Psychoanalytic Complexity: Context, Attitudes and Epistemological Ineptitude

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25 minutes

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We all want to know what works in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, and, of course, what doesn't. When I think about our contemporary ideas of therapeutic action and the change process, I am reminded of early man at the nighttime communal fire, reenacting for his clan his late-afternoon killing of a saber-tooth tiger. He plunges his spear into the ground with ferocity, twisting it from side to side, exciting sparks from the fire, as the tribe members look on with awe and reverence. (We've seen this in the movies.) Even though earlier the tiger may actually have fallen on this hunter's stick as he, the hunter, terrified, was attempting a hasty escape from certain death. After things turn out well, and the dust settles, and our heartbeats return to normal, we construct good stories about how and why things
worked out, and usually these are not mystery stories about accidents and perplexity. We tend to graft what sound like insight and good sense onto good outcomes, and even sometimes insight and good sense onto bad outcomes. Naturally we want to make sense of things, and naturally we want to have a say in how things turn out. Today, I want to talk about the role of explanatory frameworks that heretofore have been used primarily for retrospection, and how they might actually be used prospectively to inform our aims and actions in a therapy process. For me, that includes talking about a model of psychoanalytic complexity, creativity, and our clinical attitudes, and yes, our epistemological ineptitude as well—how little we can really know.

Complexity theory—a multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary explanatory framework used to understand how systems work—has a rich and varied history embedded in a variety of fields, such as physics, molecular biology, meteorology, and, of course, the study of slime mold. Now more recently, and finally(!), applied to psychological systems and, in particular, to psychoanalysis, complexity theory, or what I think of as psychoanalytic complexity, is expanding our understanding of human complex adaptive systems in exciting and
challenging directions. It sheds a much more radical light on the central and relentless role of context in understanding emotional life and the meaning-making process. We have moved from the notion of teaching the patient, to learning from the patient, to learning now from the dynamic, fluid, and unpredictable systems of which each of us is but a component. And if we learn nothing else from our “personal situatedness” (Frie, 2010) in all these interpenetrating psychological systems, we do learn that we are fundamentally epistemologically inept beings: That we can never grasp a God’s eye view of what gives rise to specific emotional experiences and meanings, always fluid and transforming from one moment to the next, despite our occasional and welcome glimpses of delimited and emergent truth and reality. A psychoanalytic complexity sensibility is indeed humbling and conveys a deeper respect for the complexity of each individual, of each therapeutic dyad, and for the painfully engraved limits of our knowledge.

Psychoanalytic complexity is a powerful explanatory framework, allowing us to understand more robustly, but retrospectively, why, for example, therapeutic relationships move in the directions they do, how, for example, we undergo positive change. But until relatively
recently, it remained an explanatory framework, not a prescriptive tool or methodology for defining therapeutic action. In attempting to speak about how a complexity sensibility might inform our ideas about therapeutic action, I have more recently turned to examining the role of attitudes in the psychoanalytic endeavor. I believe our attitudes, often implicit, inform much of what happens in the therapeutic setting. This is not a new concept by any means. I just think it hasn’t received the amount of attention it really deserves. While Freud and his followers were elaborating the necessity for objectivity, clear-mindedness, and the exacting technique of a surgeon in working with patients, a much less obvious undercurrent was underway in the early part of the 20th century. For example, recall Edward Glover’s fleeting comment from 1937, embedded in what otherwise was pure Freudian dogma, that “…a prerequisite of the efficiency of interpretation is the attitude, the true unconscious attitude of the analyst to his patients” (p. 131). There are many other instances that reflect an explicit appreciation of attitude in psychoanalysis, for examples, certainly in the work of Ferenczi, Winnicott, Heimann, Little, Sander, Friedman, Hoffman, Aron, Orange, and many others.
Thus, to extend our use of complexity theory into realms other than solely grasping an explanatory framework, I recently have been exploring the implicit and explicit attitudes that emanate from adopting such a perspective and how these attitudes may impact the change process. Elsewhere I have outlined and discussed several of these attitudes, including the following:

1. An unrelenting respect for the complexity of human experiencing and personal individuality.

2. We, along with our perspectives, are relentlessly embedded in contexts from which we can never extricate ourselves.

3. We are continually informed by our history, our current state, and our environment, and the lines between these sources of our experience remain forever indeterminate.

4. Autocatalysm—arguably the basis for the creative process—that the very components of a system create their own agent of change (effectively an emergent property and product of the system and not something one person does to another).
5. Valuing the “feeling” of complexity, in the phenomenological sense: Bringing emotional themes and relating to life.


7. Distinctions between dimensions of discourse: The phenomenological and the explanatory/metaphysical.

8. Conundrum of personal situatedness, emotional responsibility, and potential (finite) freedom.

9. Radical hope (Lear).

10. Spirit of inquiry.

And previously, in published form, I have elaborated some of these attitudes through my case presentation of Cindy. Today I wish to share the development of this case with you, which I think highlights the role of the attitudes of (1) valuing attempting to sense the presence of an alive, dynamic system along with (2) valuing emergent affective change as a source of increased hope for positive growth in the face of repetition and darkness. These attitudes, most often conveyed implicitly, rest on the complexity proposition that disequilibrium, dynamism, uncertainty, and creativity are the pulse of
life and that equilibrium, resolution, and complacency are tantamount to death.

CASE OF CINDY

In my previous work with Cindy, I explored the role of the attitude that emotional life and emotional development are emergent properties of a larger, complex relational system—the attitude that we thus “find ourselves” inextricably embedded in a larger relational, life context (for which we cannot BE entirely responsible but for which we nevertheless must come to ASSUME responsibility). Note the vital difference here between “being” and “assuming,” meaning, whereas we cannot BE completely responsible for our current life situatedness—the “where-we-find-ourselves-ness” of which Heidegger speaks—we nevertheless have to ASSUME responsibility for where and how we find ourselves if we are to move ahead and realize other life possibilities. Assuming this responsibility enables personal creativity in whatever form it may emerge. Another attitude, and equally essential, was that things do not always work the way they may feel they do. I may feel I am solely responsible for my experiential world, that my own single brain is determining the sum total of my emotional experience and the meanings I attribute to it.
But of course that is not the case. There is no brain without culture and context. Or, I may feel I am not at all responsible and have no say in things, that I am a product solely of my socio/historical/cultural context a la radical postmodernism. And of course that is not the case either. I am a reflexive being with a sense of individuality and direction (well, most of the time anyway). There is no culture or context without brain.

These themes were quite pivotal in Cindy’s development, not the least of which was a loosening of her deeply ensconced presumption that all her problems were her fault—a result of an essential flaw deeply embedded in her psyche alone—about which she had felt enormous shame and guilt.

When 36-year-old Cindy first arrived at my office several years ago, she slowly and tentatively unbuttoned her coat in a manner suggesting the unwrapping of a package whose contents were sure to be unwelcome if not toxic. Well, it turned out, the contents were not quite as toxic as she, or I, had anticipated. Cindy’s primary preoccupation had resided in confirming that her relationship problems and general, lifelong dysfunction (i.e., anxiety, depression, substance abuse, etc.) emanated from her own mind—her personal
defects were the root cause of all her woes. This emotional conviction had frequently collided with my own, as mine did with hers, which was that perhaps there were additional factors in her history, in her environment, and in her life in general that may have been contributing to her distress, that, in other words, we humans are thrown into life situations not entirely of our making and that appreciating the formative and ongoing force of culture and context in determining each of our individual emotional worlds remains an essential component of grasping a greater sense of possibility for change. Eventually Cindy and I arrived at a reflective, conscious sense of our colliding attitudes about the origins of emotional experience and the degree to which we may or may not be responsible for it.

Over time, we discovered that her decreased sense of guilt and, particularly, of shame liberated her to be more proactive in reversing many of her relationship decisions (i.e., she didn’t feel as much of that sense of “well, you’ve made your bed, and now you have to lie in it!”). She had developed a self-valuing voice. And it was turning out that this applied in no small way to our relationship as well. Flash forward a year or so: Two facets of our relationship more recently
particularly stand out in my mind. The first was a dawning awareness of her increased courage in confronting me about a gradual diminishment of my emotional availability and emotional honesty. Her decreased sense of shame and self-blame emboldened her to challenge me in increasingly uncomfortable ways. In this new context, as she became increasingly aware of her dependency on me, she also became angry about the asymmetry of our relationship. She needed me; I didn’t need her. She loved me; I didn’t love her. She was attached to me, she could come and go as far as I was concerned—it wouldn’t matter to me. Oh, and don’t forget that I was charging her money. She had to pay for my attention, and I certainly could do without HER attention. Trying not to argue truth and reality presumptions, I listened and explored what exactly it was that contributed to these impressions, and also how it was for her to dare to express them to me. She felt I hardly had to lift as much as a finger to keep the relationship going—she was doing all the work. And she was the one who had to endure the time between sessions, during which time I probably didn’t even think about her. In general, she just didn’t feel a sense of mutual, intimate connection and engagement, which sense, notably, she now felt she wanted and deserved. She
was worth it, and she also didn’t want to perpetuate her feeling of being so much at the mercy of the other. As she became more demanding of signs that I really cared about her, often in an angry kind of way, I became more silent and a bit withdrawn—you know, that deer in a headlights kind of feeling. I simultaneously knew—witnessed before my very eyes—how much I was contributing to a rapidly spiraling impasse, one in which her desperation for connection and my emotional withdrawal intertwined. Of course my OWN history, my OWN current state of mind, and my OWN environment were informing the alterations in my responsiveness to her. My own trauma-based, dissociative response to angry demands for that which I either could not provide and/or wished not to provide would revive her more archaic shame states—states which our prior work together had attenuated substantially. This pattern, with its increasing intensity, remained more implicit and unarticulated for a number of weeks, culminating in one pivotal session in which she stomped out of my office in response to my ending the session with one of my “I have to stop for now” type of comments. Rarely had I experienced before the acute anger with which one’s footsteps alone—over carpet, no less—could convey in such a palpable way. She was shamed, and angry.
She left me rather shaken and a bit despairing, with my knowing especially how much her current environment—that would be me!—was contributing to her increasing desperation and shame.

And now I too sat with shame. I imagined what I might say to a supervisee in a situation like this: Upon her return to your office, inquire about her experience of the last session, particularly the ending of it, track her affect, see what comes to life between you, and RESPOND. Do not just sit there like a frozen deer about to get whacked by a Mack truck. Do not make some kind of intellectualized, genetic interpretation. In fact, you might even want to skip the naïve and disingenuous “tell me what your experience was that may have contributed to your getting so angry so quickly” type of inquiry and just get to the point! Something like: “Last time, I think my ending the session once again reminded you of the limits imposed by my own constraints, of our being on my own time frame, and I ejected you from our space here together. I think it was a painful and shaming reminder of the inequity of our relationship, how I’ve got the upper hand, your vulnerability, our not playing on an even playing field, and my not meeting you where I’ve asked YOU to meet ME. You’ve been making yourself more vulnerable, which I’ve invited you to do, and
I’ve been responding with withdrawal and distance. Have you noticed that? Perhaps the grip of her shame and sense of rejection might loosen, and perhaps she might experience me as beginning to reconnect and to meet her.

But NO! Instead I began the next session with my antlers firmly in place, while she, somewhat to my surprise, began a litany of apologies for her angry enactment at the end of the previous session. My heart dropped. We were losing another opportunity to transform a traumatically accommodative repetitive system into a transformative one (Lachmann). The point of self-criticality, or “tipping point,” had receded back into a system that was, once again, too ordered and not reflected upon. We had an opportunity to create something new and special, to squiggle something, together, and instead were reaching for our rulers and triangles. Dan Stern speaks of “now moments.” For me, this felt much more like a “now or never moment.” I replied that I wished to reject her apology, that though she had not used her words, she was coming in (or, in that case, going out) loud and clear, and that I would not want to miss out on her taking a stand and speaking her voice. My sadness for what was about to be entirely lost—for what had been woefully lost for her historically in her having
had to accommodate to the dictates of authority (Brandchaft)—helped
extract the antlers from my head and join her in her courage for
insisting on connection and engagement. She brightened, and said,
“well, yes, I am pretty pissed. I don’t want to have to BE in a
relationship again where I’m always clawing around the edges,
begging for a connection. Been there, done that.” Indeed, been there,
done that.

In the weeks that followed, and with no small amount of anxiety,
we were able to continue this level of engagement. We were able to
sustain, at least for a while, this sense of aliveness and vitality in our
exchanges—importantly, ones in which she was making herself
matter. I might say, the feel of our system became, once again, more
dynamic, messy, noisy, creative, and alive, reflecting the signs of a
complex system in action. And we were learning to recognize what a
dyadic system feels like when it is moving somewhere.

Weeks later, our conversation drifted away and then back again
to our relationship, as it often did. In the midst of one of these
exchanges, she jolted me with the question: “Well, DO you care
about me?” A little stunned, and feeling no small amount of that “here
we go again” feeling, I said that I thought that was an odd question,
considering that I suspected she may already know the answer. I said that I thought that perhaps her question was more reflective of another instance of her making herself matter, and of her asserting that she was worth it. Smiling, she agreed, and also said, “yea, I know you care about me—I think you care about me lots, despite that I’m the one doing all the thinking about you and you aren’t necessarily thinking about me that much.” “Yes,” I replied, “more inequities between us.” She nodded, and there was a brief pause. I then asked, with tongue firmly planted in cheek, “well, I’m curious, what is it exactly that leaves you feeling that I care about you so much.” At which point she glared at me with that “don’t make me come over there Coburn and whack you upside the head” look on her face. We laughed and then went silent again. Then, in a more serious tone, she said, “well, what about sex?” Pensive, but with my stomach dropping into yet another “oh shit, here we go again” feeling, I replied, after an anxious pause, “Well...under the right circumstances, I highly recommend it. “Ha!” she said, “…don’t worry Coburn, I’m just fucking with you.” I replied, “well then, I guess there’s all kinds of fucking and ways to be intimate and engaged, aren’t there? And I guess there are some ways we can know each other and others ways we can’t.” “Yes,
of course, I know that’s not possible, and what good would you be to me then if we did have sex?” Moved by her comment, I replied, “indeed, what good then?” And to myself I silently interpreted, here again is your voice of self-value and self-worth Cindy, loud and clear!—I like that!

I felt quite moved by this exchange, and Cindy seemed far more comfortable about it than I. And good for her! And what was that about my discomfort? More personal guilt and shame about the inequities of this relationship? Was I sexually drawn to her? Was I repulsed by her? Was I apathetic? This exchange reflects another instance of novelty and emergence, for both of us—another example of autocalylysm in action. Who is the agent of change here? And when and where did the change begin? As I mentioned before, we were both learning, experientially, the difference between a repetitive system and a transformative system (Lachmann) and would in the future continue to seek out the dynamic, edge-of-chaos type of engagement that we had come to be able to identify. And I was imagining…what would be next? Something like…”Well, so, do you at least find me attractive?” But it remains to be seen what will happen
next. We can never know. Probably anything good, though, won’t emerge without some amount of anxiety.

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What are the attitudes that may have been especially active and determinative in this recent clinical snapshot and that were useful and developmental for Cindy and for myself?

The additional attitude in evidence here—that of valuing the emergence of what feels like something new and useful in the patient’s experiential world—so central to clinical practice, pertains to the presumption that we humans, given a responsive enough relational context, tend to expand and grow in useful and adaptive ways (Kohut, Lichtenberg, Fosshage, Lachmann, and others)—an unintentional, personal creativity—and that, clinically speaking, such adaptive growth is encouraged through the acknowledgement and articulation of those at-times subtle developmental tendrils (Marian Tolpin) that otherwise might dissolve back into an emotionally indistinct, undifferentiated oblivion. Determining the nature and presence of an emergent, developmental advance, including distinguishing it from what otherwise might be maladaptive and/or repetitive phenomena, is not necessarily easy. It requires a sensitivity
to the nuances of an ever-changing context, as well as to the corresponding meanings associated with the emergence of novel affective experience and behavior. Alternatively stated, what is emergent, novel, and developmental for one person might easily be apparent regression and destruction for another. (Cindy’s apologies here might be misconstrued by some as development and maturity—but in my view, it was not.)

And just a side note: developmental or forward-edge tendrils are not relegated to one individual. Dyadic systems have their development tendrils as well, and we need to remain alert to them, as both Cindy and I attempted to do.

Of equal therapeutic consequence, however, is the impact of the implicit attitudes conveyed to the patient in the course of acknowledging and articulating individual AND dyadic developmental advances. Such acknowledgement and articulation not only draw attention to the system’s creative process and growth—certainly vital for the patient to know about, to learn how eventually to recognize on his or her own—but also convey, yes, life can move forward in positive directions; yes, not all experience is trauma and loss; yes, not all relational interactions need to be organized around
accommodation (Brandchaft, 2007), self-suppression, or self-destruction. This vital, additional attitude conveys hope in the sense explored by Lear (2006), in which he defines true courage as sustaining a “radical hope” for adaptive change and expanded freedom in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity as to what form, exactly, that change and expansion will take. To have one’s novel, emergent affective experience brought to one’s attention is also to hear that one’s interlocutor feels that development can happen, that it is valued and worth looking for, and that perhaps there is more to come.