The older brother went off to a military school and Connie went off to an orphanage/boarding school run by nuns, several hundred miles from her home. The nuns took good care of her, but it was an almost completely anonymous life. She lived in a dormitory with other girls; her bed was like all the other beds, with all signs of distinct and distinguishing characteristics disallowed. One of her most vivid visceral memories of the nuns was the starched bbs they wore betraying nothing of warm breasts or body underneath. She would return home to be with her father on week-ends. She felt extremely grateful that he would come to pick her up each week-end, since there were other girls who were orphaned and had nobody. She wrote to her father every day, telling him she loved him, so as to remind him to not forget about her. It was only after seven years that the father felt the children were old enough to return home on a regular basis. On the week-ends with her father, and in living with him after the children returned home, Connie experienced her father as extremely overtaxed and brittle. It seemed desperately important never to burden him with her own needs, as if the fragile elements of a home that were provided could themselves instantly cave in. So Connie lost more than her mother at age 5; in effect, she lost her whole world.

It is, of course, impossible to capture the complex texture of an analytic process in writing. But I would like to pull out four themes from our work to illustrate the ways in which the angles on relationship developed in the writings of Fairbairn, Winnicott, Loewald and Sullivan, together with Bowlby, have provided for me a rich convergence for thinking about the psychoanalytic process.

1. Attachments to Unavailable or Unsatisfying Objects

In speaking about the ‘hole’ left by her mother’s death, Connie came to elaborate the ways in which she felt different from other people. As we returned to this theme repeatedly, in its many different variations, it became increasingly apparent the extent to which the loss of her mother and its impact on her life had become the way in which Connie had come to define herself — to distinguish herself from others. Her sadness, even though anguishing, had, she feared, become her destiny. She couldn’t remember her mother; all she had was the hole rent in the fabric of her experience that her mother’s disappearance had left behind.

Mary Main notes the shift in thinking about attachment from the early notion that disturbances in mothering generate poorly or weakly attached children, to the understanding, more compatible with Fairbairn’s notion of attachment to ‘bad’ objects, that children become inevitably powerfully attached to whatever is available:

Quantitative terms (such as ‘strongly’ or ‘weakly’ attached) are not used in describing differences among individuals... Infants who have become attached to maltreating or simply insensitive attachment figures are presumed no ‘less’ attached than others, and virtually all infants become attached. (Main 1995, pp. 411–12)

In this sense, rather than distinguishing between secure and insecure attachments, we might distingusih between attachments to secure and insecure or absent objects. For Connie, her mother’s absence created a powerful presence; her attachment to that absence served as a central, defining feature of her sense of self. Her continual unconscious mourning for her mother served as a perpetual object tie linking Connie to her mother.

This theme surfaced throughout her life in ways that I found surprising and fascinating. In one session she began talking about a new book she had been reading about groups of climbers on Mount Everest. She’d been finding the book completely captivating. As we explored its power for her, she began to speak of ‘extreme situations’, like climbing Everest, as something she fantasized about a lot and also had sought out in some wilderness travel. Her visit to the tundra in Alaska had been a high
point in her life. There was something about the self-state generated amid the bleakness of the tundra landscape, the gripping feeling of the enormity of the world and her own smallness that, paradoxically, generated a sense of serenity and security she found so hard to come by. Such a world seemed ‘unforgiving’, she said, and it was that very quality she found reassuring. Similarly, in the long-distance running and swimming she spent a lot of time doing, she felt closest to contacting that sense of self she found so elusive in other circumstances. As she drove herself past pain, she felt she had some defining sense of who she was, what sort of a person she could be. One could think of these experiences in terms of guilt and masochism. Did Connie feel somehow responsible for her mother’s death? Was the ‘unforgiving’ quality of bleakness and pain a self-punishment for what she felt had been her crime? But along Fairbairn lines, it also seemed as if the bleakness and enormity of the wilderness and her ability to survive and transcend pain evoked something of the aching emptiness of her losses and the ‘unforgiving’ world of the school in which she found herself and had survived. In the absence of a secure attachment figure, the bleakness and pain itself had become a point of reference for self-recognition.

In her current life, Connie spends a lot of time thinking about what constitutes a ‘home’ and how to provide a home for her son. At one point in discussing these issues that I found particularly poignant, she said that she always had very powerful feelings associated with the particular sound of a screen door closing. In fact, she had loved that sound so much, she had once tried to have built a custom-made, miniature screen door that she could keep on her desk. Her associations led to the feeling as a kid of going out the back door of her house into the backyard and the rest of the world, and feeling the solidity of the house behind her as the sound of the door conveyed to her. It was if that sound was an anchor, a point of attachment.

2. The Self, Desire and Mourning

Connie regarded the sadness that had been a constant accompaniment of her life since her early childhood as connected with the loss of her mother and the subsequent loss of mothering throughout her childhood. The first therapy had made that sadness more vivid and meaningful, but had not helped her free herself of it. There were times during that work that she felt almost paralyzed by her feelings. She had a deep fear of coming back for more analytic work, because she experienced her mournful sadness as a bottomless pit. She hoped our work would help free her of it but feared that even more painful losses would be stirred up.

After a while I began to feel that there was something in the way Connie organized her current experiences that contributed to regenerating her sadness, that her feelings reflected something she was giving up in the present as much as something she had lost in the past. Somehow, probably because it is one of my favorite subjects, we had gotten into talking about her approach to food and eating. She tended to be extremely health conscious, with a focus on eating salads and vegetables. However, she allowed herself one bag of M&M’s each afternoon. I have always disliked M&M’s, so I became intrigued with the specificity of that choice. She liked M&M’s partly because each bit of chocolate was embedded in a hard shell; it was ‘modular,’ she said. Now I like my chocolate accompanied by a sense of limitless self-indulgence. I wondered whether she ever ate Milky-Ways, suspecting probably not. Of course she had tried them, but the thing about Milky-Ways was precisely that their richness and size could easily make you feel sick and regretful after a while. Connie recalled that the kind of supervisory care that she provided for her son’s eating had been lost for her with the death of her mother. There was nobody to watch out for the health implications, short- and long-term of what she ate. She learned early on to do that for herself. She would start with what seemed conscientious and sensible, and then let herself desire what was feasible. I compared that, silently, with my own experience, which moves in the other direction, from an initial impulse of limitless desire to regretful considerations connected with having a mortal body in the real world. I mused with Connie about the implications of her never having had the experience, at least within memory, of not having to worry about real considerations of health and safety, of being able to give oneself over to impulses of sheer desire and pleasure, taking for granted that someone else would be watching over. We began to feel that part of her sadness was a present accommodation of the sensible and conscientious approach to living that had enabled her to survive.

I began to realize that we were dealing with issues of the sort that Winnicott had described in his exploration of the ways in which personal meaning and a sense of self are generated. ‘True self’ experience, in Winnicott’s terms, begins with a ‘spontaneous gesture’ that emerges from a core of subjective omnipotence; spontaneous gestures are, in the beginning, actualized by the ‘good-enough mother’ and thereby consolidated into a sense of oneself as good and real. Because Connie had lost that parental provision precipitously, she had to take over that caretaking role for herself. The consequence was not so much a sense of ‘falseness’ in Winnicott’s terms, but a chronic sense of sadness and of something missing.

We began to realize that Connie’s approach to chocolate was prototypical of her way of organizing much of her experience, including personal relationships. She would figure out what was possible to have, and then let herself want things within those borders. The area of her life in which considerable sadness was generated through this approach was with her husband, who was quite self-absorbed. Although he actually seemed to have a pretty rich range of emotional potentials, he could, if not pushed, easily convey the impression that he was not available for much intimacy. And especially in her experience with her father, Connie had learned that a seamless adaptation to what was available, not pushing, was the way to survive.

Bowlby and Ainsworth pointed to the provision in secure attachment of a safe base for an exploration of the world. This aspect of the work with Connie suggests that another experience that secure attachment provides is the safety to explore not just the external world, but the internal world of personal preferences, desires and impulses, what Winnicott called ‘spontaneous gestures’. When the safety that a dependable attachment figure provides is missing, the child herself tends to precociously fill in the missing parental function (Winnicott’s ‘caretaker self’) and opportunities for a worry-free surrender to one’s own experience is foreclosed. (See also Ghent 1992, on surrender.)

3. The Other as Part of Oneself

During a stretch of several weeks when her son’s separation problems had been quite acute, Connie began to describe, somewhat shamefully, her sense that her son was ‘part of me’. This, of course, is not what enlightened parents are supposed to think. But we explored some ways in which this was, in fact, her reality. She described her experience of watching him play with his classmates. She couldn’t take her eyes off
him. It was as if he were endlessly fascinating. I knew something about what she was describing from experiences with my own children, but her feelings seemed to be more intense and pervasive. So I asked her to see if she could get at the feelings connected with the sense that 'he is part of me'.

Connie remembered her absorption in her pregnancy when, in a quite literal sense, her son was part of her. She remembered the strangeness of the separation that constituted his birth; he still felt part of her although no longer literally part of her. She then associated to her memories that in losing her mother she had lost a 'part' of herself. In fact, she'd felt an absence, a kind of hole, in herself ever since that time, as if a part of her had disappeared and never returned. She'd felt that perhaps, in becoming a mother, she could reunite with her mother once again, although it had never really felt quite like that. I suggested that when she lost her mother she had also lost a version of herself, and that her fascination with her son was partly a fascination with a childhood that she herself had been robbed of. In watching him, she was also watching for lost parts of herself and her lost mother who had never seen them.

How would we want to characterize Connie’s experience of her son as 'part of me'? Is this an illusion? Is it a primitive fantasy? Is it a break in reality-testing? It is here that I find some of Loewald’s ideas helpful. Loewald believed that we organize our experience on different levels simultaneously. Borrowing Freud’s terms, but imbuing them with very different meanings, Loewald depicts a 'primary process' organized around a primal density of experience, in which dichotomies like self/other, past/present, inner/outer do not exist, and a 'secondary process' in which the customary categories of conventional, adaptive living apply. Loewald’s concerns are close to Winnicott’s in the latter’s descriptions of transitional phenomena, but in his final work, Loewald (1988) stressed what is a very important difference from Winnicott. The latter regards the early subjective experiences of the child, including transitional experience, as suffused with omnipotence and illusion. Loewald regards many primary process experiences, particularly those of undifferentiation between self and others, as not illusions at all. For Loewald, primary process and secondary process constitute alternative and equally valid, equally 'real' forms of organizing experience. The task of psychoanalysis is not a transformation of primary process into secondary process, not a removal of fantasy and distortion, but an opening up of the seared, potentially enriching links between fantasy and actuality.

Thus, Connie’s experience of her son as ‘part of me’ might be understood as a reality of a different sort than the conventional one we generally inhabit. Connie’s early catastrophic loss seems to have been experienced not only as the loss of an other, but as the loss of an other, a self, a world, all jumbled up together. Her pregnancy filled, temporarily, the hole left by that loss, and her son came to signify for parts of herself that were there and parts of herself she experienced only as absences. He, in turn, must have come to experience her losses and terror of separation as his own. According to Loewald, it is a mistake to understand these experiences as fantasied distortions of reality due to pathological, abortive mourning. Rather, they are pieces of reality. On a primary process level, we are not separate from our significant others; in intense emotional experiences, we co-create events and share resonating emotions that are not neatly assignable to discrete categories like self/other, and inner/outer. In this view, what Connie needs to accomplish is not a neat separation from her mother and her son, but a greater capacity to contain varied experiences of both union with and differentiation from them.

4. The Enrichment of the Analytic Relationship

Among the most radical implications of Sullivan’s concept of the interpersonal field was the notion that mind is not something each of us carries around inside our skulls, in control over how much to reveal or conceal of it to others, but that mind is transpersonal and contextual. Mind emerges in interactions with other minds. No matter how much of an observer the analyst tries to be, Sullivan was suggesting, he is also inevitably a participant. Sullivan’s early concepts were developed by subsequent interpersonal theorists into an approach to the analytic process that emphasizes the here-and-now relationship between the two participants. Whereas theorists within the British Independent Group, like Fairbairn, Winnicott and Balint, wrote about the analytic relationship in terms of missing parental provisions and functions, the interpersonalists wrote about the analytic relationship in less developmental, more intersubjective terms. Particularly in the contributions of Edgar Levenson, the analyst is portrayed as inevitably embedded within the transference/countertransference mix. With this background in mind, I would like to trace several important points in the evolution of the analytic relationship that Connie and I co-constructed, which, I believe, provided her with different sorts of attachment experiences than her early life had allowed.

Despite my suggestion that a greater frequency would be preferable, Connie began our work on a once per week basis, which was more than enough for her, thank you. She was extremely wary of the feelings that might be unleashed, and was concerned about the dangers of being in therapy for the rest of her life.

Connie used the time very conscientiously and productively from the start. She was a keen and thoughtful observer of her own experience. I liked her very much and enjoyed talking with her. I soon found the once a week frequency depleting. I found myself wanting more of her, and, upon reflection, realized that I was feeling something like her childhood feelings of longing in relation to her father’s weekly visits. But it wasn’t only the frequency that seemed rigidly controlled. Any questions about feelings she might have in relation to me were met with incredulity. Why would she have feelings about me? This was a strictly professional relationship, after all. There was clearly something in this of her experiences with the nuns. Any personal feelings between us would be inappropriate and likely end up in painful longing. She said this in a manner that made me feel as if my even entertaining the idea that we might actually have feelings about each other was a sign of immaturity and perverse silliness on my part. So I stayed at my assigned distance and waited.

A couple of months into the work Connie surprised me by beginning a session in considerable distress. How did this therapy work? she wanted to know. She felt there was something terribly impersonal about the way I greeted her in the waiting-room, without even saying her name, right after the previous, probably equally anonymous patient had left. I at first felt a little stung by this accusation, particularly since I had been struggling myself with what felt to me to be a distance imposed by her. I began to wonder if I had not unconsciously retaliated by toning down my emotional reactions to her at the beginning and ending of our sessions. I do tend sometimes to be pretty businesslike. And my customary way of greeting patients was to acknowledge their presence with a ‘hello’ and invite them into my office without mentioning their names. We explored Connie’s experience of these interactions, but she was still angry. I explained that it was just not my customary style to mention people’s names when I
met them, either inside or outside the therapy setting. She felt that what she experienced as the anonymity of my manner was intolerable, and that, unless I would sometimes mention her name, she would be unable to continue. We agreed that it would not make sense for me to do this mechanically, but that I would try to find a way that was genuine for me. And I did. I actually found that I enjoyed saying her name. And her responses to my greetings were warmer than they had been before. I realized that there was something a bit pressured about my 'let’s get down to work' attitude. I even began to change my manner of greeting and parting from other patients. It seemed to me that Connie and I were working something out related to distance and intimacy, presence and loss that was not unrelated to her early traumas and deprivations, but that was happening in a very live way between us now. A couple of months following our newly-fashioned manner of greeting and parting, Connie said she felt she had too much to talk about in one-weekly session and she began to come twice a week.

The work continued to go well, focusing on recurrent patterns in different areas of her life. She reported feeling better, somehow, less chronically sad and more grounded in a sense of who she is. We would periodically speak about her sense of oddness about our sessions, how unrelated they seemed to the rest of her life. She often had trouble remembering what we had spoken of shortly after leaving, and almost seemed surprised to find herself there again at the beginning of sessions. We looked at her struggles with keeping the connection with me alive from many different angles.

About a year into the work, Connie reported for several weeks a strong feeling of not wanting to come for sessions. We were both puzzled by these feelings, but felt we would come to learn more about them as we went along. She then reported a dream in which she got into a taxi; her destination was a very desolate, windy street. The driver was an Indian or Pakistani, with a turban, who, she slowly realized, was angry, threatening and probably dangerous. She was considering how she would get out of the taxi when the dream ended.

Her associations to the street were to a childhood friend who had become schizophrenic and lived in a half-way house on the edge of the city in which they had grown up, by the water. It was indeed a very windy place. Then there was my street, which is also pretty windy. We played with the sense of me as unknown, exotic, strange, threatening, perhaps dangerous. She felt that the dream reflected a sense that the work with me had become, somewhat surprisingly, important to her, and that she wasn’t sure where that would leave her. We spoke of her need to keep me separated from the rest of her life – out at the end of the earth. There was something about that splitting that kept me safe for her to touch base with and leave, and also kept the rest of her life safe for her to handle on her own. But her locating me out on the periphery of her world also made me foreign, distant and unknown.

About a week later she reported a powerful experience with her husband or, more accurately, in her feelings toward her husband. Their relationship was quite caring and mutually supportive in times of crisis but, in many respects, quite distant and cool in an ongoing way. We had been working, on and off, on the part she played in maintaining that distance. She had come to realize that she had long ago decided that her husband was simply unavailable to meet her emotional needs, and so she had stopped even being aware of having any vis-à-vis him. Recently, she had become aware of wanting things from him and had tried, with varying degrees of success, to express those desires with him.

The experience she reported was of going to bed after he had already gone to sleep. She had the compelling thought that she might wake him to make love; it felt that such a gesture would constitute a forgiveness of her chronic grievances against him. She decided not to wake him and, as was her custom, simply went quietly to sleep beside him. We explored, among other things, her sense that to be close to him in one way would entail renouncing her right to her own needs in other ways.

In the next session Connie reported a fight they had had. It was typical of their fights but had a somewhat different ending. He had left a used tea-bag in the sink. His untidiness had been a chronic issue between them. He had grown up in a wealthy family, with maids to clean up after him. They lived a comfortable but by no means luxurious life now, with no maids. Connie felt he continually left messes for her to clean up. They had made some progress – in early years the tea-bag would have been left on the table. But she felt a deep sense of bitterness at what she felt was his taking her for granted. She expressed this to him, and he felt attacked, leading to counter-attacks. He was effective at debate and, traditionally, she would give in, apologizing for what seemed to be the inappropriate intensity of her anger. That surrender would leave her feeling demoralized and despairing. This time she defended her position without giving in, which was a considerable accomplishment. But she felt an aching sense that she would never feel taken into account as a person in the way she longed for.

I got interested in the way Connie presented her concerns to her husband, through the kind of ‘detailed inquiry’ Sullivan wrote extensively about. His methodology of finding out exactly ‘Who said what to whom?’ can sometimes be very enlightening. By the time Connie opened up these discussions with her husband, she was already very angry, and his sense that he was being attacked seemed understandable to me. But what was really demoralizing to her was the sense that he operated as if she did not exist for him, as if she had no presence in his mind. And in the end, it was her chronic, pervasive sense of isolation that contributed to her perpetual sadness.

I do what often do in this kind of situations, which is to try to imagine another way to deal with the situation that might run a greater chance of a more constructive outcome. I told her that it seemed to me that the issue was really not the power negotiation over who did what jobs – always an important issue within couples – but that she ended up feeling invisible to him, trapped in her familiar but sad solitude. I asked her what she thought might happen if she opened the discussion with him by explaining that she valued a feeling of connection with him, that his acting as if he were unaware of the impact of his behavior on her made her feel as if she had no place in his mind. The issue was not to control or criticize him, but to find a way for the two of them to feel mindful of and related to each other. Although I hadn’t thought about it at the time, I was clearly exploring the aspect of mentalization that Fonagy finds central in the healthy experience of secure attachment. Connie found herself amazed at the thought that she might broach these issues with him in this way. She realized that the reason she would never have thought about approaching him in that way was it would imply that she actually had some ongoing emotional need for connection with him, and that certainly wasn’t something she was ordinarily aware of.

Suggesting alternative ways of handling interpersonal situations is not generally considered within the bounds of traditional analytic technique. But I sometimes find it very useful. The suggestions are almost never simply picked up upon and used. That is not the point. What is invariably most interesting and useful are the patient’s thoughts and feelings in reaction to my imaginary alternatives. They are really a kind
of thought experiment. Connie returned for the next session brimming with intense mixed feelings. She’d been thinking a great deal about the previous session. It was true that the sense of emotional connection to her husband, a sense that she had a presence in her mind, was very important to her, she now realized. To actively express that need seemed both exhilarating and frightening. She feared that anyone becoming aware of her needs for them would likely feel burdened and abandon her. And she had trouble imagining that she could actually give expression to such needs and still remain herself—a task seemed so far from the self she recognized herself to be. Yet, she felt excited at the prospect of exploring new possibilities. However, she also resented the fact that such cathartic feelings and exhilarating thoughts had emerged in her therapy rather than in conversation with her husband. I kidded her about her fear of catharsis outside of marriage. We laughed together about that. Sessions over the next several months primarily explored various facets of her relationship with her husband, in which she became more adept at locating and expressing her own needs, both for contact with him and freedom from his need of her. In one discussion, which was extraordinarily important to her, he had come out of his absorption in his own work to speak to her. Rather than make herself grudgingly available, as was her wont, Connie told him that, at that moment on Tuesday evening at 10 o’clock, watching her favorite TV show was actually more important to her than being available to speak to him. Although seemingly trivial, this was an extremely precarious act of extraordinary personal freedom for her in their relationship. It seemed as if her increased ability to be aware of and express her attachment to him also allowed Connie to begin to be able to establish her independence from him without the paralyzing dread of losing him.

In conclusion, I have tried to show the ways in which major relational authors have contributed to our clinical understanding of different facets and implications of human relationality and attachment. Fairbairn explored the psychodynamics of attachments to physically or emotionally absent parenting figures. Winnicott illuminated the subtle ways in which secure attachment facilitates the development of a personal sense of self and the ways in which the absence of such parental functions adaptively forecloses such development. Loewald’s innovative theorizing suggests that the apparent separation between the subject who attaches and the object of attachment overlays a primary process level of organization in which self and other exist in various degrees of undifferentiation from each other. Loewald suggests that healthy object relations consist not so much in a clear separation of self from others but in a capacity to contain in dialectical tensions different mutually enriching forms of relatedness. And, finally, Sullivan and contemporary interpersonalists have contributed to our understanding of the ways in which the vicissitudes of early attachment experiences play themselves out in current relationships, including the transference—countertransference relationship with the analyst. At this point in the evolution of psychological ideas, attachment theory and psychoanalytic theory, rather than offering alternative pathways, offer an exciting possibility for a convergence that is mutually enriching.

References


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STUDENT ESSAY COMPETITION 1999

Once again we are holding a competition for essays written by clinical students of adult or child psychoanalysis or psychotherapy. Original papers are invited on clinical or theoretical topics; we are particularly interested in the integration of clinical and theoretical material. Topics should bear on the unconscious and/or the transference/countertransference. Papers may be those submitted to the student’s institute during the course of training but must not have previously been published elsewhere or be under consideration for publication.

The papers will be judged by a panel of senior psychoanalysts and psychotherapists and the paper winning first prize will be published in the Journal. Up to three cash prizes will be allocated.

Manuscripts should be typed, double spaced, on one side of the paper only and not longer than 5000 words. References should be in the order of author, (date), title, place of publication, and details of volume and pages or city/publisher. The name of the competitor should not appear on the manuscript but should appear on one separate page and include address, telephone number and institute of training, as well as title of the paper. Manuscripts will not be returned: manuscripts which are over length unfortunately cannot be considered.

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CLOSING DATE: MONDAY, MARCH 15th, 1999