THOU SHALT NOT KNOW THY RELATIONAL CONTEXT:

Blindness to the Contextuality of Emotional Life

by,

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The myth of the isolated mind ascribes to man a mode of being in which the individual exists separately from the world of physical nature and also from engagement with others. This myth in addition denies the essential immateriality of human experience by portraying subjective life in reified, substantialized terms. Viewed as a symbol of cultural experience, the image of the isolated mind represents modern man’s alienation from nature, from social life, and from subjectivity itself.

It is our view that modern man’s threefold alienation serves to disavow a set of specific vulnerabilities that are inherent in human existence, vulnerabilities that otherwise may lead to an unbearable sense of anxiety and anguish.

Stolorow & Atwood (2002, pp. 7 – 8).

Introduction

A central thesis of contemporary relational psychoanalysis is that a person’s emotional life is constitutively embedded in its world of human relationships. That is, human emotional experiencing initially comes into being and goes on being, becomes and transforms—whether in experientially expansive or traumatically constrictive directions—within contexts of relational interaction with others. That the “very being” of emotional life is embedded in or contextualized by others (Orange, Atwood and Stolorow, 1997, p. 71) does not, however, mean that the person necessarily experiences this embeddedness or relational contextuality. In fact, even presuming the developmental conditions and capacities that make such reflective experience possible (Ogden, 1986), it is my observation that we human beings are often deeply reluctant to bring our
emotional lives’ relationally embedded or contextual nature into linguistically elaborated awareness --that is, to fully see, feel and speak of it.

In this Presentation, I attempt to elucidate an emotional process, named “decontextualization,” that functions to obscure a person’s perception and feelings about the relational embeddedness or contextuality of his emotional experience.

Clinical Illustration of One Form of Decontextualization

The Case of Allen: The Inherently Sensitive Boy. Fourteen year old Allen lived alone with his father, his only living parent. His mother had died suddenly of a ruthless ovarian cancer when he was seven. Because the father had a history deprived of love, where early caregivers repeatedly invalidated and devalued his feelings, the father viewed his own emotional life, and himself, as inherently unworthy. As a result, he avoided awareness of his own shame-soaked emotional states --including his devastation at the loss of his young wife-- and tended to see himself, others and the world in emotionally flattened, concrete and practical terms.

When young Allen felt the sorrow and injury of his mother having been torn from his life, or simple insecurity amidst intimidating academic demands, or conflicts with peers at school --what I will call a first level of pain-- he looked to his father for emotional holding, soothing understanding, and reassuring paternal
perspective. Repeatedly, however, the father’s emotional flatness, and concrete and practical sensibility, rendered him ill-attuned to Allen’s grief, self-doubts and anxieties, and to his nevertheless persistent longing for paternal comfort. In response to these ill-attunements, Allen experienced painful reactive hurt and disappointment in his father -- a second level of pain.

When Allen would dare to express this reactive, or second-level, pain to his father, including his associated perceptions of the father as emotionally unavailable, dismissive and ill-attuned, the father would fall into a depressed shame state that was perceptible to Allen.

In defense against his own shame, the father would then communicate to Allen a wish -- a wish that, for Allen, had the power of a commandment-- that Allen disregard his reactive hurt, disappointment and associated negative perceptions of the father, and replace them with perceptions and feelings that were more favorable and restorative to the father's sense of parental self-esteem.

The father guided Allen in how to fulfill this wish by offering an alternative explanation of the hurtful and disappointing interactions between them, an explanation that conveyed the father’s need to avoid his own painful shame. This explanation consisted in the idea that Allen possessed a natural gift of inborn emotional sensitivity. “You are an overly sensitive boy,” he would tell Allen. Per this idea, Allen’s emotional sensitivity was the principle determinant of his
intensely painful feelings, and it existed independently of Allen’s relational contexts, except perhaps to the minor extent that those contexts served as triggers.

As emotionally required explanation, the sensitive boy idea functioned to organize, or reorganize, both Allen’s and his father’s perceptions of Allen’s reactive hurts and disappointments, and their constitutive relational contexts -- in particular, the constitutive role in them of the father’s ill-attunements.

Specifically -- and corresponding to the primary, repressive dimension of the decontextualization process-- the sensitive boy idea stripped Allen’s hurt and disappointment of his sense of interactivity with father, particularly the reactivity to father’s mal-attunement that, as paternal context, constituted them. Additionally --corresponding to the second dimension of the decontextualization process-- it pressured Allen to replace the prohibited experience of his reactive hurt and disappointment with father with experiences of himself as an unrelated, isolated sensitive brain.

This instance of decontextualization freed the father of shame-saturated perceptions of, and feelings about, himself as being with Allen in ill-attuned, disappointing and hurtful ways. And Allen’s accommodative participation in this experiential reorganization arguably secured his bond with his sole remaining parent and organized his experience with a plausible explanation. At the same time, however, it imprisoned Allen in perceptions of his [reactive] pain as a “gift” produced by his radically isolated brain --a brain that, in gifting itself pain, must certainly be defective.
The Primal Motivation to Decontextualize Human Emotional Life,
And Its Consequences

In keeping with psychoanalyst and philosopher, and IFPE’s 2012 Hans W. Loewald Award winner, Robert Stolorow’s, as well as George Atwood’s, convictions, as captured in the above epigraph, I contend that, at the most elemental perceptual and affective levels, awareness of emotional life’s embeddedness-in-other --that is, its nature as relationally contextual-- entails often unbearably states of existential and emotional vulnerability (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992, pp. 7 - 12). It is my observation also that we human beings insulate ourselves or flee from these vulnerable states in the Cartesian myth of the isolated mind (Descartes, R., 1641; Stolorow and Atwood, 1992). This myth expresses itself experientially in defensive perceptions of our subjective life as sharply separate from the world of human relationships in which our subjectivity exists; in feelings of grandiose independence from and invulnerability to others; and in beliefs that our understandings and knowledge transcend the personally situated-subjectivity that produces them.

Now, what is the relational embeddedness or contextuality of emotional life that we avert in processes of decontextualization --or what might also be termed Descartes-alization? Like Stolorow (2007; 2011), as I read him, I contend that the embeddedness-in-other of the human person’s emotional experience becomes illuminatingly intelligible when understood to derive from the embeddedness of his being in his world, as captured by Heidegger’s (1927) hyphenated characterization of [human] existence as “being-in-the-world.” Existentially speaking, one feature of being-in-the-world is its “thrownness” or deliverance --beyond any power in such being to control or decide-- into interaction with others, and its socio-cultural milieu at large.
Previously, I (2011) have called this aspect of human being’s thrownness its [all hyphenated] “thrownness-into-others” or “thrownness-into-relationship.”

In my psychoanalytic systems language, in being thrown-into-others, the human being’s emotional world is from inception thrown into complex intersubjective systems constituted in part by socio-culturally emergent precepts and expressions of self, other, race, sex, family, society, economics, politics etc etc (see Atwood & Stolorow, 1984; Mitchell, S., 1988; Taylor, C., __; Cushman, P., __; Natinsky, Ari, 2012, etc.). More synthetically, his emotional development and experiencing is delivered into complex systems of interaction between and among mutually embedded worlds of subjective emotional experience. In this presentation, I explore the issue of a person’s experiential ownership, or evasion, of such subjective interactivity --particularly, here today, dyadic developmental and therapeutic affective interactivity-- as a particular, but experientially crucial, feature of his emotional life.¹

¹ I wish to highlight that in being thrown into its world, a person’s emotional life is thrown into other a priori features of the human world, including finite time, finite understanding and finite substantiality. Thus, in addition to electing to experience or evade emotional experience’s interactive embeddedness-in-other, the person may elect to experience or evade his emotional experience’s embeddedness in temporality, situatedness and material insubstantiality (or any other feature of being-in-the-world that existentially contextualizes emotional experiencing).

In being thrown into time, for example, emotional experiencing is constituted by finite temporality and implies loss of self (as disclosed in existential anxiety), and loss of others (as disclosed in existential grief)(see Stolorow, 2011). Decontextualization in respect of temporality functions to evade experience of the existential self and other loss that necessarily condition subjective emotional life (Maduro, P, 2008; Hinton, L. 2012).

In being thrown into its world, emotional experience is additionally thrown into its unique situatedness, and thus always makes sense of (organizes) itself within, and not outside of, its relationally and historically “thick” (Dostal, 1993) situation; it is inherently constituted by unique and personal perspective. Its situatedness implies the limits of emotional (and intellectual) knowledge, which can only be partial --a partiality that psychoanalysis deems glorious in its human --versus God-like-- circumscribedness.

Finally, in being thrown into insubstantiality, emotional experiencing is most intelligible as immaterial interactive “process” (Jones, 1995) and meaning (Klein, G., __), and is not a material entity or thing (see Atwood & Stolorow, 1984, Ch. 4). In short, decontextualization varies in form depending in part upon which, or which combination, of features of emotional experience’s relational contextuality the subject evades. Again, today I focus my Presentation on emotional life’s constitutive interactive embeddedness-in-other, and our evasion of it in decontextualization.
The Constitutive Interactivity of Our Emotional Experience. The *intersubjective system* is a psychoanalytic explanatory model that captures human emotional life’s relational embeddedness and, in particular, its constitutively interactive nature. In this model, emotional phenomena exist, form and transform in systems of the mutually and reciprocally interacting emotional worlds (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992; Stolorow, 1997), for example those of child and caregiver, or analysand and analyst.

Implicit in the notion of *mutual and reciprocal interaction* is the idea that each subject who co-constitutes an intersubjective system is an agent of not only his own emotional experiencing, but also, in the constitutive interplay of his and others’ respective emotional worlds, a contributing agent in others’ emotional experiencing (see Wallace, 1985). It is this constitutive interplay that makes for so-called mutual and reciprocal *interaction*.

Assuming the prerequisite developmental capacities (see e.g., Ogden, 1986), I contend that the human subject can discern and specifically perceive, have feelings about, and linguistically formulate or, in the alternative, blind, numb, and silence himself to this *interactivity*. For example, he can experientially own or evade perception of his own agency, the agency of the other with whom he relates, and features of their dynamic interplay-- as well as the constitutive role this interaction plays in his own, or the other’s, emotional life. In seeing and owning this interactivity, the person experiences a central aspect of emotional life’s embeddedness-in-other or relationality; in decontextualizing and disowning his perception of it he experiences emotional life in an unrelated form or state --that is, in some respect, and to some extent, as dis-embedded, extricated from context, or dys-worlded.
Now, What necessitates decontextualization and how does it work?

**Decontextualization as Defense: Experiential Blindness to the Activity, Reactivity and Interactivity that Structures Human Emotional Life, and its Roots in Developmental Trauma**

The possibility of an experiencing subject acquiring and maintaining a sense of his emotional life’s contextuality depends upon relational contexts of “attuned responsiveness” (Stolorow, 2007, p. 3) to the interactive features and dimensions of the subject’s affective process.

Caregivers’ --in the developmental system-- and analysts’ --in the treatment system-- attunement to a child’s or patient’s perceptions of, and feelings about, the relational dimensions of his affectivity --for example, Allen’s experience of his father’s ill-attunement-- is critical to the seamless integration of those perceptions and feelings into the child’s or patient’s self-experience (Kohut, 1971; Krystal, 1988; Socarides and Stolorow, 1984/85) on the levels of self-cohesion, self-differentiation, self-esteem and otherwise.

Now, in any relational system, the other’s emotional attunement may be selective in respect to the totality of a person’s perceptual and emotional process. A caregiver, for example, may attune to one aspect or dimension of the content or process of his or her child’s affective/perceptual experience, without attuning to, or while communicating rejection of, other aspects or dimensions.

Mal-attunement specifically --even if not exclusively-- with respect to a subject’s perceptual and/or affective discernment and ownership of the *interactive structures* of his given emotional
state is constitutive of a relational context that will breed decontextualization in respect of interactivity. In Allen’s case, for example, the father responded with validating recognition of certain core aspects or qualities of Allen’s feelings of hurt and disappointment, but with invalidating mal-attunement to the reactive features of those feelings, like Allen’s perception of his father’s self-preoccupation and dismissiveness. It was in this way that Allen’s perceptions of his father’s emotional behavior, and the reactive aspects of Allen’s emotional pain, were unable to be integrated into his self-experience.

Decontextualization as Bi-Dimensional Process: The Substitution of Cartesian Perceptions and Affects for Repressed Experience. As in the case of Allen and his father, when a caregiver refuses her child’s efforts to linguistically experience the interactive features of his emotional states, perhaps especially painful emotional states, she will likely also convey a “wish” (Bowlby, 1988), instruction or even commandment (Miller, A., 1979) that the child substitute for the offensive experience perceptions of his emotion as disembedded or non-contextual. As illustrated in Allen’s case, the father’s wish or commandment was that Allen’s pain be seen and understood as arising from Allen’s “isolated mind” (Stolorow, 1992, p. 9) --that is, from an emotional subject or entity who exists apart from, and is unaffected by, his world, especially his world of paternal interaction. Most children will, like Allen, register the caregiver’s purposive rejections of offending experience, on the one hand, and guidance towards favored substitutive perceptions and feelings, on the other, as both prohibitions against experiences of interactive contextuality and requirements for substitutive experiences of non-interactivity, or, more broadly, non-relationality or non-contextuality.
In developmental contexts involving this kind of parental “pressure” (Bowlby, 1988, p. 108; see also, Miller, A., 1979), the child, like Allen, will likely resolve the subjectively felt relational conflict through accommodation (Brandchaft, 1994, 2007) to the caregiver’s multifaceted emotional mandates.\(^2\) Corresponding to a bi-dimensional decontextualization, in one dimension of the accommodation, the child will, as already detailed, repress or abort the process of experiencing his perceptions and feelings of the offending features of the interactive heart of his emotional state. And, in a second dimension of the accommodation, he will substitute for his repressed experiences, or positively articulate in consciousness, the “indulgent … and favourable” (Bowlby, 1988, p. 108), Cartesian non-contextuality of his states.\(^3\)

**Decontextualization as Pathogenic.** In contexts of greater attunement to context, the child acquires new tools and possibilities for communicating and relating with others about the relational fields they co-constitute and create (see e.g., Stern, 1985). With respect specifically to the child’s experiences of his own emotion’s relationality, the child comes to represent linguistically and share with others his complex perceptions of, and affects about, his emotional life’s relational features. Particularly potent opportunities for expansive development as well as

\(^2\) In the more discrete terms of conflict formation, in the repeated absence of validating responsiveness to the child’s perceptions of, and feelings about, the interactive contexts of his emotional experience, or in the repeated presence of invalidation or rejection that specifically and selectively targets those perceptions and affects, a child will come to see his experiences of interactivity as sources of dangerous relational conflict. The resulting subjective experiences of conflict (Socarides and Stolorow, 1984/85; Stolorow, Brandchaft and Atwood, 1987) will lead to inhibitions in, and defenses against, the integration of those conflict-laden experiences, including wholesale repression of them (see e.g., Stolorow, 2007, p. 8). Such “shutting off” (Bowlby, 1988) processes function defensively to maintain the integrity of the child’s developing organizations of experience as well as his attachment bonds with caregivers (Bowlby, 1988, p. 108; Stolorow and Atwood, 1992). The preservation of attachment and the sense of self-intelligibility (self, other and world making sense) comes at no small cost, however, to the structure of [reactive] emotional pain, which will now be configured and felt as isolated, injurious and/or shameful.

\(^3\) Recently, a traumatized patient of mine was grappling with her memory of, and emotional reactions to, a series of painful intersubjective exchanges. She said to me: “I can’t tell if something really happened or if this is just a state of my being.” Here, she struggled to maintain the validity of her sense of her pain’s contextuality (that “something really happened”), yet felt the accommodatively reductive and confusing pull towards her pain’s decontextualization, or what I might term, in this instance, its *ontologization* (my pain is “just a state of my being”).
pathogenesis emerge insofar as the shared experiences pertain to the child’s perceptions of, and affects about, his interactions with his primary caregivers, his earliest developmental and interaffective context.

When the child shares satisfying, positive experiences of his interaction with his caregivers, the caregivers are likely to respond with interested, attuned responsiveness, if only because such experiences will typically harmonize with their narcissism. What happens, however, when the child attempts to communicate with his caregivers about his painful, negative experiences of interaction with them? It may be especially in contexts where caregivers are attuned and receptive to the child’s experiences and expressions of painful caregiver interaction that the child builds enduring confidence that relational features of his pain are not fraught with undesirability and conflict. Repeated parental mal-attunement at these critical intersubjective moments, however, is precisely the point of trauma --what I call relationality trauma-- in developmental systems of decontextualization.

In so-called relationality trauma, the child will likely interpret his linguistic formulation and awareness of these aspects as meaning that his subjectivity is emotionally treacherous and a defective failure in respect of his caretaker’s emotional needs. Moreover, by virtue of the developmental nexus between affectivity, its integration (or dissociation), and experiences of selfhood, the child will come to believe not only that his experiences of relationality are destructive and shameful, but also that his very being or existence is so --a recipe for profound self-loathing and terror in respect of one’s multi-dimensional contextuality.
As already alluded to, in order to escape painful relationality shame, the child may not only repress the conflict-laden experiences of his affectivity’s interactivity, but also erect a defensive Cartesian self-ideal that centers on an image of his emotional experience as purified of the interactive features whose recognition he perceived to be damaging to caregivers or shamefully unwelcome (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992). I define such ideals as *Cartesian self-ideals* because they are constituted by images, and associated feelings, of one’s own, and others’, minds’ radically isolated, non-interactive nature -- in accord with the metaphysics of French philosopher Renee Descartes (1641). Such ideals may present conspicuously, as in grandiose John Wayne-like ideals and self-images of relational invulnerability, or they may operate less conspicuously behind seemingly undramatic, difficult-to-perceive patterns of relentless self-blame or defensive idealization (see e.g., Fairbairn, 1952, pp. 59-81) in which the hurtful other is experienced as uninvolved or innocent.

A particular feature of relationality trauma is the “constriction and narrowing of the horizons of emotional experiencing” (Stolorow, 2007, p. 4; see also Stolorow, Atwood and Orange, 2002, Chapter 3) with respect to relatedness and relating. This narrowing of perceptual field in respect of relatedness is the clinical outcome of the often insidiously stealth and traumatic decontextualization process whereby perception of, and emotional reaction to, relational context has been rendered experientially intolerable. In the repressive dimension of decontextualization, the person’s experiences of his subjectivity’s relational embeddedness is dissociated or otherwise relegated to a dynamically unconscious state (Stolorow, Atwood and Orange, 2002); instead of reflectively aware, he is blind, numbed and silenced to the interactive nature of his experiential process.
The blindness and affective numbness in respect of interactive relatedness that results from decontextualization is highly problematic because rudimentary perceptions of one’s emotional life’s relationality—like seeing one’s impact on others, and others’ impact on oneself—are developmentally prerequisite to the possibility of invaluable experiences of relatedness-to or interactivity-with other, like reactive hurt, disappointment, exploitation (Perlman, 1993; 1999; 2008), self-protective anger, and moral outrage—among others. Moreover, these reactive experiences are in turn prerequisite to the possibility of more concrete reactions on the level of willful conduct and attempts at interpersonal solution, self-care, and self-defense, whether intellectually or physically.

In short, when perceptions of, and reactive feelings about, the relationality of emotional experience are repressed and obscured by illusion, and thus unavailable for integration into selfhood, motivation and action—that is, when one is imprisoned in the arresting isolation and shamefulness of decontextualized states—other critically important possibilities, like self-care and remedial action, that rely upon relational sight and affective life become inaccessible.4

4 Severely decontextualizing developmental systems can result in extreme forms of psychopathology wherein the person’s sense of interactivity with other is rendered completely invalid. In such systems, perceptions of being emotionally or physically violated, for example, and the reactive affects of intrusion and terror that accompany them, may become pervaded by experiences of utter illegitimacy. Since, as I contended at the outset, relational interactivity is ascribed to the “very being” (Orange, Atwood and Stolorow, 1997, p. 71) of human emotional life, such pathology amounts to nothing less than an experience of the invalidity of a central aspect of one’s existence (Heidegger, 1927) as a distinct feeling and perceiving subject; that such experiences typically arise in dramatically hurtful systems of interaction only serves to interweave invalidity with [valid, if isolated,] despair. Such regions of perceptual and emotional invalidity and despair often lead to experiences of “personal annihilation” and falls into abysses of madness, as powerfully elucidated by George Atwood (see e.g., Stolorow, Atwood and Orange, 2002, p. 139; Atwood, 2011).
Just A Few Transference Implications: In conclusion, a few brief thoughts on transference implications. In the clinical setting, developmental histories of relationality trauma will determine significantly the character of a patient’s expectations of, and resistance to, exploration and dialogue about his sense of interactivity, particularly disharmonious interactivity, with his analyst. In a similar vein, an analyst’s appreciation of a patient’s developmental history of relationality trauma will help her focus an aspect of the treatment on exploring the contextual nature of the transference -- that is, cultivating mutual acknowledgement of, and dialogue about, experiential details and nuances of their treatment interactions (see Ehrenberg, D. B., 1974; Stolorow and Atwood, 1992, pp. 56-59; Fosshage, 2007, p. 339; Stolorow, 2007, pp. 8 – 9).  

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5 After all this, decontextualization is here succinctly defined: In decontextualization, linguistically articulated reflective emotional and perceptual experience -- that is, somatically-symbolically integrated knowledge-- of the relational contextuality of emotional life is, within relational contexts of resistive mal-attunement to such emotional and perceptual knowledge, disarticulated and repressed into dynamic unconsciousness, and replaced in consciousness with Cartesian images of emotional life’s non-contextuality.


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