The relational unconscious is the fundamental structuring property of each interpersonal relation; it permits, as well as constrains, modes of engagement specific to that dyad and influences individual subjective experience within the dyad. Three usages of the concept of thirdness are delineated and contrasted with the concept of the relational unconscious, which, it is suggested, has the advantage of being both consistent with existing views of unconscious processes and more directly applicable to therapeutic concerns. Enactments and intersubjective resistances are viewed as clinical manifestations of the relational unconscious, and the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis results, in part, from altering the structure of the relational unconscious that binds analysand and analyst.

Introduction

It may have taken the field of psychoanalysis eighty years to take full note of the “third” so
evident to Eliot's (1922) poetic vision, yet it seems that having only recently broadened our
purview from a singular focus on the patient, our gaze now moves urgently past the engagements
of the dyad and into an opaque space beyond identifiable subjects. For some, this something
called a third that transcends individualities is thought of as a product of an interaction between
persons; others speak of it as a context that originates apart from us even as it binds us together;
and there are some for whom the third is a developmental achievement that creates a location
permitting reflective observation of lived experience, be it singular or communal. These multiple
meanings indicate that our field is searching for concepts to contain and further the abundant
new observations that have stimulated us as we have evolved into a theoretically pluralistic
discipline tied to contemporary developments in other fields of study.

In this paper, I hope to further this project by rethinking some of the foundational concepts that
originated within a more exclusive intrapsychic orientation and by extending them from within
an intersubjective perspective.1 After briefly considering some premises that inform a relational
view of the mind, I will elaborate on these elements of intersubjectivity, with three purposes in
mind. The first is to extend the concept of the unconscious and its processes in a manner
consistent with intersubjective views of human development and communication of knowledge.
In this regard, I will suggest that the concept of the relational unconscious best captures the
theoretical and clinical implications of intersubjectivity. Second, I will contrast the concept of
the relational unconscious with those that involve notions of thirdness,

1 For overviews of the intersubjective and relational perspectives, see Aron 1996; Benjamin
Renik 1998; Spezzano 1996; D. Stern 1997; and Stolorow, Atwood, and Brandchaft 1994.

and in this effort I will delineate three different usages of the concept of thirdness—namely, the
developmental third, the cultural third, and the relational third. My third aim is to draw attention
to the operations of the relational unconscious within psychoanalytic practice. Here I examine
two clinical vignettes in which the work is temporarily stagnant as a consequence of
intersubjective resistances; I suggest that the unraveling of such resistances alters both the
structures of each individual's unconscious and the patterning of their relational unconscious. I
conclude with the view that clinical progress is regularly characterized by analytic discourse that
creates the dual therapeutic action of affecting both the individual and relational unconsciouses
of both participants in the analytic dyad.

In 1994, the International Journal of Psychoanalysis published a 75th anniversary issue entitled
“The Conceptualisation and Communication of Clinical Facts in Psychoanalysis.” In a paper
surveying and summarizing the content of the articles of that issue, Mayer (1996) wrote:

Almost every contributor makes a point of emphasizing how crucial and basic is the relational,
intersubjective and subjective nature of a psycho-analytic clinical fact…. Clinical facts are not
about how, in the context of one person's mind, the unconscious becomes conscious or structural
change happens. Unconscious fantasy and genetic reconstruction do not themselves constitute clinical facts; they simply do not exist as discernible facts outside the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of the analytic relationship. [p. 710]

This broad movement within psychoanalysis to embrace relationally based conceptions of developmental and clinical processes represents a significant departure from the debates that marked the emergence of the intersubjective perspective (roughly from the mid-1980s to the mid-'90s). Often framed as a debate between one-person and two-person psychologies, these controversies reflected a false dichotomy between intrapsychic (one-person) and intersubjective (two-person) conceptions of the analytic interaction.

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More recent contributions have attempted to transcend the initial polarizations by revisioning psychoanalytic theory in a manner that seeks to describe the always intertwined and necessary contributions of each viewpoint (Green 2000).

In addition to general attempts to reconcile the intersubjective and intrapsychic, the current focus has shifted to specific aspects of theory and technique that are in need of elaboration from within the emergent integrative perspective. Fundamental concepts that form the theoretical base for analytic practice are currently being rethought from within the enriched perspective of a relational model that is fully informed by intrapsychic phenomena.2 These efforts are, I believe, part of an evolution that seeks to refashion psychoanalytic theory and principles of technique by assimilating newer modes of thought into prior understandings in a way that enables both continuity and innovation.

The Intersubjective Creation of Meaning

I will introduce this section with a very brief vignette, one that occurred twenty-five years ago, yet only recently returned as a memory and now informs my thinking about intersubjectivity and the clinical process. Early in my career, a man came to see me with the hope that I might help him reach some decision about how to proceed in his professional life. His frustration was palpable, and while I sensed that he wished that I might advise him and rescue him from his interminable dilemma, he downplayed this idea and said he wanted only to figure out his own mind.

One day, in the midst of his reflections about how he would know when the right choice presented itself, he said, “I'm thinking

2 See, for example, the concepts of drive and object (Green 2000), empathy (Fishman 1999), enactment (Friedman and Natterson 1999), holding (Ginot 2001), neutrality (Gerson 1996; Hoffman 1983; Renik 1996), self-disclosure (Cooper 1998a, 1998b; Crastnopol 1997; Ehrenberg 1992; Gerson 1996; Jacobs 1999; Maroda 1991; Meissner 2002; Renik 1995, 1999), and
supervision (Berman 2000; Brown and Miller 2002).

about that question that's asked in all introductory philosophy courses, the question of ‘If a tree falls in the forest and there is no one to hear it, does it make any sound?’’ He then went on to say, “Well, neither of the two choices makes any sense to me. It seems to me that in order for a tree to make a sound, there has to be more than one person to hear it. If I were alone in the woods and a tree fell, I would need to turn to someone and ask, ‘Did you hear that?’ Without someone else's response, how could I be certain about what had happened?”

I have come to believe that this man's novel solution to the “If a tree falls in the forest” question can be heard as an allegory about the communal origins of knowledge—a rendering that contains essential truths about human development, as well as about the analytic process. His reflections about the familiar philosophical puzzle contain the belief that our sense of the world around us, and of our position in that world, is forever contextualized in an intersubjective matrix of perception, speech, and signification.

His solution also captures two foundational elements of an intersubjective orientation to psychoanalysis. First is the premise that all subjectivity exists as a fluid state in which there is continuous movement from evanescent perceptions toward stability of meanings. This core aspect of mental activity involves processes of finding ways to represent our inner states to ourselves in a manner whereby experience achieves a sense of coherence. In this process, subjectivity tends toward its own transformation into objectivity via processes that aim to anchor the internal in external realities (e.g., projection and theories of causation). In these fundamental endeavors, we are perpetually engaged with the task of organizing our internal experience in ways that allow us to discover and create external realities that provide reflections and justifications for our affective states. As clinicians, we articulate this understanding in our efforts to demonstrate to our patients how their feelings may be transformed into “facts.” Elusive as it may be, subjectivity always seeks to locate itself in the ground of objectivity. Lear (1990) spoke to this issue when he noted that “Subjectivity is upwardly mobile. The meanings and memories

that shape a person's outlook on the world do not lie dormant in the soul; they are striving for expression” (p. 29).

A second premise of an intersubjective psychoanalysis is that the organization of meaning in one mind is always embedded in processes of reciprocal influence with other minds similarly engaged in processes of altering subjective sensibilities into seemingly objective realities. The emphasis here is that the maintenance, transformation, and/or creation of organizations of meaning in one person rely on an active engagement with others (internally and/or externally) for realization. The journey of subjectivity toward its expression occurs via systems that originate beyond the individual and, through their use by the individual, inform and transform subjectivity itself.
This developmentally progressive, or “upwardly mobile,” movement of subjectivity follows a trajectory from the internal, unique, and private domain toward external, shared, and communal worlds; it is a dynamic process wherein context infiltrates internal experience and saturates private fantasy with meanings that are publicly comprehensible. As each person strives to transform private sensation into symbolic communication, he or she also traces the route by which all individual minds become both the creator and the expression of culture. Implicit in this description is the inherent and inevitable quality of mind to utilize systems of meanings external to itself in the service of transforming inchoate impression into a communicable form, while simultaneously preserving the idiosyncratic truth of experience.

I think that this is what Bollas (1992) refers to when he discusses how we are continuously involved in attempts to utilize elements of the environment as opportunities for “thinking ourselves out.” As he noted, “Without giving it much thought at all, we consecrate the world with our own subjectivity, investing people, places, things, and events with a kind of idiomatic significance” (p. 3). Objects that can contain the projection of our idioms and play them back in a way that neither destroys nor mystifies our experience best allow us to articulate our sensibilities. In this benign and creative process, that which has been felt but not reflectively organized becomes available for our consideration and use. A major implication of the idea that minds are always engaged in procuring opportunities to know themselves and to be known is that the entirety of one's psychological content that comes to be known is not already organized, but rather, that some contents achieve coherence only in acts of communication and recognition.

From this vantage point, the unconscious is not only the receptacle of repressed material driven underground to protect one from conflict-induced anxieties; it is also a holding area whose contents await birth at a receptive moment in the contingencies of evolving experience. D. Stern (1989) outlined this perspective when he described the nature of unformulated experience:

Unconscious contents can no longer be conceived of as concrete or literal, but must instead be understood as potential mental activity: thoughts not yet thought, connections not yet made, memories one does not yet have the resources or the willingness to construct. [p. 12]

This idea of unformulated experience is of a similar order to Bollas's (1987) concept of the unthought known, Bion's (1962) concept of beta elements, and Mitrani's (1995) formulation of unmentalized experience—each referring to experience that eludes consciousness due to absences of a resonant interpersonal environment. In a similar vein, Stolorow and Atwood (1992) offered the concept of an unvalidated unconscious, constituted by aspects of experience that “could not be articulated because they never evoked the requisite validating response from the surround” (p. 33). They believe that this realm of the unconscious, while located in an individual's mind, is nonetheless affected by the intersubjective context, and as such, is always in a fluid state and capable of being transformed into consciousness, given a proper environmental fit.

These theories of mental organization describe an unconscious that fashions the forms of
individual subjectivity, even while its contents await elaboration and the possibility of self-knowledge

through external experience with another. Together, they highlight the necessity of another mind capable of receiving, containing, and expressively elaborating one's experience, if that experience is to become a vital element of one's consciousness.

Spezzano (1995) refers to these fundamental processes as constituting a “theory of mind that posits an unconscious psyche constantly driven to bring its contents into consciousness. Consciousness, in turn, is viewed as, inherently, the creation of minds in interaction” (p. 24). Similarly, Cavell (1988) has written that “since meaning is understood to be intrinsically social, so in an important sense is mind” (p. 859). Both these authors point toward the postulate that the development and transformation of the unconscious is part of a continuous process that is rooted in the always evolving dialectics of private and social experience, and therefore cannot progress as an act of one mind in solitude. Rather, the presence of another mind is required for the registration, recognition, and articulation of the unconscious elements of the first. It is this necessary presence of the other that establishes knowledge as an intersubjective creation and renders that which is knowable as socially determined. As Bruner (1986) put it: “The nature of the ‘untold’ and ‘untellable’ and our attitudes toward them are deeply cultural in character” (p. 68).

All intersubjective theorization exists in opposition to “the myth of the isolated mind” (Stolorow and Atwood 1992, p. 7), and thereby issues a fundamental challenge to contemporary views about the privacy, unity, and primacy of the self (Blatt and Blass 1990; Cushman 1995). The intersubjective focus highlights those modes of experience wherein the sharp distinctions between inner and outer, between self and other, are replaced by boundaries that surround rather than separate the individual. As such, this jointly constituted area may be most fruitfully thought of as an entity of its own, rather than as a site of exchange between bounded individual selves. Winnicott (1953) captured the radical implications of this perspective in his formulation of an intermediate area of experience:

There is no interchange between the mother and the infant. Psychologically, the infant takes from a breast that is part of the infant, and the mother gives milk to an infant that is part of herself. In psychology, the idea of an interchange is based on an illusion in the psychologist. [p. 12]

Winnicott, in his descriptions of experience as residing in an undifferentiated zone populated by individuals, yet not defined by their singular attributes or potentials, foreshadowed contemporary research and writing on the relationally embedded nature of perception, meaning, consciousness, and communication.3 These contemporary studies have included developmental (Beebe, Lachmann, and Jaffe 1997; Emde 1990; Main 2000; D. N. Stern 1985), philosophical (Cavell 1988, 1998; Elliott and Spezzano 2000; Gergen 1994), and semiotic (Muller 1996) contributions. Throughout these literatures, we are reminded that our sensibilities are formed and reformed by
the presence of the other, and that our seemingly autonomous selves are social constructions, containing what Vygotsky (1978) aptly referred to as a culturally embedded “loan of consciousness,” while constituting individuals as containing “a consciousness of two” (p. 88).

The Relational Unconscious

I propose that this reciprocal and mutual influence of unconscious minds upon one another creates a relational unconscious. The uniqueness of each relationship is in large part due to its singular mix of the permitted and prohibited, a mix that is formed from, yet transcends, the individual conscious and unconscious elements of each partner. Imagine the relationship as the offspring of the two individuals, constituted by each of their unconscious material, and, as in the mix of genetic material, having features both recognizable and novel and always containing marks of mysterious origin. The jointly developed relational unconscious affords each participant novel opportunities for the expression of previously unactualized, as well as repressed, elements of subjectivity and experience, even as it contains limitations and prohibitions unique to the dyad, which culminate in a variety of mutually supported defensive processes.

The relational unconscious, as a jointly constructed process maintained by each individual in the relation, is not simply a projection of one person's unconscious self and object representations and interactional schemas onto the other, nor is it constituted by a series of such reciprocal projections and introjections between two people. Rather, as used here, the relational unconscious is the unrecognized bond that wraps each relationship, infusing the expression and constriction of each partner's subjectivity and individual unconscious within that particular relation. In this regard, the relational unconscious is a concept that allows the joining of psychoanalytic thought about intrapsychic and intersubjective phenomena within a theoretical framework that contains each perspective and elaborates their inherent interconnectedness.

I believe that this is the task and vision articulated by Green (2000) in the following passage:

3 Loewald's (1960) elegant attempts to integrate biological and social processes might be seen as a precursor of this point of view as well.

We need to consider that it is more enriching to think of the relation between the two poles than to think of each pole (the intrapsychic and the intersubjective) separately, as these do not remain the same in the context of their mutual relations…. Moreover, our thinking about the “inter” in psychoanalysis cannot be confined only to that which takes place between the two members of a couple; it also refers to another order of determination that eludes the observation of their relations. What happens in each person's intrapsychic life and in the course of the relation between two subjects reveals that the intersubjective relation is, as it were, beyond the two poles…. The intersubjective relation has the property of creating an added value of meaning
compared with the signification this acquires for each of the partners. [pp. 21-22, italics in original]

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The relational unconscious may be thought of as that which is, in Green's words, “beyond the two poles,” and as the unseen bridge that “eludes the observation of their relations.” It is by dint of its existence in and between both minds that the concept of the relational unconscious described here differs from other recent usages of the term, each of which has addressed the content of an individual unconscious, rather than the bond made between the two individuals while going beyond each.

Davies's (1996) conception of the relational unconscious delineated a set of individually held experiences of unacceptable object-related wishes or fantasies, and incompatible self experiences in relation to the other. These experiences, while relational in nature, as they are always actualized in the interpersonal present and are evocative of the interpersonal past, are nonetheless viewed as aspects, albeit basic ones, of each person's psyche and not as a mutually constructed and maintained unconscious.

Similarly, Rucker and Lombardi's (1997) ideas about the “related unconscious” described a region of “undifferentiated” experience within the individual. They referred to interactions that occur on this plane as “subject-relations” and identified this level of interaction as one in which “two individuals experience their sameness and indivisibility rather than their individuality” (p. 20). Relying on Matte-Blanco's (1975) theory of the essential symmetrical organization of unconscious processes, Rucker and Lombardi's related unconscious denotes a property of all unconscious processes—namely, a register that is not organized by differentiation based on logic, linearity, and causality. In their model, the unconscious is related as an inherent product of its own organizing activity, and not as a result of the actual modes of engagement and separation created by two people in their relationship.

Recently, the concept of a two-person or relational unconscious has been fruitfully utilized by clinical scholars, who attempted to understand therapeutic processes from the vantage point of mutually constituted and maintained forms of regulation (Lyons-Ruth 1999; Zeddes 2000). The increasing emphasis on the reciprocal and reverberating influences of analyst and analysand upon each other has found most use in the concept of enactment, and I will consider this phenomenon in a subsequent section of this paper. Suffice it to say here that even the enactment literature contains scant reference to a jointly created unconscious; rather, the formulations offered typically involve how two distinct unconsciouses affect each other. Here in the rich field of the transference-countertransference matrix, as in the great majority of psychoanalytic scholarship, the unconscious is represented almost exclusively as a property of each individual in interaction with an other's similarly bounded, even if responsive, unconscious. Yet, clinicians and theorists who apply psychoanalytic concepts to the larger entities of couples, families, groups, organizations, and ethnic, religious, and national entities regularly make use of some
notion of a shared unconscious to facilitate their understanding of the motivational dynamics of such groupings (e.g., Hopper 2003; Javier and Rendon 1995; Ruszczynski 1993).

If we postulate that all human groupings are characterized by both conscious and unconscious domains of experience and belief, then we may describe each individual's unconscious life as existing in a continuous relation with the unconscious life of all other persons and groupings in which his or her life is lived. A full description of any individual's unconscious life in relation to the unconsciouses of all human individuals and groupings in that person's life would be of immense complexity, inevitably beyond two-dimensional renderings. Nonetheless, I would like to offer a few imaginary structures to explicate the concept of the relational unconscious.

First, visualize a triangular structure wherein the individual unconscious forms the apex and rests upon multiple dyadic relational unconsciouses. The relational unconsciouses (one for every relationship) may be thought of, in turn, as resting upon a series of ever more inclusive group unconsciouses (e.g., memberships in sexual, professional, political, national, religious, and cultural groupings). All these layers exist simultaneously, yet are more or less energized from moment to moment, depending on the groupings with which the individual is actively engaged at any moment. Similarly, one might imagine that each relational unconscious is like the point of intersection on a Venn diagram between one's individual unconscious and that of one's partner, and that this relational unconscious is itself intersected by an ever more inclusive set of human groupings to which each member of the relationship belongs, with some of these groupings shifting from foreground to background, yet all represented unconsciously.

The visual metaphor of a triangular structure or of a nested series of overlapping circles does not, of course, capture the complexities created by the multidimensional interweavings of each layer or circle as it evolves from relationship to relationship. Yet I hope that in these imaginary configurations, the breadth of unconscious life finds representation and may shed light on how, in our existence as individuals, our seemingly most private unconscious is always being shaped by the multiple forces and contexts in which we are embedded and through which we are constituted.

**Thirdness**

The now widespread recognition that analytic practice involves processes and phenomena that transcend the boundaries of a single mind has led to a variety of attempts to conceptualize, name, and explore that which exists beyond the individual psyches of analyst and analysand. Many of these attempts have invoked structures, positions, or locations that occupy a space apart from the minds of the participants themselves. In recent years, the concept of thirdness has been increasingly utilized to speak of a realm that transcends the subjectivities of the two participants. In what follows, I highlight some of the usages of the concept of the third and of related terms,
contrasting these with the concept of the relational unconscious put forth in the previous section.

Thirdness, or the concept of the third, like the concept of intersubjectivity itself (Levine and Friedman 2000), has no singular,

agreed-upon definition. Nonetheless, a review of the meanings of the concept of thirdness reveals three primary usages of the term, each of which describes a different (even if somewhat overlapping) domain of experience and set of conceptual concerns. I will call these the developmental third, the cultural third, and the relational third, and will briefly explicate each by referencing the work of those who write about thirdness from these particular perspectives.

The numerical connotation of the third as occurring along a sequential order is embodied in those usages of the term that seek to name a stage in a developmental progression from individual and dyadic concerns and capabilities to recognition of the independence of another person. The prime exemplar of the developmental third is found in the application of the concept of thirdness to refer to oedipal processes. Here, oedipal conflicts are thought of as a third force that (potentially) moves the individual from a narcissistic form of relating and toward an acceptance of relating to needed others, while recognizing that others have needs of their own.

This developmental thirdness is represented in the work of Britton (1998), for whom the third position always invokes an oedipal constellation, as it represents a third entity (be it person, institution, symbol) that disrupts the dyadic. The intrusion into the cloistered twoness creates a psychic spaciousness that Britton refers to as triangular space (1998, 2004), a positioning that allows the mental freedom of independence of mind, as well as a vantage point from which to observe oneself and one's interactions with others. Britton writes that “in all analyses, the basic Oedipus situation exists whenever the analyst exercises his or her mind independently of the inter-subjective relationship of patient and analyst” (1998, p. 44). Of note here is that, for Britton, the “intersubjective” is a dyadic configuration that, by force of its fusion of subjects, limits independence of mind. A third position develops with the child's tolerance of parental relations from which he or she is excluded, and this

… provides the child with a prototype for an object relationship of a third kind in which he or she is a witness

and not a participant. A third position then comes into existence from which object relationships can be observed. [Britton 1998, p. 42, italics in original]

The third for Britton represents a third entity and, as such, it is not a quality of the intersubjective relation itself. Rather, in Britton's usage, the third position could be considered an intrapsychic achievement, born in the recognition of separateness, that permits reflection about separation. From this perspective, the third position—and the triangular space it creates—lies beyond, and perhaps even stands in opposition to, the intersubjective. Indeed “intersubjectivity,” as defined
by Britton, appears as a constraint on the development of a third position.

Britton's view of thirdness as a developmental achievement bears an affinity to what I am referring to as cultural thirdness, since both usages of thirdness emphasize the third as existing beyond and intruding upon the dyad. The cultural third, as represented in the work of Chasseguet-Smirgel (1974) and Lacan (1977), also refers to a nonintersubjective form of thirdness; that is, a form of thirdness that does not arise from the subjectivities of the individuals in the dyad, but rather one that envelops, intrudes upon, and shapes the interactions of the dyad, as well as the subjectivities of each member of the dyad. Exemplars of the cultural third are such forces as the incest taboo, language, and professional standards (Aron 1999; Crastnopol 1999; Spezzano 1998), with each representing a codification, both legal and semiotic (Peirce 1972), of the possible and the prohibited. Muller (1996) offered a succinct delineation of thirdness as a cultural force, rather than as a relational product, when he noted that “the code that structures the interaction stands as a third term to the dyad, as the holding environment for both mother and infant” (p. 21).

Bernstein (1999) elaborated this perspective on the functions of the cultural third within clinical practice in her conception of the analyst as the interlocutor of a third force who stands apart from the intersubjective dynamics of analyst and patient:

Being the bearer of speech, the analyst—in the Lacanian framework—stands in the place of the Other, who is listening beyond the dimension of spoken words, always looking beyond the I-Thou analytic relationship, pointing toward Otherness of the unconscious discourse as it is determining and interrupting the dual drama of the psychoanalytic relationship. [p. 293]

Cavell (1998) positions the third as an entity beyond the dyad (e.g., another person, real or imagined, or language), yet one that serves as a point in a triangular structure that includes as well as organizes the intersubjective relation of the dyad. In her view, the third creates a triangulation that permits experiences that arise within the dyad to be reflectively organized through shared as well as external realities. In this regard, Cavell's cultural third is a necessary constituent of intersubjectivity, rather than a disjunctive force.

In a perspective that shares Cavell's integrative view of thirdness and intersubjectivity, Benjamin (2004) attempts to firmly anchor within an intersubjective sphere the developmental achievements that Britton places in a third area beyond the dyad. Benjamin's thoughts offer a view of thirdness that both encompasses and goes beyond dyadic relating. In her description of thirdness as a quality of mental space, she contrasts this idea of the third as a reflective space based on mutual recognition with the concept of a complementary twoness, in which there is no third space from which the interaction can be viewed. Here, she shows an affinity with Britton's ideas about the necessity of a third to create reflective space, and she opposes the Lacanian view of a cultural third. Benjamin (2004) also counters the idea that the third intrudes on the
suffocating dyad of early mother–infant interaction:

In my view of thirdness, recognition is not first constituted by verbal speech; rather, it begins with the early nonverbal experience of sharing a pattern, a dance, with another person. I … have therefore proposed a nascent or energetic third … present in the earliest exchange of gestures between mother and child, in the relationship that has been called oneness. I consider this early exchange to be a form of thirdness, and suggest that we call the

principle of affective resonance or union that underlies it the one in the third … [pp. 16-17, italics in original]

In this and in her earlier work (1995), Benjamin utilizes the notion of thirdness to represent a creation of the dyad, itself containing cultural forces that are internalized into the operations of the dyad from the start. In Benjamin's (2004) conception, as in Cavell's (1998), the cultural third does not disrupt intersubjectivity, but rather is one of its basic constituents.

The notion of thirdness as arising from within the dyad is what I am referring to as the relational third, and it is this usage of the concept of thirdness that is most frequently associated with an intersubjective perspective. Early references to the concept of a relational third did not invoke nomenclature of the third, yet spoke to the same phenomenon that would later be placed under this rubric. In an early contribution, Green (1975) viewed intersubjective processes as constituting an analytic object. Green described the analytic object as created by the novel organization of meanings between analyst and patient, which exist “in the meeting of these two communications in the potential space which lies between them” (p. 12). In also adopting a spatial metaphor, Baranger (1993) situated intersubjectivity and the notion of thirdness in an analytic field, in and through which individual dynamics were situated:

In speaking of the analytic field, we are referring to the formation of a structure which is a product of the two participants in the relationship but which in turn involves them in a dynamic and possibly creative process…. The field is a structure different from the sum of its components, just as a melody is different from a sum of its notes. [pp. 16-17]

Bollas (1992) offered a similar notion of a relational third in his description of a third intermediate object, through which clinically serviceable psychoanalytic knowledge originates. As he put it:

The patient–analyst relationship is inevitably dialectical, as each participant destroys the other's perception and

rhetorical rendering of events, to create that third intermediate object, a synthesis, that is owned by neither participant and objectifies the loss of omnipotent wishes to possess truth, just as it situates the participants in that collaborative place from which the only analytically usable truth
can emerge. [p. 112]

Orange (1995), as well, spoke to the notion of a relational third when she proposed the idea of an intersubjective triad. She stated that “the concept of a ‘triad’ highlights the capacity of the field itself to have both history and emotional qualities” (p. 9).

Perhaps the most often noted version of the relational third is that proposed by Ogden (1994a), who observed that intersubjectivity exists as the analytic third, and described this as a “third subjectivity … a product of a unique dialectic generated by (between) the separate subjectivities of analyst and analysand within the analytic setting” (p. 4). In this conception, Ogden applies to the analytic process Winnicott's (1960) frequently quoted formulation that there is no such thing as an infant apart from maternal provision, when he states that “there is no analyst, no analysand, and no analysis in the absence of the third” (Ogden 1994a, p. 17).

Ogden's concept of the intersubjective analytic third is consistent with that of other authors who speak of thirdness as a creation of the dyad, rather than that which signifies a force beyond the dyad. Yet, in relying on the spatial and differentiating concept of the third, Ogden's usage of thirdness, as is the case with many other usages of the term, suggests the possibility of a remove from the continuous, reciprocal interplay of the two subjects of intersubjectivity. The analytic third can thus come to be thought of, both theoretically and within clinical practice, as a separate object that is potentially observable through an objectifying process—a process consisting of the analyst's decoding reveries formed in that third. In this usage, the analytic third is in danger of being transformed from the product of two subjectivities ruled by unconscious processes into a site of projections that can be viewed in acts of unilateral understanding by the analyst.

While each of these authors evocatively articulates the notion that analysis occurs within a third arena, which is formed by individual

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subjectivities even as it alters them, I suggest that it is advantageous to think of an intersubjectively defined relation not as a third entity, but rather as constituting the relational unconscious of the dyad. Perhaps the most basic benefit of this terminology is that it allows us to utilize our already developed and richly nuanced ideas about the nature of unconscious processes to study the formation, regulation, and communication of that which is unthinkable.

In addition to its abundant historical linkages, the concept of the relational unconscious is, I believe, preferable to that of concepts invoking thirdness because it signifies a dynamic process that belongs fully to the human participants, whose hopes and fears silently combine in ways that may eventuate in creative, as well as destructive, engagement. The relational unconscious is not an object, a third, a triad, a field, or a space. Each of these renderings connotes—even if it is not the intention of the author to do so—an entity that can be separated from the two subjectivities that combine to create it. Intersubjectivity and the relational unconscious are better thought of as processes through which individuals communicate with each other without awareness about their wishes and fears, and in so doing, structure the relation according to both mutually regulated
concealments and searches for recognition and expression of their individual subjectivities.

The Relational Unconscious, Intersubjective Resistance, and Clinical Process

The mind of the other is both the location of another subjectively organized unconscious, with its own archaic modes of operating and its own repository of experience striving for expression, and an interactive system buffeted by the unconscious forces in the interpersonal and cultural surround. Bollas (1992) captured the elemental power of the interaction of multiply located and structured unconscious processes when he wrote that:

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To communicate with one another is to evoke each other, and in that moment, to be distorted by the laws of unconscious work. To be touched by the other's unconscious is to be scattered by the winds of the primary process to faraway associations and elaborations, reached through the private links of one's own subjectivity. [p. 45]

These remarks echo Freud's (1912, 1913, 1915) descriptions of unconscious processes in interpersonal communication, where-in he consistently pointed out that one's unconscious is inevitably and indispensably involved in receiving and learning about the hidden mental lives of others. Freud (1913) noted that “every-one possesses in his own unconscious an instrument with which he can interpret the utterances of the unconscious of other people” (p. 320). In his essay on the unconscious two years later, he again drew our attention to the process of unconscious transmission and transformation of meaning when he wrote that “it is a very remarkable thing that the Unconscious of one human being can react upon that of another, without passing through the Conscious” (1915, p. 194).

These observations about unconscious communication were, however, at least as much a source of concern for Freud as they were his routes toward psychoanalytic understanding, to be valued and explored. Freud's (1912) recommendation that the analyst “must turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ toward the transmitting unconscious of the patient” (p. 115) was intended to suggest that the analyst's unconscious could receive the patient's unconscious communications without distortion, and that the analyst could then proceed to decode and reconstruct the meanings hidden in the patient's message. In his very next paragraph, however, Freud implied that the analyst's knowledge of the patient always contains mixtures and residues of the analyst's own unconscious. Freud assumed that these admixtures would inevitably be detrimental to the task of understanding the patient, and therefore must be filtered out by means of the analyst's undergoing his or her own “psychoanalytic purification” (1912, p. 116).

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Advances in our understanding of analytic processes and our contemporary postmodern sensibilities (e.g., the more encompassing definitions and utility of countertransference,
recognition of the inevitability of enactments, epistemological uncertainties introduced by the recognition that subjectivity is always involved in perception and the creation of meaning), render us unable to endorse Freud's early optimism about the possibilities of psychic purification. Rather, we are compelled to take account of the fact that the conscious meanings we develop about the patient, and the conscious intentions we maintain when we offer these meanings as interpretations, simultaneously reflect and obscure how we have received and processed the unconscious elements of the patient's mind via our own unconscious. As participants in a continuous mix of unconscious mental life, we can never be simply receivers or containers of the patient's affects and meanings; rather, we always saturate elements of the patient's subjectivity with our own, producing the novel admixture of a relational unconscious that makes each analysis unique.

Earlier, I noted that a basic premise of an intersubjective orientation is that we are all motivated to utilize elements from the environment to help cohere internal experience, as well as to creatively transform it. As Ogden (1994b) put it: “Human beings have a need as deep as hunger and thirst to establish intersubjective constructions (including projective identifications) in order to find an exit from unending, futile wanderings in their own internal object world” (p. 105). Of interest here is the similarity between this view of motivation and Freud's (1914) observations on the necessity “for our mental life to pass beyond the limits of narcissism and attach the libido to objects” (p. 85), if we are to avoid falling ill.

It is this movement toward enlivenment in the presence and through the medium of another's subjectivity that creates the analytic process. Furthermore, it is the intersubjective nature of the interaction that both enables the evolution of the particular transference-countertransference dynamic of the analytic dyad, and creates the conditions for its resolution—a resolution in which the subjectivity of each participant is altered as it lives through its archaic expression in the other and within the dyad's unique relational unconscious.

Psychoanalytic theoreticians from all schools of thought have noted the inevitable presence of a relational unconscious (albeit with different terminology) within each analysis, as well as the imperative to achieve an understanding of the analytic relational unconscious by working within—and working through—its manifestations and meanings. Jung (1946) offered one of the earlier descriptions of the process that informs the construction of an analytic relational unconscious when he wrote that:

The doctor, by voluntarily and consciously taking over the psychic sufferings of the patient, exposes himself to the overpowering contents of the unconscious and hence also to their inductive action…. The patient, by bringing activated unconscious content to bear upon the doctor, constellates the corresponding unconscious material in him, owing to the inductive effect which always emanates from projections in greater or less degree. Doctor and patient thus find themselves in a relationship founded on mutual unconsciousness. [p. 176, italics added]

This description of the formation of the analytic relational unconscious is similar to Arlow's
(1979) ideas about the manner by which empathy with the patient creates analytic understanding:

The shared intimacy of the psychoanalytic situation, the knowledge of secrets confided and desires exposed, intensifies the trend toward mutual identification in the analytic setting, and, in the end, serves to stimulate in the mind of the analyst unconscious fantasies either identical with or corresponding to those decisive in the patient's conflicts and development. Analyst and analysand thus become a group of two sharing an unconscious fantasy in common. [p. 202, italics added]

Similarly, Loewald (1979), in one of his last works, observed that:

There are kinds of relatedness between what conventionally we call self and object, that call into question the universal validity of these very terms. We have come to see that there are levels of mental functioning and experience where these distinctions are not made, or made only fleetingly and in rudimentary form. These are deep unconscious layers showing modes of interpsychic relatedness, of emotional ties that are active under the surface in both analysand and analyst, and thus in their relatedness, forming ingredients of therapeutic potential. [p. 376]

Perhaps the most readily observed and described clinical phenomena that indicate the presence of the relationally embedded and structured forms of unconscious engagement that Jung, Arlow, and Loewald articulate is the configuration known as enactment. Enactments may be thought of as a manifest content of the relational unconscious, for it is in these moments that transference and countertransference become mutually stimulating forces, unconsciously driving toward an expression that could not be consciously known and articulated between the individuals and within the relationship. Enactments are always, I believe, indicators of an intersubjective process that is not yet available for active reflection, and as such, are derivatives in action of the relational unconscious of the analytic dyad. Enactments, insofar as they express in action that which is not thinkable, have often been treated ambivalently in our literature, with some authors suggesting that while enactments may be inevitable, they nonetheless indicate an untoward or less than adequately processed countertransference. For others, however, enactments are not only inevitable, but also a major medium through which all analyses progress. Renik (1997) succinctly articulates this view in his statement that enactments are “the required text for the analysis of the transference” (p. 10). I would elaborate Renik's useful insight by stating that, through the process of recognizing and working through enactments, the analyst gains access to the relational unconscious that structures the analytic work, and can thereby begin to alter its repetitive and constraining hold on him or her, as well as on the patient.

At those times when the relational unconscious includes contents that do not permit or yield to attempts at conscious reflection, the transference and countertransference matrix may evolve into a state of unrelenting enmeshments in stagnant or destructive forms of interaction. In an earlier
communication (Gerson 1996), I referred to such states as signifying

... a joint project designed to suspend the development of new modes of affecting and imagining the other and the relation. Such mutually and reciprocally motivated states can be thought of as intersubjective resistances, as they are sustained by each participant's efforts to maintain the other in the familiar transference-countertransference configuration. Intersubjective resistances and enmeshments are formed by the reciprocal influence upon each other of patient's and analyst's unconscious motivations and are a constituent of the relational unconscious of the analytic pair. [p. 632, italics in original]

This view of resistance as an intersubjective creation elaborates Boesky's (1990) oft-noted statement that “the manifest form of a resistance is even sometimes unconsciously negotiated by both patient and analyst” (p. 572). It also reflects an earlier understanding by Bird (1972) of the analyst's contribution to an impasse in the treatment:

What I come to ... is the proposition that a stalemate in the analysis, an implacable resistance, an unchanging negative therapeutic reaction—anything of this kind should be suspected of consisting of a silent, secret, but actual destructive act engaged in by both patient and analyst. [p. 294, italics in original]

Clinical vignettes that illustrate the mutual construction and maintenance of intersubjective resistances are sparse in our literature. Understandably, vignettes of this sort reveal what most of us wish to conceal from ourselves and from each other. It may be of interest, then, to observe that the two relevant clinical narratives from the literature that I have identified below both involve the analyst's struggle with parental loss—a part of life that we all share, and so can readily imagine ourselves within the chair of the analyst who is grappling with the intrusion of these personal concerns into professional work.

In the following illustration of an intersubjective resistance located in the relational unconscious of analyst and analysand, Jacobs (2001) describes a break in the flow of productive work with one of his patients that resulted from a parallel set of anxieties about each of their paternal relationships:

My father's sudden illness, and my reaction to it, had the effect of disrupting this work. As I mentioned, F [the patient] retreated in the face of what he perceived as signs of disability in his analyst. Since I did not understand and therefore could not interpret the underlying fantasies that led to his withdrawal, progress in the analysis essentially came to a halt. Indirectly, however, through associations that contained references to ill, disturbed, or otherwise nonfunctioning physicians, teachers, or other authority figures, F expressed the anxious concerns that, consciously, he had managed to keep at bay. For reasons of my own, I did not pick up these messages. To do so would have been to confront my own behavior, to explore its meaning, and to come in touch with the conflictual issues concerning my father, parallel to those F was struggling with, that I, too, wished to avoid. In fact, I realized later that my behavior in not
dealing earlier with F's persistent focus on S as a resistance was motivated in part by defensive needs of my own. Although I was not conscious of it at the time, I must have had the sense that to engage F's resistance and to pursue the question of his deep and troubling ambivalence toward his own father would, inevitably, stir conflicts in myself that I was not ready to face. [p. 16]

The candor of Jacobs's report allows us to appreciate the manner by which personal conflicts that resonate within the dyad may

limit both participants' ability to identify and address the individual concerns of either patient or analyst. This type of intersubjective resistance often does, however, signal an unconscious configuration in the dyad that goes beyond the specific manifest content of the resistance. What I wish to suggest, in general and in reference to the above vignette, is that intersubjective resistances not only revolve around specific content, but also unconsciously structure the relationship itself in a specific way. I imagine, for example, that in addition to their parallel conflicts, anxieties, and defenses about their fathers, Jacobs and his patient were inhabiting a relationship structured along these unconscious issues.

In the next clinical vignette illustrating an intersubjective resistance, McLaughlin (1988) tells us that his report “reflects a particular instance of analytic stagnation that had been created by the patient and myself through the intermeshing of the patient's transfentially shaped behaviors with regressive transferences of my own” (p. 374). McLaughlin then describes an odd moment when, shortly after having a particular fantasy during the patient's monologue, he, the analyst, was stunned to hear a quite similar reverie expressed by the patient:

As he spoke, I had the powerful sense of the uncanny: strong vigilance, hair on back of the neck on end and tingling; a sense of being in the presence of something powerfully known but not identifiable. As this subsided, I too felt bewildered and fascinated. [p. 377]

I was caught up in something very difficult for both of us … [p. 378]

I think it is evident from this vignette that the necessary analytic work to be done by us had been slowed down by the cautious and passive distancing modes of the patient, reinforced by the increasingly similar stance I took in responding with my own conflicts. In the tangle of tensions that Mr. B brought to our work, I had quickly found likeness and symmetry between us. His rich range of conflicts about his son, wife, mother, deceased father, and himself—as well as being close to my son's age—allowed me the opportunity and liability to respond regressively … and supported my falling back into old defensive/adaptive ways to be removed from the swirl of anger, hurt, and needing that was alive in both of us. [pp. 382-383]

What we had created between us, during those months, could be viewed as the living reality in which both of us worked through strong resistances against grappling with our separate mordant
concerns, now intertwined. [p. 384]

McLaughlin summarizes his work by noting that “the analytic stagnation and tensions consequent to this regression embody in their detail and specific enactment the shared and intertwined dynamic concerns specific to both members of the pair” (p. 388). To this open description of the time and commitments necessary for the fruitful working through of the enmeshments of an intersubjective resistance, I wish to add only a consideration of the role of the relational unconscious in these interactions. McLaughlin's emphasis on each partner's “strong resistances against grappling with our separate … concerns” echoes Jacobs's (2001) description of parallel concerns between his patient and himself.

While each of these authors readily highlights the stultifying impact of the interaction between these individual concerns, neither directly addresses how the interlocking of the individual conflicts of analyst and analysand created an unconscious configuration between them that contained, and yet went beyond, their individual concerns, and that allowed for particular ways of relating and excluded others. What I wish to emphasize here is that, while moments of enactment and impasse often reveal in dramatic fashion specific dynamic constraints to what is knowable (both affectively and cognitively), the relationship itself is continuously being patterned in more subtle ways that embody and elaborate a reciprocally constructed, intersubjective dynamic. In this perpetual process, enactments are like disruptive events that indicate “fault lines” between the analyst's and patient's dynamic trajectories, yet they do not describe the configurations that result from the interaction of these individual forms. Before, during, and after the drama of enactment captures our attention and reveals hidden forces, the continuously operating relational unconscious is silently configuring the landscape.

Smith (1997, 2000, 2001) proposed an analogous view when he noted that the dynamics informing all analytic processes were constantly shaped by progressive and regressive elements, and that each moment and any outcome was marked by a compromise in the conflict between desire and defense. In his view, the interactions between the dynamics of analyst and patient are of such complexity that, inevitably, each movement toward understanding and resolution leaves potential areas of knowing unexplored. He noted that “transference, countertransference, and their interactive form, enactment, are all processes in analysis that operate to varying degrees at all times simultaneously to advance and to retard the work of analysis” (1997, p. 14). I read this to indicate that all analyses, like all relationships, assume a particular shape that is the product of two individual psychologies, and therefore, there is no such entity as a complete analysis; rather, each analysis bears the unique stamp of its relational unconscious, and thus of what was possible for that particular dyad and what was jointly occluded.

An important implication of linking intersubjective resistances to content within the broader framework of the structuring functions of the relational unconscious is that we may then observe how the unraveling of resistances not only reveals hidden conflicts in each person, but also alters the unconsciously maintained patterning of the relationship. As a result of the successful working
through of a conflicted area of functioning, there is an increased range of possibilities in each mind and in the relationship itself. These wider arcs of possibility create a virtuous chain wherein individual and relational growth mutually and reciprocally reinforce each other.

It is my contention that the concept of the relational unconscious provides the vantage points from which to investigate how the intersubjective nature of human processes is expressed and altered within the matrix of transference and countertransference phenomena. An example of an approach that furthers our understanding of the operations of the relational unconscious within the analytic setting can be found in the work of the Boston Change Study Process Group (2002). These clinicians and developmentalists are exploring the applicability of findings from the developmental, cognitive, and neuroscience literatures to the psychoanalytic process, and have, in a series of papers, suggested that therapy progresses via changes in the patient's implicit relational knowing, and that this level of knowledge is unconsciously held as a form of procedural knowing (Bucci 2001). The BCSPG investigators maintain that implicit relational knowledge shifts in moments of meeting that are often constituted by relational moves — the small, interactive units wherein the intentionality of each partner to affect the other may be gauged. It is believed that these relational moves are all formed within a context in which “each partner is not only putting forth actions and inferring intentions, but also having an effect on shaping the actions and intentions of the other as they emerge” (Boston Change Study Process Group 2002, p. 1058). Referring to a clinical example wherein attempts at greater “fittedness” between the partners were successful, the authors noted that “what has been created belongs to both, becoming part of the implicit relational knowing of each” (p. 1058). Here they are referring to an emergent and fluid set of procedural moves and knowledge that are intersubjectively created.

Lyons-Ruth (1999; Lyons-Ruth and Boston Change Study Process Group 1998), a member of the Boston Change Study Process Group, has elaborated on this process:

If representational change involves not only cognition or “insight” but also changes in affectively rich “ways of being with,” a shift in organization must also involve a reorganization of the analyst's and patient's ways of being together. Therefore, moments of reorganization must involve a new “opening” in the interpersonal space, allowing both participants to become agents toward one another in a new way…. This new organization is not simply a product of the individual patient's intrapsychic work, however, but of the working out of new relational possibilities with the analyst. [Lyons-Ruth 1999, pp. 611-612]

The BCSPG's work resonates with the idea that the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis is formed on a dual basis, consisting of a restructuring of both the individual unconscious of the analysand and the relational unconscious of the analysand and analyst. In addition, the concept of
the relational unconscious contains the fundamental systems, or “field,” notion that change in one member of the analytic dyad inevitably involves and invokes shifts in the other and in their relationship.

Another way of conceptualizing this is that a shift in an individual transference presumes shifts in the countertransference aspect of the matrix, and thereby results in mutually reinforcing movement in the individual unconsciouses of analyst and analysand and in their relational unconscious. This multifaceted perspective on the dynamics of change highlights how our contemporary recognition of the patternings of unconscious processes within structures of relating permits us to broaden the psychoanalytic project of making the unconscious conscious, such that it includes working through those aspects of the relational unconscious that limit knowledge and creative development.

**Conclusion**

The increasingly commonplace understanding of change as involving relational processes that are beyond insight has often left the analytic clinician grappling with questions about what modes of intervention best serve the analytic process. We generally agree that the analyst's “irreducible subjectivity” (Renik 1993) has been draped over the tattered remains of the classical blank screen, yet when we enter the consulting room, intersubjective theory is confronted by, and yields to, modes of practice shaped by the objectivist orientation of our theoretical heritage. Here we encounter the oft-noted lag between innovations in our theory and their application to clinical practice, and are thus challenged to integrate the intersubjective perspective with our keen and elemental interest in the patient's singular experience. It has been my aim in this work to suggest that the concept of the relational unconscious can serve us well as a bridging structure that is at once firmly rooted in the historical insights and terminology of traditional psychoanalysis, even as it incorporates our contemporary theoretical and clinical understandings and sensibilities. We are left with substantial and vexing questions of how best to work with the broadened concept of the unconscious that we inhabit with our analysands, and of whether the principles of technique that we apply to understand the individual unconscious will serve us as well to understand the relational unconscious. Yet our increasing sophistication about the intersubjective foundations and structures of mind may allow us to explore these questions in a spirit of joint endeavor with our analysands and our colleagues.

There is always a preexisting blueprint of experience in the minds of the analyst and analysand. Yet a new and more livable architecture of knowledge is built through their discourse about how they use and respond to each other's subjectivity as they construct their unique relationship. Knowledge that carries the conviction of being lived is created in dialogical moments in which traces of each participant's private meanings provide a marker for the other's expression, until a pattern that fits both of their experiences and imaginings is created. Much as we agree about the arrangement of stars to form constellations, the mutual creation of coherence alters the private
and dark unknown of the individual unconscious into a shared geography of meaning.

References


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