Autobiographical Reflections on the Intersubjective History of an Intersubjective Perspective in Psychoanalysis

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This article traces the evolution of the author's intersubjective perspective by chronicling four decades of formative relationships that contributed to its creation.

My development as a psychoanalytic theoretician and practitioner is coextensive with the evolution of a psychoanalytic perspective that I have come to call intersubjective systems theory. True to this perspective, the history of its evolution that follows is in large part a history of formative relationships—with teachers, with mentors, and, especially important, with treasured collaborators. (An important omission here is the profound impact of my relationships with patients.)

The intellectual roots of my psychoanalytic perspective go back to the period of my doctoral studies in clinical psychology at Harvard, from 1965 to 1970. During that period, Harvard was a wonderful place for a clinical psychologist to grow up in intellectually. The clinical psychology program was actually not part of a psychology department. It was set in the Department of Social Relations, which had been formed by leading scholars from four disciplines—sociology, cultural anthropology, social psychology, and personality psychology—all of whom had a common interest and background in psychoanalysis. Thus, instead of studying the experimental psychology of rats, I had the privilege of learning about social systems theory from Talcott Parsons, culture and personality from John Whiting, and epigenesis and identity formation from Erik Erikson.

The clinical psychology program at Harvard was the first and last stronghold of a tradition in academic personality psychology known as personology. This tradition, founded by Henry Murray at the Harvard Psychological Clinic in the 1930s, held as its basic premise the claim that knowledge of human personality can be advanced only by the systematic, in-depth study of the individual person. This emphasis on “idiographic,” rather than “nomothetic,” research was a radical departure from the philosophy of science that then dominated, and has continued to dominate, academic psychology in the United States. Murray's personology attracted a group of exceptionally creative students, many of whom contributed to his magnum opus, Explorations in Personality (Murray, 1938), a classic in the field of personality psychology. Two of Murray's most influential followers were Robert White and Silvan Tomkins.

My two principal mentors during my doctoral studies were White and Irving Alexander, a visiting professor and protégé of Tomkins. From White I took seminars on Freudian and neo-Freudian theory and the study of lives and acquired an abiding interest in understanding the uniqueness of each individual's world of experience. Alexander taught us psychological assessment the way he had learned it from Tomkins. Instead of preparing us to do psychological testing in hospitals, his course consisted in studying one person for the entire year.
year by means of a variety of methods (analysis of autobiographical material, in-depth interviews, projective tests, etc.). The emphasis again was on systematically investigating the unique psychological world of the individual.

Unfortunately, White's retirement in 1968 was a virtual deathblow for personology at Harvard, but attempts were made to revive the tradition in other settings. Before chronicling one such attempt, I must first make note of the impact of my psychoanalytic training.

I pursued my formal psychoanalytic training from 1970 to 1974 at the psychoanalytic institute of the Postgraduate Center for Mental Health in New York City, one of the few psychoanalytic institutes in the United States that at that time offered full training to psychologists and social workers along with psychiatrists. From the start, I was unhappy with the slow pace and lack of intellectual rigor of the didactic coursework, and I studied a great deal on my own. For example, during my first year I undertook a close reading of Freud's complete works, excluding those in applied psychoanalysis and his pre-Studies-in-Hysteria papers. The dominant theoretical orientation at the institute was Freudian ego psychology, and I eagerly devoured the writings of such authors as Anna Freud, Hartmann, Mahler, Jacobson, Loewald, Sandler, Kernberg, Rapaport, Schafer, G. Klein, and Gill, along with a smattering of Horney, Fairbairn, and Winnicott.

During my first year of candidacy, I took a course from Frank Lachmann, who, the following year, became the supervisor of one of my analytic cases. Frank was far and away my best teacher and supervisor, showing a remarkable capacity to draw out the implications of differing theoretical ideas for the specific framing of analytic interventions. In his course, he introduced Kohut's (1966, 1968) early clinical papers on narcissism and the treatment of narcissistic personality disorders—contributions that left a lasting imprint on my clinical sensibility. A group of disgruntled candidates, including myself and my good friends James Fosshage and Peter Buirsky, dissatisfied with the coursework at the institute, engaged Frank to lead a private study group, which focused for two years on psychoanalytic readings on narcissism and masochism. As a direct result of participating in that study group, I wrote and published my first two major psychoanalytic articles, “Toward a Functional Definition of Narcissism” (Stolorow, 1975b) and “The Narcissistic Function of Masochism” (Stolorow, 1975a). My effort in these articles was to free Kohut's pathbreaking insights into the phenomenology of narcissism and narcissistic disturbance from their embeddedness in the mechanistic assumptions of classical drive theory. Frank and I soon began collaborating on a series of clinical papers on the “developmental prestages of defense,” and these, together with my articles on narcissism, were collected in our book Psychoanalysis of Developmental Arrests (Stolorow and Lachmann, 1980), a book that, along with a later article (Stolorow and Lachmann, 1984/1985) redefining transference as unconscious organizing activity, established us both as clinical theoreticians.

I return now to the influence on my psychoanalytic development of Murray's personology. An attempt to revive the personological tradition occurred in 1972. While still a candidate, I became interested in pursuing an academic career in psychology and learned of a position opening at Rutgers, where Tomkins and George Atwood, who had been deeply influenced by Tomkins, were on the psychology faculty. I recall a phone conversation in which Tomkins urged me to come to Rutgers because, as he put it, with me on the faculty there would be a “critical mass” for the creation of a program in personology. I did join the faculty at Rutgers, but, despite several meetings devoted to planning a new personologically oriented doctoral program in personality psychology, it never got off the ground. The one concrete result of these efforts, a highly significant one for me, was a series of collaborative studies, first by Atwood and Tomkins and then by Atwood and me.

Atwood and Tomkins (1976) wrote a pivotal article, “On the Subjectivity of Personality Theory,” which was published in a rather obscure periodical, The Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences. The basic premise of this article, which the authors viewed as a contribution to the psychology of knowledge, was that every psychological theory has roots in the psychological life of the theorist and that the science of personality psychology “can achieve a greater degree of consensus and generality only if it begins to turn back on itself and question its own psychological foundations” (p. 166).
George soon became established as my soul-brother, my closest friend and collaborator, which he has remained. In the early and mid-1970s, after writing a first brief, joint article on messianic salvation fantasies (Stolorow and Atwood, 1973), we embarked on a series of psychobiographical studies of the personal, subjective origins of the theoretical systems of Freud, Jung, Reich, and Rank—studies that formed the basis of our first book, *Faces in a Cloud*: Subjectivity in Personality Theory (Stolorow and Atwood, 1979), which was completed in 1976. From these studies we concluded that, because psychological theories derive to a significant degree from the subjective concerns of their creators, what psychoanalysis and personality psychology needed was a theory of subjectivity itself—a unifying framework capable of accounting not only for the psychological phenomena that other theories address but also for the theories themselves.

In the last chapter of *Faces*, we outlined a set of proposals for the creation of such a framework, which we called *psychoanalytic phenomenology*, a term that never caught on. Influenced by the writings of G. Klein (1976) and Schafer (1976), we envisioned this framework as a depth psychology of personal experience, purified of the mechanistic reifications of Freudian metapsychology. Our framework took the subjective “representational world” (Sandler and Rosenblatt, 1962) of the individual as its central theoretical construct. We assumed no impersonal psychical agencies or motivational prime movers in order to explain the representational world. Instead, we assumed that this world evolves organically from the person's encounter with the critical formative experiences that constitute his or her unique life history. Once established, it becomes discernible in the distinctive, recurrent patterns, themes, and invariant meanings that prereflectively organize the person's experiences. Psychoanalytic phenomenology entailed a set of interpretive principles for investigating the nature, origins, purposes, and transformations of the configurations of self and other pervading a person's subjective universe (see, e.g., Stolorow, 1978a, 1979; Atwood and Stolorow, 1980, 1981, 1984; Stolorow and Atwood, 1982, 1984).

Although the concept of *intersubjectivity* was not introduced in the first edition of *Faces*, it was clearly implicit in the demonstrations of how the personal, subjective world of a personality theorist influences his or her understanding of other persons' experiences (a section in the introductory chapter is subtitled “The Observer Is the Observed”). The first explicit use of the term *intersubjective* in our work appeared in the article “The Representational World in Psychoanalytic Therapy” (Stolorow, Atwood, and Ross, 1978), also completed in 1976, which Aron (1996) credited with having introduced the concept of intersubjectivity into American psychoanalytic discourse. In “Transference and Countertransference: An Intersubjective Perspective” (a section of the article), we conceptualized the interplay of transference and countertransference in psychoanalytic treatment as an intersubjective process reflecting the mutual interaction of the differently organized subjective worlds of patient and analyst (p. 249). Foreshadowing much work to come, we examined the impact on the therapeutic process of unrecognized correspondences and disparities—intersubjective conjunctions and disjunctions—between the patient's and analyst's respective worlds of experience.

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2 This title derived from a passage written by Murray (1938). In the passage, which became our book's epigraph, he compared psychologists of differing theoretical persuasions with people seeing different faces in the same cloud formation, depending on their initial biases of perception.

3 Later, we (Atwood and Stolorow, 1984) dropped the term representational world because incisive questioning by our students helped us become aware that it was being used to refer both to imagistic contents of experience and to the thematic structuring of experience. Hence, we decided to use subjective world when describing experiential contents and structures of subjectivity to designate the invariant principles prereflectively organizing those contents along particular thematic lines.
A nodal point in my professional development occurred in 1977 when the book review journal *Contemporary Psychology* invited me to review Kohut's (1977) new book, *The Restoration of the Self*—an invitation I gladly accepted. I was immediately attracted to the revolutionary nature of his theoretical proposals, in which he was

4 Our use of the term *intersubjective* has never presupposed the attainment of symbolic thought, of a concept of oneself as a subject, of intersubjective relatedness in Stern's (1985) sense, or of mutual recognition as described by Benjamin (1995). Nor have we confined our usage to the realm of unconscious nonverbal affective communication, as Ogden (1994) seemed to do. We use *intersubjective* very broadly, to refer to any psychological field formed by interacting worlds of experience, at whatever developmental level those worlds may be organized. For us, *intersubjective* denotes neither a mode of experiencing nor a sharing of experience, but the contextual precondition for having any experience at all. In our vision, intersubjective fields and experiential worlds are equiprimordial, mutually constituting one another in circular fashion.

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throwing off the shackles of classical metapsychology and recasting psychoanalysis as a “developmental phenomenology of the self,” as I called it in my review (Stolorow, 1978b, p. 229). This new theoretical paradigm, emphasizing the motivational centrality of self-experience, seemed to fit like a glove with the suggestions for a psychoanalytic phenomenology that Atwood and I had set forth in *Faces*. Kohut was attempting, as we were, to reframe psychoanalysis as pure psychology.

Kohut's discussion of the empathic-introspective mode of observation in the last chapter of *The Restoration of the Self* led me to his original article (Kohut, 1959) on that subject, which I had not read before. The article, in which he contended that the empirical and theoretical domains of psychoanalysis are defined and delimited by its empathic-introspective mode of investigation, became my favorite of Kohut's works. What was intensely verifying for me was that Kohut, by studying the relationship between mode of observation and theory in psychoanalysis, had come to exactly the same conclusion that Atwood and I had arrived at by studying the subjective origins of psychological theories—namely, that psychoanalysis, at all levels of abstraction and generality, should be a depth psychology of personal experience.

My first personal contact with Kohut came about as a result of my reading *The Restoration of the Self*. Citing two articles (Stolorow, 1976; Stolorow and Atwood, 1976) in which I had shown how his conceptualizations of narcissism and narcissistic transferences shed light on the works of Rogers and Rank, Kohut, in the book's preface, erroneously included me among a group of critics who had faulted him for failing to acknowledge sufficiently the prior contributions of others. I wrote him a note expressing my surprise at this and affirming that I was a friendly admirer, not an opponent. With little delay he sent me a gracious reply, apologizing for his mistake. Soon thereafter, I sent him a draft of my review of his book, and he, in turn, sent me a letter expressing his gratitude. I suspect that it was my review and Kohut's appreciation of it that led to my being invited to speak at the first national self psychology conference in Chicago in 1978.

My participation in this and subsequent such conferences was extremely important to me because, at the time, for a nonmedical analyst like myself, still marginalized by the psychoanalytic establishment,

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there was no other major forum for discussing my ideas (the American Psychological Association did not yet have its Division of Psychoanalysis) and no other context in which I could have a dialogue with analysts from around the United States and the world. I continue to value my good friendships with colleagues in the self psychology movement (including with Kohut before he died in 1981), despite my objections to some aspects of Kohutian theory, such as its reifications of self-experience, its reductionistic doctrine of “defects in the self” (Atwood and Stolorow, 1997), and its attempt to generalize important
insights about the psychology of narcissism into a theory of the total personality and the totality of analytic transferences.

Another nodal point in my psychoanalytic development occurred in 1979 when, at the second national self psychology conference in Los Angeles, I heard Bernard Brandchaft deliver a paper on negative therapeutic reactions, attributing these to patients' experiences of disruptions in the transference, to which the analyst's faulty interpretive stance had contributed (see Brandchaft, 1983). I had with me the page proofs of a section from Psychoanalysis of Developmental Arrests subtitled “The Therapeutic and Untherapeutic Action of Psychoanalysis” (p. 187), in which Lachmann and I made a similar point, and I eagerly showed these to Brandchaft. We both felt an immediate intellectual kinship, and soon thereafter he invited me to present a paper at a conference on the borderline personality, to be held at UCLA the following year. I accepted and suggested that we write the paper together. Bernie agreed, and, during our ensuing discussions, we learned that we had independently made almost identical observations about so-called borderline states. We had found that when a very vulnerable, archaically organized patient is treated according to the theoretical ideas and technical recommendations offered by Kernberg (1975), that patient will quickly display all the characteristics Kernberg ascribed to borderline personality organization, and the pages in Kernberg's books will come alive right before the clinician's eyes. On the other hand, when such a patient is treated according to the theory and technical stance proposed by Kohut (1971), that patient will soon show the features Kohut attributed to narcissistic personality disorder, and Kohut's pages will come alive. In our paper (Brandchaft and Stolorow, 1984), we contended that borderline states take form in an intersubjective field coconstituted by the patient's psychological structures and the way these are understood and responded to by the therapist.

Thus began my close friendship with Bernie and a series of collaborative studies (Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 1983, 1987; Atwood and Stolorow, 1984) in which Brandchaft, Atwood, and I extended our intersubjective perspective to a wide array of clinical phenomena, including development and pathogenesis, transference and resistance, emotional conflict formation, dreams, enactments, neurotic symptoms, and psychotic states. In each instance, phenomena that had traditionally been the focus of psychoanalytic investigation were understood not as products of isolated intrapsychic mechanisms but as forming at the interface of interacting subjective worlds. The intersubjective context, we contended, has a constitutive role in all forms of psychopathology, and clinical phenomena cannot be comprehended psychoanalytically apart from the intersubjective field in which they crystallize. In psychoanalytic treatment, as Kohut (1984) also emphasized, the impact of the observer is grasped as intrinsic to the observed.5

From 1976 until I relocated to Los Angeles in 1984, I was a professor in the graduate school of psychology at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, where two additional colleagues had a decisive impact on my development. Beatrice Beebe, who became a good friend and one-time collaborator (Lachmann, Beebe, and Stolorow, 1987), introduced me to infant research and to the dynamic systems thinking of Thelen and Smith (1994), both of which contributed importantly to my understanding of the intersubjective contexts of psychological development (Atwood and Stolorow, 1984) and developmental change (Stolorow, 1997). John Munder Ross also became a friend, collaborated on the article noted earlier in which the phrase intersubjective perspective first appeared, and, most fatefully, introduced me to Charles Socarides and his daughter, Daphne. Dede, as she was called by friends and loved ones, became both my collaborator and my wife. Our first joint article,

5 As an additional benefit of my collaboration with Bernie, my clinical sensibility was enduringly enriched by his conceptualization of a broad class of organizing principles that he calls structures of pathological accommodation (Brandchaft, 1993).
“Affects and Selfobjects” (Socarides and Stolorow, 1984/1985), which reflected her boundless love of affect, was an attempt to integrate our evolving intersubjective perspective with the framework of self psychology. In our proposed expansion and refinement of Kohut's (1971) selfobject concept, we suggested that "selfobject functions pertain fundamentally to the integration of affect" into the organization of self-experience and that the need for selfobject ties “pertains most centrally to the need for [attuned] responsiveness to affect states in all stages of the life cycle” (p. 105). Kohut's discussions of the longing for mirroring, for example, were seen as pointing to the role of appreciative attunement in the integration of expansive affect states, whereas his descriptions of the idealizing yearning were seen as indicating the importance of attuned emotional holding (Winnicott, 1965) in the integration of painful reactive affect states. Emotional experience was grasped in this article as being inseparable from the intersubjective contexts of attunement and malattunement in which it was felt. That understanding led in later works to further formulations contextualizing psychological conflict and the very boundary between consciousness and unconsciousness (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992). The so-called repression barrier became graspable as an emergent property of dynamic intersubjective systems.

In essence, the article with Dede proposed a shift from the motivational primacy of drive to the motivational primacy of affectivity—a theoretical shift that moves psychoanalysis toward a phenomenological contextualism and a central focus on dynamic intersubjective systems. Unlike drives, which originate deep within an isolated mental apparatus, affect—that is, subjective emotional experience—is something that from birth onward is regulated, or misregulated, within ongoing relational systems. Therefore, locating affect at the motivational center automatically entails a radical contextualization of all aspects of human psychological life and of the therapeutic process.

Daphne Socarides Stolorow died on February 23, 1991, four weeks after her cancer had been diagnosed. During the summer of that year, in the wake of devastating loss, George Atwood and I outlined our book Contexts of Being: The Intersubjective Foundations of Psychological Life (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992). As we wrote in the preface, “we drew closer and decided to try to create something lasting from the ashes of loss and sorrow” (p. xi). In this book, our intersubjective perspective broadened into a sweeping methodological and epistemological stance calling for a radical revision of all aspects of psychoanalytic thought. Whereas our earlier work had brought into focus the implications of this perspective for a range of clinical issues, Contexts extended the intersubjectivity principle to a rethinking and contextualization of the foundational pillars of psychoanalytic theory, including the concept of the unconscious, the relation between mind and body, the concept of trauma, and the understanding of fantasy.

Other collaborators also contributed importantly to this book. The chapter on fantasy was a revised version of an article Dede had written with me (Stolorow and Stolorow, 1989), showing how an introject fantasy vividly concretizes an intersubjective process of psychological usurpation—the substitution of an alien perceptual reality for one's own invalidated experience. My good friends Bernie Brandchaft and Jeffrey Trop joined me in authoring chapters on therapeutic alliance and therapeutic impasse, respectively. The chapter that most directly reflects the impact of losing Dede—the chapter on trauma—was cowritten with Sheila Namir, Dede's closest friend. Sheila asked that she not be listed as coauthor of the chapter, because she wanted her contribution to be a gift to me as well as a tribute to Dede. In that chapter, we proposed that at the core of psychological trauma is the profound lack of a relational home for painful affect, which thus becomes overwhelming and unendurable. The person whom I would have wanted to hold my overwhelming grief was the very same person who was gone. I felt that only George, whose own world had been shattered by loss when he was a boy, really grasped my emotional devastation.

Donna Orange joined the collaboration in 1995 and soon became a dear friend as well. With doctorates in both psychology and philosophy, Donna expanded the explicitly philosophical dimension of our evolving framework. Our first project began with the idea of a clinical primer but was soon transformed into a book offering a broad philosophy of psychoanalytic practice that we called contextualism (Orange, Atwood, and Stolorow, 1997). Drawing on Donna's philosophical expertise, this book underlined the importance of practical wisdom (Aristotle's phronesis) rather than technical rationality (techne) in psychoanalytic work, and emphasized...
that our intersubjective perspective presupposes the hermeneutic, perspectival, and thus fallible nature of all psychoanalytic understanding and knowing (see also Orange, 1995).

Subsequent works by the three of us have focused more explicitly on the philosophical foundations of psychoanalytic theory and practice. In a series of articles (Stolorow, Atwood, and Orange, 1999; Stolorow, Orange, and Atwood, 2001a, b), we have shown how a range of traditional and contemporary psychoanalytic viewpoints have been undergirded by Descartes's philosophical doctrine of the isolated mind, and we have attempted to move psychoanalysis toward a post-Cartesian contextualism that recognizes the constitutive role of relatedness in the making of all experience, including experiences of personal annihilation and disintegration of one's world (Atwood, Orange, and Stolorow, 2002). These and other papers were gathered in our book Worlds of Experience: Interweaving Philosophical and Clinical Dimensions in Psychoanalysis (Stolorow, Atwood, and Orange, 2002).

The last, but not least, collaboration I wish to chronicle is that with Julia Schwartz, who was introduced to me by another dear friend, Estelle Shane. Julia lit a candle in the dark world of my grieving, and we married in 1994. In reflecting, over the course of the six years after Dede's death, on the profound sense of estrangement and isolation that was a central feature of my experience of traumatic loss, I arrived at a deepening understanding of psychological trauma that I thought might be beneficial to others and that I wanted to write about. I discussed this with Julia, saying that I felt I had to describe my understanding autobiographically. It was only with Julia's steadfast support and encouragement that I was able to write the article (Stolorow, 1999). In that article, I concluded that psychological trauma, fundamentally, is a shattering of the “sustaining absolutisms of everyday life” (p. 467), a catastrophic loss of innocence exposing the “unbearable embeddedness of being” (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992, p. 22), the inescapable contingency of existence on a universe that is random and unpredictable and in which no safety or continuity of being can be assured. As a result, I contended, the traumatized person cannot help but perceive aspects of existence that lie well outside the absolutized horizons of normal everydayness. Consequently, the experiential worlds of traumatized persons are felt to be essentially incommensurable with those of others; there is a deep chasm in which an anguished sense of singularity and solitude takes form.

Subsequently, Julia and I extended these ideas together, coauthoring an article on the impact of trauma in the presymbolic phase (Schwartz and Stolorow, 2001). Drawing on one of Julia's analytic cases, we illustrated the lifelong consequences of traumatic violations during the first year of life in shattering a patient's presymbolic sense of the integrity and inviolability of her physical being. More recently, again with Julia's help, I completed a paper on trauma and temporality, showing how trauma destroys one's felt sense of being-in-time (Stolorow, 2003).

Concluding Remarks

Most psychoanalytic theories have been the creation of a single genius working essentially in isolation, admiring disciples notwithstanding. Our intersubjective systems theory, by contrast, has over the course of its evolution taken form in a complex, richly variegated nexus of deep, collaborative relationships, and this, I believe, accounts in part for its greater generality and inclusiveness. As George Atwood is fond of saying, the process by which our intersubjective perspective is being created is a metalogue of its basic principle—the claim that all human psychological products crystallize within systems constituted by interacting, differently organized worlds of experience. It has been a belief shared by the collaborators of intersubjectivity theory that, when it comes to psychoanalytic theorizing, many experiential worlds are better than one.
As a postscript, I add here a few brief comments on the contribution of aspects of my earlier emotional development (illuminated in my personal analysis with Alexander Wolf) to my attraction to two basic tenets of intersubjective systems theory—its perspectivalist epistemology and its placing of affect at the center of psychological life. My father was a man who believed and insisted that he had a God's-eye view (Putnam, 1990) of truth and reality, and my struggles against such arrogance have contributed importantly to my advocacy of a level epistemological playing field in the psychoanalytic situation. Additionally, my father's affect so dominated my mother's world that I often felt emotionally erased, and her emotional vitality seemed largely encased behind a wall of wooden depression. Hence, a compelling theme in my life became the search for affective aliveness—both my own and my mother's—a quest to which my guiding psychoanalytic framework inevitably became heir.

References


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