Relational and Intersubjective Perspectives in Psychoanalysis

A Critique

Edited by Jon Mills
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In memory of Peter L. Giovacchini
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About the Contributors
Psychoanalysis today is largely a psychology of consciousness: post- and neo-Freudians form a marginalized community within North America in comparison to contemporary relational and intersubjective theorists who emphasize the phenomenology of lived conscious experience, affective attunement, social construction, and interpersonal recognition over the role of insight and interpretation. Despite the rich historical terrain of theoretical variation and advance, contemporary approaches have displaced the primacy of the unconscious. A brief perusal through many leading psychoanalytic periodicals would yield very few direct references to the unconscious, unlike preceding generations where unconscious processes were the locus of explanation and critique. Perhaps this is in part due to the changing role of psychoanalysis in a consumer society where individuals neither have the time nor the resources to afford delving into the inner recesses of mind with no guarantee of equitable return. And even if they did, the masses would not be interested in disrupting their equilibrium for the exchange of self-knowledge. Psychoanalysis is aware of this and for this reason must adopt certain pragmatic positions to ensure its survival. Unlike the postwar boom of previous generations during which many neurotics underwent a five day analytic treatment each week, the actual number of committed analysands today could hardly sustain a clinician’s practice. As a result, the practice of psychoanalysis has been forced to go underground: it is exclusively for the rich and the elite.

In its theoretical and applied form, however, psychoanalysis relegates itself to conceptual speculations about human nature and issues of most concern to a public suffering from tangible distress. On the clinical side of things, psychoanalysis, for practical reasons, has joined the ranks of the competing psychotherapies which are generally less focused on an exposition of unconscious
processes in favor of attenuating adverse conditions impacting on conscious experience. With its current focus on consciousness, psychoanalysis is straying from its original contribution to the behavioral sciences. This is particularly salient when examining the theoretical topography of relational and intersubjective perspectives that are currently in vogue. It is unfortunate that classical approaches are often portrayed as antithetical to these contemporary schools of thought, when in actuality they are complementary models that enrich our understanding of psychic reality and clinical practice.

Notwithstanding the theoretical hair-splitting that historically occurs across the psychoanalytic domain, we are beginning to see with increasing force and clarity what Mitchell and Aron (1999) refer to as the emergence of a new tradition—namely, relational psychoanalysis. Having its edifice in early object relations theory, the Middle British and American interpersonal schools, and self psychology (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983), relationality is billed as "a distinctly new tradition" (Mitchell & Aron, 1999, p. x). What is being labeled as the American Middle Group of psychoanalysis (Spezzano, 1997), relational and intersubjective theory has taken center stage. Indeed, psychoanalysis in the United States has become so dominated and politicized by the proponents of relational thought, especially by contemporary psychoanalytic psychology, that one would be hard-pressed to pass a blind editorial review to present a paper at a professional conference or get published in a leading journal without at least minimally engaging this new movement.

This volume was originally proposed to be a balanced examination of relational and intersubjective perspectives in psychoanalysis neither intended to deify its subject matter ex cathedra nor to emphasize destructive polemics. Rather, I had in mind the inclination to assemble a first-rate group of scholars and clinicians who would seek to critically examine the advances and departures of relational frameworks from other competing psychoanalytic paradigms. My hope was to produce an eclectic, symmetrical volume equally addressing purported advantages as well as limitations, problems, and/or conundrums this movement has generated. So much for wishful intentions. For various reasons, such as other overriding commitments, many of the identified scholars in relational and intersubjective psychoanalysis declined to participate. While this does not at all deprecate the value of the scholars that comprise this volume—most of whom are internationally celebrated in their own right, it did nevertheless change the focus of this volume considerably. Therefore, this present contribution has turned into more of a critical reader of relational and intersubjective perspectives in psychoanalytic thought and practice. I mention this shift in the inception of the project for the simple fact that it gives the reader the context for the structure of this work. It may be argued that relational and intersubjective perspectives have failed to be prop-
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erly critiqued from within their own school of discourse, so it now becomes the intention of this book to remedy such lacunae. With the ever-increasing interest in interdisciplinary and philosophic analysis, many of the contributors assembled here subject advocates of the American Middle School to a through critique of its philosophical assumptions, limitations, and practices they claim to purport. If not for any other reason, this project is of timely significance for the field of psychoanalysis and the competing psychotherapies because it attempts to address the philosophical undergirding of the relational movement.

Relational and intersubjective perspectives in psychoanalysis were prepared by many object relations theorists, interpersonal analysts, and self psychologists, each with varying degrees of specificity; but relational concepts and their therapeutic advance in psychoanalysis are originally attributed to the work of the late Stephen Mitchell and Jay Greenberg, while intersubjectivity is mainly associated with Jessica Benjamin, Robert Stolorow, and George Atwood. But what precisely do we mean by relational versus intersubjective? Are the two distinct or the same? With regard to theory, both approaches largely converge with each other, emphasizing the nature of contextuality, emotional transmutation, meaning construction, mutual yet asymmetrical connectedness, and recognition, thus at first glance making their respective conceptual distinctions minimal. Relationality (Mitchell, 1988, 2002), intersubjectivity theory (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992; Orange, Atwood, & Stolorow, 1997), and dyadic systems (Beebe, Jafee, & Lachmann, 1992) approaches all appreciate the nuances of emotional subjective life, empathic attunement and responsiveness, and the interdependency of relational attachment between the patient and the therapist.

Yet many distinctions and nuances between relational and intersubjective perspectives deserve thorough critique, as many authors set out to do in the context of this project. However, where agreements exist, these schools of thought typically propound to reify dyadic and social interpersonal life over the intrapsychic lived subjective experience of each individual. In my estimation, taken to the extreme, these propositions have the tendency to present false dichotomies that extricate intrapsychic life from the relational matrix—such as Stolorow’s mythology of the isolated mind, or they banish intrapsychic experience all together, thus boiling everything down to an interpersonal ontology. In fact, Mitchell (1992) claims that all subjective experience is relationally mediated, while Stolorow and his colleagues (2001) have gone so far as to insinuate a disregard for the individual altogether, claiming that all intrapsychic experience is intersubjectively constructed. These propositions fail to account for the unconscious a priori forces that exist prior to interpersonal experience, the epistemology of internal thoughts,
feelings, and experiential processes that are separate from other beings, and the lived phenomenology of affective, preverbal, and extralinguistic forces that permeate the interior of the life within.

In my view, relationality generally involves the convergence and interdependence of two or more human subjects—each with their own competing subjective processes—who form a matrix or field of reciprocal interactions that permeate the unconscious, affective, and cognitive appraisals of each person, thus giving rise to both intrapsychic and interpersonal transfigurations. But relationality also transpires within the interior of each subject, within the silent dialogue the soul has with itself (Mills, 2002); thereby the self has a relation to its self.

For Mitchell, Benjamin, Ogden, Stolorow, Stern, Aron, Lichtenberg, and others, personality development and clinical praxis are conditioned on the relational-phenomenological field of interactional experience that constitutes subjective and communal life from birth onward. The intersubjective matrix presupposes the process of attachment and relatedness, beginning with the introjection, identification, and internalization of early parental images and their value imperatives, which in turn are incorporated and transposed onto psychic structure: this indubitably leaves permutations on self-organization and one’s internalized representational world further interacting with competing, preexisting unconscious processes. Intersubjectivity may be viewed on multiple axes within the ontogenesis of each individual, from the internalization of one subject (as internalized representations of their functional properties and qualities) into the subjectivity of the other—a process initiated in infancy, to the mutual recognition that each subject is a self-conscious experiential being (Hegel, 1807) who has needs, thoughts, and feelings similar to one’s own. Because the intersubjective field is often asymmetrical (Aron, 1996)—that is, disproportionate and uneven—such as the child’s unequal relation to his parents, or the patient’s respect for the therapist’s expertise, the degree of relational reciprocity will be contingent upon the form and parameters of the therapeutic encounter negotiated by the intersubjective unit. Not only is this colored by the patient’s disposition, attitudes, and symptomatic profile, but it is radically conditioned by the therapist’s personality style and theoretical mode of clinical practice. Forming the intersubjective constellation is never the same process: because each subject—both patient and therapist—have their own unique personalities, experiences, and developmental histories they bring to bear on the therapeutic context, this ensures that each intersubjective system will be created afresh, marbled by novel interaction, and mediated by situational contingencies that materialize in the moment (such as the spontaneous activation of affect, the perception, meaning, and interpretation of content, role responsive adoptions enacted from each subject, the permeability
of emotional resonance states, and the mobilization of unconscious conflict, wish, and defense, resistance, transference, and countertransference, just to name a few).

Relational and intersubjective psychoanalytic perspectives have made their hallmark devaluing Freud and his theoretical corpus while offering their own “alternative” paradigms. While a thorough critique of the misconstrual and anticlassical bias is beyond the scope of this immediate introduction, it may be argued that Freud anticipated the significance of relationality in a number of important ways. It was Freud (1921) who advanced the notion that identification constituted an emotional bond based on a feeling of attachment or connection to a significant love object. It may be said that since his introduction of the signal theory of anxiety, Freud (1926) was the first to emphasize the importance of attachment (Sandler, 1989; Tyson, 2000), and threats against separation and loss (Freud, 1933). During his mature period, Freud (1931) identified the “primary relation” between children and their mothers (p. 225), claiming that the maternal object is the “prototype of all later love-relations—for both sexes” (Freud, 1938, p. 188). The nature and significance of relatedness is further encompassed by Freud’s (1923, 1933, 1938) view of eros as a relational principle (see also Reisner, 1992), which he specifically delineates on a continuum of realized possibilities and expressions including sexuality, identification, love, sublimation, reason, ethics, aesthetics, and culture, among other things. Identification becomes an architectonic function in the development and fortification of psychic structure—being at once a basic operation of connectedness to another through emotional mediacy, and the assimilation of universal values belonging to familial and cultural life. Identification furthermore entails the fantasized construction of certain subjective ideals as wishful expressions that can be both a source of pleasure and conflict for each individual; and it is precisely the nature of fantasized ideal relations that become crucial aspects of the clinical encounter.

As Freud (1933) describes, identification is “the assimilation of one ego to another,” whereby the other’s ego is taken into the self: “It is a very important form of attachment to someone else” (p. 63, italics added). Here Freud recognizes the initial process of intersubjective self-consciousness: one ego recognizes the ego of the other and wants to be like that other. In fact, when we identify so strongly with another, we wish to be that other, to have and possess him as our own (see Freud, 1921, 1933). And when objects of identification are lost or obliged to be given up, the ego compensates by identifying with the lost object, which is incorporated into the self. This often explains why objects of identifications (and their ideals) are repetitiously evoked and enacted in clinical populations through various pathological manifestations—for example, as repetition compulsions fueled by the unconscious desire to procure a certain
degree of qualitative responsiveness, recognition, mastery, acceptance, love, and/or validation from a dependency figure or its symbolic surrogate, such as the therapist.

Identification is the precursor for the development of conscience and the internalization of valuation practices, having its original impetus in emotive attachments to parents. Because objects of choice are based on the quality of a subjective emotional bond with a significant dependency figure, identification is furthermore a precursor to love. Yet for Freud (1933), love is a developmental achievement predicated on identification, for identification is "probably the very first" form of attachment (p. 63). Identification therefore becomes an indispensable process of relationality. Extending this notion to the clinical milieu, it is often the case that identification with the therapist (parent) leads to positive internalized representations, which in turn produce positive therapeutic effects by rehabilitating or ameliorating deficits in self-structure.

Contemporary relational psychoanalysis claims to have transcended the theoretical ailments that plague classical analysis by emphasizing the irreducible subjectivity of the analyst (Renik, 1993) over objective certainty, the fallacy of the analyst's epistemological authority, the primacy of context and perspective over universality and essentialism, and the adoption of a "two-person psychology" which is thoroughly intersubjective. But these premises are not without problems. Does the analyst's subjectivity foreclose the question of objectivity? Does epistemically limited access to knowledge necessarily delimit our understanding of truth and reality? Does particularity and pluralism negate the notion of universals and collectivity? Does a nominalist view of subjectivity necessarily annul the notion of essence? And does a two-person model of intersubjectivity minimize or cancel the value of intrapsychic reality and lived individual experience? These are but some of the philosophical conundrums that arise from the relational literature.

But with a few exceptions, it may be said that contemporary psychoanalytic theory largely lacks originality; and when theoretical novelty exists, it is premised on re-appropriating old paradigms under the veil of popular garb, e.g. postmodernism. What is even more striking is the paucity of philosophical rigor among contemporary writers, much of which has been addressed by my colleagues in this volume. There is little creativity left: psychoanalysis is at the limit (Mills, 2004). The distinguished group of scholars and clinicians assembled here are largely preoccupied with tracing the (1) philosophical underpinnings of contemporary relational and intersubjective theory, (2) its theoretical relation to traditional psychoanalytic thought, (3) clinical implications for therapeutic practice, and (4) its intersection with alternative psychoanalytic paradigms that emerge from these traditions. Robert Wallerstein provides a
thoughtful overview and critique of each chapter at the end of this book; therefore, I will not duplicate a critical summary of each contribution, which is customary in an edited volume of this kind. Rather, I wish to make a few observations regarding the general thrust of the chapters that tend to organize around a few interwoven yet diverse themes.

A number of chapters attempt to situate relational and intersubjective thought within the historical and philosophical context in which they originally transpire—namely, from early German idealism through twentieth-century European continental philosophy. Roger Frie, Bruce Reis, and M. Guy Thompson particularly provide a perspicuous and cogent introduction to the philosophical foundations of relational psychoanalysis and the interface between the existential, phenomenological, and linguistic traditions. Frie and Reis provide an exceptionally well-articulated overview of intersubjectivity in the contemporary works of Benjamin, Ogden, and Stolorow and his colleagues, its philosophical history, and implications for relational theory and practice; while Thompson shows how the work of Laing, Husserl, Heidegger, and Lacan all prefigure the American relational turn, in part claiming that Mitchell, Aron, Stolorow and other relational thinkers have simply distorted the intersubjective elements of classical psychoanalysis while passing off their own theories under the guise of new scholarship.

One persistent criticism of relational theorizing is that it does not do justice to the notion of personal agency and the separateness of the self. Jon Frederickson pulls no punches in his assessment that the intersubjectivists fail to adequately account for the problem of agency, freedom, contextualism, the notion of an enduring subject or self, and personal identity. Similar concerns are addressed by Frie, Reis, Thompson, Peter Giovacchini, and Philip Giovacchini, who accuse relational thinking of displacing the centrality of the self and dissolving the concept of objectivity. Perhaps the most critical attention is paid to the work of Stolorow, Atwood, and Orange, who, by many authors’ evaluations of their theoretical edifice, demonstrate sloppy thinking at best, and incoherent thinking at worst. Frederickson argues that they extract and dislocate the subject from subjectivity, decompose personal identity, ignore the unique phenomenology and epistemological process of lived experience by collapsing every psychic event into a relational ontology, thus usurping the concretely existing human being, and devolve the notion of contextualism into the abyss of abstraction. Similarly, Peter Giovacchini simply thinks that the intersubjectivists have reinvented the wheel by replacing the transference–countertransference process, a common therapeutic phenomenon, with the terminology of the “intersubjective field” or “worldviews,” which he thinks is postmodern gibberish; while Philip Giovacchini, relying primarily on Winnicott, feels subjectivity is so radically emphasized that objective reality
becomes eclipsed. In the end, mind becomes this ephemeral ether that coalesces into an “intersubjective system” with no a priori processes informing its burgeoning structure. With the insistence on pure intersubjectivity, the subject evaporates. This leads many to conclude that Stolorow et al.’s theoretical commitments are simply philosophical embarrassments.

Where relational psychoanalysis has had more of a profound impact in recent times is on the way we have come to conceptualize the therapeutic encounter, and specifically the role of the analyst in technique and practice. Frank Summers, Timothy Zeddies, and David Downing provide chapters that address the therapeutic process within a relational framework relying on case illustrations to augment their theoretical propositions. Summers concentrates on the process of creation and self-discovery within the analytic situation, places greater value on responsiveness over insight and understanding, and addresses the nature of impasse and transcendence within the clinical encounter. Summers particularly addresses the curative aspects of affective attunement and empathic responsiveness within transitional space and transference enactments, and how self-discovery is simultaneously a creative process of mutual meaning construction.

Little has been said on the nature of psychoanalysis and ethics in the relational literature, and specifically on the role and place of the analyst's subjective values in the consulting room. This is presumably because psychoanalysis has historically remained opposed to the propagation of valuation judgments in favor of the neutrality necessary for understanding. Zeddies engages the important questions of moral discourse in psychoanalysis, the analyst’s valuation practices, the chasm between theory and clinical praxis, and impending ethical encounters that emerge in the course of therapeutic work. He argues for a particular psychoanalytic attitude that is willing and capable of examining the moral and philosophical underpinnings of relational thought and practice, both from the standpoint of the patient embroiled in ethical dilemmas, as well as valuation practices espoused by the analyst in attempts to produce therapeutic change.

Countertransference is often viewed as a negative enterprise that compromises successful treatment. This assessment, however, unfortunately obfuscates the essentially overdetermined meanings of countertransference phenomena. Downing's chapter is a specifically focused and detailed look at the problem of somnolence (e.g., drowsiness, sleep) in the analytic encounter through an extended case study of a chronically traumatized patient. He attempts to rectify a much neglected area of psychoanalytic inquiry by analyzing the multiple functions and parallel processes of the analyst’s and patient’s somnolence during a fourteen-year treatment.
The final section of the volume centers around alternative and postmodern perspectives in psychoanalysis that interface with the relational tradition. Marilyn Nissim-Sabat is particularly concerned with the crisis of positivism that threatens a phenomenology of intersubjectivity. Through Husserl, she examines the works of Benjamin, Hoffman, and Richard Bernstein, arguing that positivistic science ultimately "decapitates" psychoanalysis and sunders it from relational sensibility, a sensibility that is tenuously close to relapsing back into positivistic currents. Nissim-Sabat takes a pure agnostic stance with respect to the analyst's epistemic access to objective knowledge, and like Renik, reaffirms the irreducible nature of the therapist's subjectivity. In the end, she finds promise in Benjamin's feminist developmental theory and the meaning of recognition as a philosophical ideal.

Unlike Nissim-Sabat who sees positivism as the bane of psychoanalysis, psychoanalytic theory and practice can never escape the question of science and objectivity. Robert Langs is among one of the most prolific contemporary analytic writers and is founder of the strong-adaptive approach to communicative psychoanalysis. Langs sees his approach to theory and practice as inherently relational and interactional but diverges quite radically from mainstream perspectives that currently dominate the scene. Despite having many shared propositional similarities, Langs advocates for an objective and universal appraisal of unconscious communicative processes that challenge the often one-sided nature of subjectivity within the relational corpus. He very much assumes the existence of objective reality and sees emotional life as a bid for adaptation unconsciously assimilated in the service of survival. He provides a concise yet comprehensive overview of his theoretical system based on thirty years of research and proposes a juxtaposition to current relational theorizing.

One uncontestable aspect to relational psychoanalysis is that it challenges orthodox conceptions of neutrality, abstinence, and the admonition against therapist self-disclosure. Gershon Molad and Judith Vida provide a thoughtful and candid appraisal of the how analysts talk to one another about their own self-experiences in professional discourse and particularly in conference space. In what they call the autobiographical dialogue in the dialogue between analysts, they attempt to break down the inherent schism between the professional and the personal by being brutally honest about their own phenomenological processes which they attempt to bring within shared communal experience. Derived from clinical, postmodern, and aesthetic sensibilities, Molad and Vida are preoccupied with the presence of void, nothingness, and lack within existence, the most alienating and ineffable portraits of human desire, and how the personal development of the analyst is enriched.
through an intersubjective search for what is missing in our professional and personal lives.

My chapter is an attempt to ground psychoanalysis within a philosophical dialectical framework through the introduction of a new theoretical system I have called dialectical psychoanalysis or process psychology. Process psychology favors a relational or intersubjective approach to theory and practice, yet it attempts to situate relationality in the broader ontological context that informs human experience. Through Hegel’s dialectical logic, I am largely preoccupied with articulating the basic constituents of psychic reality derived from process philosophy and attempt to offer a potential answer to the question of realism. In the end, I argue that psychoanalysis is ultimately a metaphysical enterprise.

Because relational psychoanalysis is primarily an American phenomena, arguably garnering the most recent attention in psychoanalytic theorizing and practice, there is no unified voice or set of precepts defining relational and intersubjective principles. One thing is for certain, however: Relationality is born out of a tradition that stands in relation to late modern and early continental philosophy, therefore sharing many affinities with the existential and phenomenological movements informing the context of relational thinking today. With increasing interest and sophistication in conceptual and technical innovations, relational psychoanalysis is well on its way to moving beyond merely a trend to become a tradition in its own right.

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