

My Psychoanalytic Journey

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I am grateful to the editors of *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* for inviting me to participate in this retrospective issue on our collective psychoanalytic journeys. Life proceeds, both personally and professionally, in such a dense rush that this has provided a precious opportunity for me to take a longer view. Histories of persons, of nations, or of disciplines can be told in many different ways. The most compelling narrative of my own psychoanalytic history, from my current vantage point, is one with not too many surprises but with continuity and progressive deepening and enrichment.

LIKE MANY IN THE FIELD OF PSYCHOANALYSIS, I WAS FIRST DRAWN to the ideas of Freud himself. I don't remember how I came across Freud's writings, but I spent a good part of the summer between my junior and senior years of high school devouring the five-volume edition of Freud's collected papers. I went to college looking for Freud in psychology courses, only to discover rats (not the Rat Man). I ended up with a wonderful cross-disciplinary major, "History, the Arts & Letters," in which I learned a great deal about structural, comparative approaches to ideas. My major interests, in addition to psychology, were politics and philosophy. Eventually, both began to merge for me back into psychology: helping people change their lives politically and socially required understanding them psychologically, and Nietzsche convinced me that philosophy had made a wrong

The late Stephen A. Mitchell, Ph.D. was Founding Editor, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues: A Journal of Relational Perspectives*.

turn in focusing on how people should be rather than on how people actually are.

I got my doctorate in clinical psychology at New York University (NYU) in the remarkably open and stimulating atmosphere created by Bernie Kalinkowitz and many of his friends, adjunct faculty trained at the William Alanson White Psychiatric Institute. I minored in community psychology. My dual focus on individuals and social processes was maintained in my internship at the Columbia Psychiatric Institute, where I spent half the year on the community service and half the year on the psychoanalytic service.

My conceptual and clinical development in those years reflected that same dialectical tension between the individual and the social, intrapsychic, and interpersonal. Although Freudian ego psychology was very much a presence at NYU (through Robert Holt, Leo Goldberger, and others), I was most drawn to interpersonal teachers and supervisors whose ideas spoke more directly to my own experience and understanding of the world. I read Sullivan and Fromm avidly, and I was introduced (through Bernie Friedland) to Fairbairn and Guntrip. At about the same time, I discovered the existentialist and interpersonal essays of Leslie Farber, whose thought has had a lasting influence on me. During those years, I was also in a very meaningful and useful personal analysis with a contemporary Freudian.

For me, these various foci deepened during the mid-1970s at the White institute. I was forced to change to a White institute training analyst, which I resented at first. However, the second analysis in some respects had more of an impact on me than the first did, and I have come to treasure the two experiences in tandem as having taught me a great deal about how deeply personal and interpersonal each analytic dyad is. The dominant intellectual influence at White in those years was Edgar Levenson, who greatly transformed and modernized interpersonal theory into its current emphasis on transference-countertransference phenomena. But I was also very lucky to be able to study Freud with Irving Paul and ego psychology with Martin Bergman. My favorite supervisor, Geneva Goodrich, told me that it takes about seven to eight years to learn to do psychoanalysis, so that took off some of the pressure I put on myself. I had enormously rich clinical experiences with patients and supervisors, and I still find myself thinking about these experiences and people today. I watched my clinical work change from year to year in tandem with changes in

supervisors, and I worried about being too easily influenced, as if I were clinically promiscuous. (This was also noted by a couple of my patients!) But I decided again that psychoanalysis was a very personal business and that a kind of surrender to the sensibility of supervisors and teachers was the best way to learn deeply what they had to offer. I stopped worrying.

I had discovered in college that the only way to really learn anything was to study it on one's own, and I began to find that the best way to learn something deeply was to teach it. I taught psychoanalytic ideas and interdisciplinary courses to undergraduates for eight years during the 1970s, and then I began teaching at a wide range of different psychoanalytic institutes. It was in teaching—taking apart, reconstructing, and comparing different theoretical models—that I discovered that I had developed a point of view. And it was in presenting and reflecting on my own clinical work that I discovered that I had indeed developed a coherent style of my own. The teaching lent itself naturally to writing, which I had always loved doing, but until then I had not felt that I had anything particularly useful to say. To the deep satisfactions of doing clinical work were added a passion for both teaching and writing, on which I have continued to spend a major portion of time, to this very moment. For the past 15 years or so, I have been meeting with reading groups to explore both past and present analytic literature. Meeting with these groups has been a rich vehicle for sharing and processing my clinical experiences and ideas. It is difficult for me to imagine doing clinical work without the teaching and writing that have become its counterpart.

Over lunch one day, Jay Greenberg and I discovered that we were both planning to write the same book. We joined forces, and the book eventually became *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* (1983). We wanted to show that a broad shift (in those days, *paradigm* was not yet a clichéd word) had taken place over several preceding decades of psychoanalytic thought—from an understanding of mind as built from drive-based impulses and defenses to an understanding of mind as built from relational configurations. We tried to demonstrate the different strategies for dealing with this shift—from more conservative strategies of accommodation (in Freudian ego psychology) to more radical strategies of clear alternatives (in interpersonal theory and in the object relations theory of Fairbairn). For me, writing this book was extraordinary in many ways. Jay and I often

converged in our approaches to issues, but there were some important differences as well. Struggling with those differences and devising a conceptual framework for encompassing them made the book much more balanced and textured than it would have been if either of us had written it alone. That taught me a great deal about collaboration and community. And research into the book sections for which I was responsible deepened my sense that there were fundamental compatibilities among interpersonal psychoanalysis, British school object relations theories (particularly Fairbairn's), and much of the clinical wisdom of contemporary Kleinian theory.

The understanding of the history of psychoanalytic ideas that developed in those years has stayed with me ever since. There had been many innovations and departures from classical Freudian drive theory over the years, but they had remained isolated around different issues in different schools—interpersonal theory, object relations theory, self psychology, existential psychoanalysis, humanistic psychology, and so on. Many of these contributions use different terminology, but they are grounded in common conceptual assumptions. Together, they form a comprehensive alternative to what had increasingly become, for me, the anachronistic features of classical metapsychology.

In the mid-1980s, I began to develop an integrated relational perspective for exploring various major psychoanalytic concerns, including sexuality, development, narcissism, agency, aggression, self, authenticity, the psychoanalytic relationship, and analytic process. The results of my explorations were eventually published in *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis: An Integration* (1988), *Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis* (1993), and *Influence and Autonomy in Psychoanalysis* (1997).

As I was working out my own personal synthesis of concepts and influences, several institutional developments were having an enormous impact on me.

First, the Division of Psychoanalysis (Division 39) of the American Psychological Association began to really take off. After decades of passively waiting and hoping to be taken in by the American Psychoanalytic Association and the American Federation, psychologists began to empower themselves to study, teach, and practice psychoanalysis. I became active in teaching at various “local chapters” in different cities (Denver, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, and, later,

Toronto and Seattle), and these chapters grew into a new generation of psychoanalytic institutes. These teaching experiences—involving marathon weekends, speaker phones, and video cameras—were some of the most exciting I've enjoyed. There seemed to be a synergy between the revolution that was relaxing the tight institutional control that had been strangling psychoanalytic education and the theory and clinical practice revolution that the relational literature was beginning to capture and systematize.

Second, I extended my teaching from the White institute to the Post-doctoral Program at NYU. I was brought in by Bernie Friedland and Mannie Ghent to teach object relations theory in the Interpersonal/Humanistic track at a time when the Freudian and Interpersonal/Humanistic tracks were locked in a power struggle that prevented either from developing fully. In 1989, various factors converged to end this struggle, and Mannie, Bernie, and I (soon to be joined by Phil Bromberg and Jim Fosshage) were given the mandate to form a quasi-independent Relational track. Out of the explosion of interest, which was truly unexpected and startling, emerged a community that has been an extremely rich intellectual home for me.

Third, during the fall of 1989, Lew Aron and I discovered (over another fateful lunch) that we both had the fantasy of developing a relational journal. Lew mentioned this to Paul Stepansky of The Analytic Press. Paul, very excited about the idea, approached me to form a small group to develop the journal that would eventually become *Psychoanalytic Dialogues: A Journal of Relational Perspectives*. The extraordinary interest the journal attracted almost from the beginning was extremely exciting, and being its editor gave me the opportunity to work closely with colleagues who have become friends and, each in their own way, major influences on my own thinking over the years—at first, Lew Aron, Phil Bromberg, Mannie Ghent, and Adrienne Harris, and then, over the years, Neil Altman, Tony Bass, Jody Davies, and Muriel Dimen. Most recently, we were joined by Margaret Black, Carolyn Clement, and Jay Frankel. In 199x, The Analytic Press launched the Relational Perspectives Book Series, coedited by Lew Aron and me. Lew and I recently coedited the series volume *Relational Psychoanalysis: The Emergence of a Tradition* (1999).

The overlapping communities that emerged in these organizations have been extremely important in the development of my understanding

and clinical sensibility. In a very fundamental way, my psychoanalytic journey has been a “journey with others,” and as a result I have learned a great deal about many things, including these few: the dense complexities of the interactions between analysand and analyst (Lewis Aron, Jay Greenberg); multiplicitous self states and trauma (Jody Davies, Phil Bromberg); the pervasive and subtle workings of gender (Adrienne Harris, Muriel Dimen, Virginia Goldner); the ways in which we are saturated in social class and racial meanings (Neil Altman); the richness of the self-psychological approach to experience (Margaret Black, Jim Fosshage); and varieties of authenticity and intersubjectivity in the subtle distinctions among surrender, submission, and recognition (Mannie Ghent, Jessica Benjamin).

As I look back from my current vantage point, I see that the basic interests and values with which I began have stayed with me throughout the years. My early interest in both individual psychology and social problems and processes has led to a relational psychoanalytic vision that emphasizes the interpenetrability of the intrapsychic and the interpersonal. Jay Greenberg and I intended the term *relational* as a bridge concept between interpersonal relations and internal object relations. My subsequent clinical and intellectual experiences have taken me more deeply into both realms. My early education also imparted to me a strong sense of the contextual nature of all human thought—its embeddedness in cultural place and historical time. That commitment has certainly stayed with me over the years and nurtured my involvement in the sometimes hazardous business of “comparative psychoanalysis.” It has also girded my conviction that, whereas Freud’s psychoanalysis was inevitably both facilitated and constrained by the intellectual milieu of his time, our psychoanalysis must interface with, learn from, and speak to other participants in our intellectual milieu. So, contemporary philosophy, science, philosophy of history, and literary theory have remained to some extent my hobbies. What I have been able to learn about the concerns of scholars in these areas has had an ongoing, living relationship with the evolution of my psychoanalytic ideas and clinical concerns.

In addition to the original formative influences of Freud, Sullivan, Fromm, Farber, Levenson, Fairbairn, Winnicott, and Klein, and the cross-fertilizing exchanges I had with my colleagues on *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, other analytic authors have also had a major impact on my thinking. Over the past 15 years or so, I have found the

contributions of the contemporary Kleinians of great interest and resonance; I've come to recognize Racker's writings on transference and countertransference as a source of great wisdom. In the 1980s, I had the privilege of getting to know both Merton Gill and Irwin Z. Hoffman, and each has had a large impact on me both personally and professionally. Gill's lucidity, incisiveness, and intellectual integrity have become ideals for me, and Irwin's brutally honest, ongoing investigation of the ambiguities of the analyst's participation in the analytic process continues to push me in ways I am not always happy to go but always find very rewarding. I have also found the evolving thought of Thomas Ogden to be always challenging, profound, and inspiring. More recently, I've found that Adam Phillips's aesthetic take on psychoanalysis captures and expands what I've always felt has been the fun in psychoanalytic thought. And, even though I disagree with Roy Schafer, especially on basic issues of technique, I have found his writings over the years to be a source of great riches.

Perhaps the greatest joy in my reading of the psychoanalytic literature in recent years has been my immersion in the work of Hans Loewald. I was asked to be the discussant of a paper he was to present at the White institute in 1981, and, in preparation, I read a good deal of his work. The exchange we had then was stimulating for me, and in a sense his ideas became part of the background of my own thought and writing. Somewhere through teaching in the mid-1990s, however, I began to realize just how powerfully Loewald's vision had influenced my own in many ways I had not directly recognized. This led me to study his work systematically. (I included two chapters on Loewald in my most recent book, *Relationality: From Attachment to Intersubjectivity*.) As Loewald's ideas all developed within the context of his love of Freud and of his extremely idiosyncratic and creative reading of Freud's work, reading Loewald led me back to reread and reconsider Freud. I've found this kind of continual cycling back as probably the best way to both preserve and revitalize analytic traditions.

Several features of the politics of the recent history of psychoanalysis seem worth noting at this point, because they have had a big impact on my experience of and location in the psychoanalytic world. When Jay Greenberg and I began writing about the relational tradition, I regarded relational ideas as an extension of interpersonal psychoanalysis and current relational contributions as continuous with

the earlier interpersonal tradition through the bridges created by object relations theories. It was one of the greatest surprises of my professional life to discover that many identifying themselves as “interpersonal psychoanalysts,” particularly those of the older generation, did not see it that way. For them, object relations, because of its intrapsychic focus, is incompatible with interpersonal psychoanalysis and is merely an extension of everything that is wrong with traditional Freudian thinking. The title of one of the chapters in Edgar Levenson’s *The Ambiguity of Change* (1983) puts the issue succinctly: “Object Relations Theory: Bridge or Detour?” So, even though I have always considered myself both an interpersonal analyst and a relational analyst, relational psychoanalysis began to be regarded by many as a distinct school of psychoanalytic thought unto itself.

On the other side, relational concepts have continued to seep into the contemporary Freudian literature. I use the word *seep* purposely, because relational authors are most often, though with important exceptions, simply not cited. Seepage has occurred in a couple ways. Sometimes, as *relational* became almost a buzzword, the claim has been made that mainstream psychoanalysis has been relational all along. And sometimes relational authors have been caricatured as the wildest sort of “anything-goes” clinicians. These developments have made it very important to try to sort out understandings and terminology in an effort to locate real differences from both false agreements and false polarities.

I now turn to what I find most significant and most pressing in psychoanalytic thought and clinical practice today. In terms of theory, the basic underpinnings of psychoanalytic ideas have shifted broadly in recent decades—from drive-based to relational-based concepts. Concurrently, there has been a marked shift in the center of gravity in analytic thought—from the biology–culture dialectic that Freud explored to the oneness–twoness dialectic that pervades much of the contemporary literature. This is apparent in the ways in which that fundamental psychoanalytic premise, the unconscious, is now used both in theory and in clinical practice.

In Freud’s time and in Freud’s way of thinking, the unconscious was dangerous because of its primitiveness. The narcissistic blow we suffered with the discovery of the unconscious was, Freud suggested, the horrible truth that we are not masters in our own house. The masters of the psyche are instinctual impulses and defenses against

instinctual impulses, in all their complex derivatives and compromises. The unconscious and resistances to the unconscious were understood in terms of the emergence of phylogenetic remnants in the life of culture and the power of biology to destabilize civilization.

This way of thinking about the unconscious surely has enduring relevance for us. But in our time, and in our most recent analytic thought, the destabilizing power of the unconscious, both within our personal experience and as a doctrine, is increasingly understood not so much in terms of biology but in terms of otherness or “alterity”—the ways in which oneness is limited by, in some sense is constituted by, twoness. (Biology is still enormously important, but it is a differently conceived biology, not in contrast to nurture but as partly shaped through nurture.) Our minds are not static structures that we carry around for display in different contexts. What we carry are potentials for generating recurrent experiences that are actualized only in specific contexts, in interpersonal exchanges with others. (Intrapsychic structure is still very important, but it is a differently conceived structure—less static, more contextual, actualizing itself in situations.) Conversely, our very thought processes are composed of language and interiorized conversations with others. Therefore, we are embedded, to a great extent unconsciously, in interpersonal fields, and, conversely, interpersonal configurations are embedded, to a great extent unconsciously, in our individual psyches.

The great nature-versus-nurture, biology-versus-culture dialectic shaped Freud’s ways of understanding all fundamental psychoanalytic problems—the unconscious, sexuality, aggression, fantasy, conflict, and so on. For us, these polarities have been deconstructed, rethought in more complex terms. We have come to appreciate the ways in which nature and nurture, as well as biology and culture, continually interpenetrate and mutually shape each other, so that traditional psychoanalytic problems are increasingly reframed in terms of conflictual mental states and organizations, projective–introjective cycles of intrapsychic and interpersonal processes, and conflictual attachments and identifications with different sorts of external and internal objects.

In terms of clinical technique, I believe a very important shift began about five years ago. With the development of interpersonal or relational understandings of the analytic process in the 1970s and 1980s, the analyst’s participation in and influence on the analytic process were understood as being increasingly important.

Countertransference was no longer an obstacle but a tool, and neutrality was understood as an influence-masking illusion. The most important contributors to that understanding, in my view, were Edgar Levenson and Merton Gill, and both Levenson and Gill placed great importance on the interpretation of transference-countertransference dynamics as *the* fundamental analytic tool. It is very important not to assume that the patient's experience of the analyst is a distortion, a temporal displacement from early childhood, both argued. The patient reacts to the analyst—through past experience and unconscious dynamics, to be sure—as a real, nontransparent person in the here and now. The analyst has to keep a focus on the patient's experience of the analyst's participation—for Levenson, through Sullivan's "detailed inquiry," and for Gill, through continual interpretation of allusions and resistances to the transference. If the analyst's impact on the process is not made explicit, the process becomes, in Levenson's (1983) terms, persuasion rather than cure, and in Gill's terms, a manipulative transference cure. In this view, the analyst's interactive involvement in the process is an inevitable contaminant, but the patient's autonomy can be preserved by a vigilant analysis of that contaminant.

Over the past five to 10 years, there has been a gradual realization that there is no way to filter out the analyst's impact on the process. Continual inquiry, persistent transference interpretation, and systematic self-disclosure are hardly ways to limit the analyst's influence. They are, in fact, very powerful ways of steering and influencing the process. This realization, I believe, is having a profound impact on the ways we are now exploring the nature of analytic technique.

For previous generations of clinicians, technique referred primarily to behavior. What should the analyst do? What should the analyst refrain from doing? This cannot possibly work for us. We have come to realize that the meaning of whatever the analyst does or does not do is contextual and coconstructed. The analyst cannot decide on the meaning of the "frame" unilaterally. For some patients, silence is a form of holding; for others, it is a form of torture. For some patients, interpretation conveys deep recognition and self-expansion; for others, it is a form of violent exposure. For some patients, the analyst's self-disclosure might offer a unique and precious form of authenticity and honesty; for others, it is a form of charismatic seduction and narcissistic exploitation. For some patients, questions represent a

precious willingness to join and know them; for others, questions are a surreptitious invasion. It is no longer compelling to decide that these events are what we want them to be and that when patients experience them otherwise they are distorting. Interpersonal situations are ambiguous and can be interpreted in many different ways, depending on our past and our dynamics.

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