Affective Relatedness in Stance and Process: Commentary on Papers by Stuart Pizer and Barbara Pizer

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It is a pleasure to discuss these two papers, pieces that form a diptych for pushing forward some clinical ideas in relational thinking in a way that is characteristic for Barbara and Stuart Pizer. We affectionately call them “The Pizers.” This isn’t because they are inseparable, though it is a rare treat sitting with them in a meeting listening to them weave a conversation together. At some points they are virtuoso in their remarks, their mutual interjections elaborating a seamless choreography that sound for brief moments like a single superordinate mind, a Pizer third that reaches to new connections beyond what either is saying. With all good couples, the one uses the other as a kind of backup hard drive, knowing where to locate the car keys and the like. But with the Pizers there is a deep complementarity, where each individually brings so much, but where at those special times together, something synergistic take place. Stuart and Barbara bring to our work a combination of sophistication and accessibility much like those great clinical
thinkers of Boston’s last generation, Elvin Semrad and Paul Russell. Each with their unique voice offers extremely usable conceptions of analytic work, ideas that make room for paradox and passion in navigating complexities of process.

To repeat, these presentations form a *diptych*: two images side by side. Each can stand on its own, but put together they make a single work, more whole and more complex than their individual parts. I’d like to start by addressing the works separately and then note something about the synergy I find in their pairing.

I’d like to begin with Stuart’s presentation, since he provides a ground that is implicitly assumed in Barbara’s paper, and that offers a framing of the conditions for the possibility of what she then does. By ground, I think it is useful to consider a term that is part of our common lexicon, something formalized by a number of thinkers, as the analyst’s *stance*. Tony Kris talks about stance as “…the sum of the analyst’s explicit and implicit attitudes toward the patient and toward the analytic method they employ together” (1990, p. 26). Although a stance is informed by our theory, it transcends how we think in our work, capturing our most basic *attitude* in working analytically. In fact, it is just this notion of *analytic attitude* that Roy Schafer (1983) uses to elaborate his take on the basic ways an analyst engages in a psychoanalytic process. A stance or attitude captures an embodied expression or engagement deeper than understanding, a basic *sense and way of being* in the hour with our patients. It is informed by character, by who we are as a person, but is not simply coincident with our personal presence on the one hand or by our articulated formulations on the other. It is informed, prior to any reflection, by who we identify ourselves to be as an analyst. It is what we bring of the saturations of experiences and sedimented learning and identifications in the process of becoming an
analyst. Schafer called this aspect of being and becoming an analyst, the analyst’s “second self”; Robert Fliess (1942) called it the analyst’s “work ego.” This way of being is a specialization of our ordinary way of being and relating.

Coming from the analyst him or herself and not from the patient, analytic stance is a way of talking about the frame of analytic work. This is different from analytic process, which is the movement of the work as it is lived in the unfolding of the hour. It is the setting of the work, flexibly shaped by the analyst. Jose Bleger (1967) described it as “made up of the constants within whose bounds the process takes place” (p. 517). It’s beyond my scope right here to talk about relational thinking on the frame, but I would refer you to a wonderful article and discussion by Tony Bass (2007) and Philip Bromberg (2007) for elaboration.

What can we say of this specialization? First, although we share a common profession, and thus must share certain fundamental characteristics of stance (and this is something about which I’ll have more to say in just a bit), there are different kinds of stances. I believe that psychoanalytic stance has shifted over time, and continues to shift with the ineffable movement of history and culture within which psychoanalysis finds itself. What kind of stance might we expect from an analyst, who, in an earlier era, thought and looked for “mechanisms of defense?” I contend that when mechanism was spoken as a living metaphor, it carried a scintillating new experience for analysts listening to their analysand’s words. Although there are no literal mechanics in the patients’ psyche, mechanism connoted an impersonal automaticity that suited the Industrial Age, and that brought something original to the experience of what it meant to be human. Although there had been a long history of metaphors for the mechanics of the
body (Descartes), this was a fresh spark of insight regarding the operations of an impersonal and unknown mind, conveyed in the experience of speaking, listening and interpreting rather than simply sitting as a fixed label on the page.

Stances, like the metaphors that express them, have a life cycle, catalyzing from the incipient, to living and vital, and then falling apart, concretized as something static and common. We can’t hear the term mechanism now without it feeling frozen in time. What about neutrality? This is another stance metaphor, one of Freud’s three great technique maxims of neutrality, anonymity and abstinence. It would certainly seem that neutrality, like anonymity and abstinence is a metaphor of a bygone age. It suggests an analyst who “takes his stand at a point equidistant from the id, the ego, and the superego” to use another well-known stance aphorism of Freud’s daughter Anna (1936, p. 28). This is a stance from a time when psychoanalysis was held in the thrall of the “influence taboo,” to use a term by Irwin Hoffman (2009). In the service of science, the analyst must observe, listen, and pose interventions or interpretations that did not introduce intervening variables to the transference. And we all know so well the more contemporary responses to this positivism, begun over a half century ago by Harry Stack Sullivan with his notion of transference as a participant-observation, continued in the different introductions of the notion of mutual influence, interaction, participation, and to use Stuart Pizer’s term, involvement.

Even though I think we rightly jettison the term “neutrality,” I’m not ready to abandon the concept, as I see it touching on Stuart’s framing of generous involvement. Neutrality has quite a history, and there are times when conceptual longevity doesn’t necessarily mean obsolescence. The Pre-Socratic Skeptics were lovers of neutrality, in
their opposition to dogmatism. They advocated a stance of the *epoché* (Annas & Barnes, 1994), the careful and disciplined withholding of assent or dissent, the suspension of judgment.¹ But far from uninvolved dispassion, this was a stance that suspended an already formed conception of the other, a “totalizing” imposition or preconception on what is really the mystery of one’s otherness. Early on, Freud noted that the analyst proceeds “without any purpose in view, allows oneself to be taken by surprise by any new turn in [the patient], and always meets them with an open mind, free from any presuppositions” (1912, p. 114). This was not an anonymous removal, of self from the analytic situation. It instead emphasizes an openness, an active receptive presence to the other that aims to honor the real possibility of free association taken in it’s most generous sense as the expressive creation of experience. Thompson (1996) notes, “unlike abstinence, where analysts are required to hold their feelings in check, neutrality is intended to serve as a foil against becoming manipulative, clever, coercive, deceptive, therapeutically ambitious and controlling” (p. 38). At times this will require a literally active stance, whether it is expressed in Stuart’s grandfather’s nectarine, or Freud’s gesture to Paul Lorenz, the Rat Man, of feeding him herring (see Lipton, 1977).

Hence Stuart titles his paper, “The Analyst’s Generous *Involvement,*” and notes that this is an elaboration of an earlier term where he spoke of “generous mentalization.” He tells us that the latter term strikes him as implying a conscious process, a cultivated virtue, whereas he hopes to convey something else, something more fundamental with his use of the term *involvement.* Stuart’s attempt here is to articulate the analyst’s basic stance, as he sees it being manifest in our analytic work at this particular point in history.

¹ See Thompson (1996) for an elaboration of this conception of neutrality in relation to Freud’s case studies.
He ties this to a way of being so fundamental, that it would not seem to involve a choice. But indeed, does it? Or does it not?

Stuart speaks of Sullivan’s “tension of tenderness,” where the very experience of ‘self’ is constituted in the experience of being responded to by another. This is tension in the most basic sense, Sullivan’s response to Freudian “drive,” where the tension of bodily human need is completed in the embodied response engendered by this tension in the other. Tension becomes a shared mode between self and other, a generative interpersonal exchange. The infant’s expressed tension “induces tension in the mothering one, which tension is experienced as tenderness and as an impulsion to activities toward the relief of the infant’s needs” (Sullivan, 1953, p. 39). We hear in this Fairbairn’s understanding of drives as object seeking, but with the completion of the drive-satisfaction arch in a process of recognition, a reciprocal return where tension induces tension transformed to tenderness returned to the infant in this new experience.

Now, one might think that there is nothing new in this. Indeed, the thrust of many contemporary concepts elucidates a reciprocal process. But why does Sullivan call this exchange one of tenderness? He does so to differentiate this exchange of recognition from other kinds of reciprocation. Sullivan juxtaposes the tension of tenderness with the tension of anxiety and other reciprocities that might influence without meeting the other in a way that transforms, and it is this theme that Stuart develops.

I love the use of philosophy to tell a good analytic story, and I’d like to relate a reminiscence of Emmanuel Lévinas, from whom Stuart draws so well in developing his point on generous involvement. Lévinas was captured as a young French officer by the
Nazi occupation and spent a number of years in forced labor with other Jewish soldiers, spared the gas chamber by their uniforms. The prisoners, who were sent on a daily silent march to strip and chop trees, were provided only the most meager sustenance to keep them on their feet. Lévinas says: “we were subhuman, a gang of apes…we were no longer part of the world” (1990, p. 153). The Nazi machine in the camps reduced humanity into anonymous chattel: they “stripped us of our human skin…beings without language.” No recognition, no names, no gesture of acknowledgment.

In the midst of this:

…a wondering dog entered our lives. …[W]e called him Bobby, an exotic name, as one does with a cherished dog. He would appear at morning assembly and was waiting for us as we returned, jumping up and down barking in delight. For him, there was no doubt that we were men. (p. 153)

Bobby’s power of recognition suddenly shattered the pall of objectification, categorization, the machinery of power elucidated so thoroughly by Foucault in his analyses of the prison, the mad house and the factory. “At the supreme hour of his institution, with neither ethics nor logos, the dog will attest to the dignity of the person” (p. 152).

The paradox of man is that our very capacity to grasp the world and the other through our systems of understanding, through the “totalizing” nature of knowing and techne, can reduce the other to something less than mysterious. At best, such totalizing freezes the other into the likeness of self. At worst, it objectifies, reduces our ineffable subjectivity to
chattel, to be used as spare parts in the service of avoiding the existential agonies of our own vulnerabilities in the face of death.

I think we all also act as totalizing agents within ourselves. We reductively objectify parts of our humanity in an attempt to stave off existential agonies. Our bad objects are ways of reducing subjectivity, creating personal shoah-states inside, something that in turn plays out in the reciprocal exchange in the office. Psychoanalysis offers a way of responding to such reductions, holding onto a Bobby-like response in the face of dehumanization. From my perspective, Stuart’s “generous involvement” is a living metaphor that revitalizes deep down the contemporary metaphorical impact and meaning of neutrality in our present age. His is an attempt to answer the question of how we can be involved without totalizing the other in our very wish to overthrow the kinds of totalizing that are part of our past. At times, this will involve an active responsiveness, at other times it will be in a non-active witnessing, or even in a refusal to participate in a patient’s efforts to totalize a spontaneous process (like with Stuart’s patient).

But is such involvement a choice? And how do we determine when giving a nectarine opens an exchange or closes one? I would like to suggest that Stuart is proposing a moral center for our work, a position where we stake a claim for our patient’s capacity to experience, to be Other. But this stake is done with the paradoxical recognition that we can’t help but totalize, we continually attempt to catch, after the fact, how we impede that claim in how we inevitably unconsciously enter in and foreclose. From my perspective, our generosity is expressed in the sustained recognition that while we can’t not totalize we must stand for experiencing in the midst of infinitely diverse means through which
experience is foreclosed. Although we can’t choose the form that such a stance will take, the fact of taking this stance, the fact of holding a certain frame, is a choice renewed moment to moment as we continue to engage. I’m going to regrettably leave Stuart’s work right here, and comment on Barbara’s paper, returning to say a few things about both at the end.

Barbara situates her presentation in the interconnections between three great vectors of clinical experience. The first is what I would call “the development of feeling or affect,” the “moving anger forward” as Barbara calls it, a theory of mutative action shared with Paul Russell. Second, Barbara takes on that great enigma of psychoanalysis, the repetition compulsion, and finally, she looks at these in relation to the interpersonal movement of the clinical setting. I could spend a long time on her presentation, as it touches on issues near and dear to me, but I’ll have to simply provide some delectable bits, to be elaborated at another time.

What can we say of Barbara’s notion: “moving anger forward?” Barbara’s work always deals with what I would call, ‘the development of feeling,’’ the ways in which the personal, intimate and bodily affective subjectivity of the analyst is used in the creation of a felt intersubjective context for change. This work is no different, but she highlights anger in particular in this work. I want to look at this role for anger, but first, what do we mean by feeling? Here are a few phenomenological reflections.

Notice that when we talk about feeling, it has it’s ground in the body’s ineffable receptivity and engagement, of touching and being touched. We have a feel for something. There’s a profound and immediate reciprocity in this. In feeling we are
simultaneously felt. Our capacity for feeling, for experiencing the world and others simultaneously implies our openness to being felt and experienced by the world and others in response. Without that openness to being touched, we simply couldn’t touch in turn. We might feel the roughness of the bark of a tree, but only if our skin is roughened in the process of registering its roughness. The same can be said about our emotional life. We cannot move others without being simultaneously moved ourselves. This reciprocity breaks, on a fundamental level, with the dichotomy between self-other, self-world.

Feelings catalyze in a situation, are shared and experienced prior to the kind of separateness and subsequent influence we characteristically think about in interpersonal exchanges. In the elaboration of bodily feeling, felt states are our way of having a feel for the world. This is to say that prior to representation or processes of symbolic thinking, we live significations of our situations in the feeling that situations have for us. There is a felt sense or meaning that provides a background to all experiencing. It is an essential component of what experiencing is. This is what Heidegger (1927) is getting at with his concept of befindlichkeit, the moodedness of experience that conveys and expresses the meaning that a situation has for us. Our investment in the world and others can be discerned in the intensities and resonances of what we feel.

But feeling is rarely if ever a discrete affect. It is a shimmering concatenation of shifting flowing felt states that coalesce and disperse like light refractions on a pool of water. Given this movement, feelings are rarely explicit in their nature or meaning. We are most often awash in the flow, with the meanings, the sense of feelings being ambiguous, ineffable, and not initially represented in any discernable way. This is to say that feelings are lived rather than known. They come initially “de-linked” to use
Barbara’s term, from an articulation or representation of their expression. There is a movement of feeling, but this movement is not something we direct and intend like we might direct our gaze from one thing to another. Feelings happen. We are moved. We cannot simply change our feelings like we change our clothes. But by changing clothes we might feel differently. We can act and engage in ways that move feelings along. The ineffable flow of feeling can be developed such that something initially inchoate becomes more clear, becomes seen and articulated through thought and language and thus appropriated as one’s own.

When Barbara speaks of moving anger forward, I see her describing a personal and interpersonal arch of feeling. Although anger is one possible leading edge of its unfolding, there is a more complex emergence, an ineffable elixir of felt states that flow from one infinitely subtle set of nuances to something sorted out where the sorting makes the meanings clear, but also freezes the flow, captures or totalizes something that can never be held nor fully known. Barbara knows this, and says: “I recognize that anger is more than just a feeling. Anger may also be a mode of transportation that carries with it a richness of unexpected feelings as it travels along, feelings and combinations of feelings never felt in quite this way before or again” (p. 12).

Although all feelings can develop, there are feeling states that, because of their lack of safety or incompatibility with our safe ways of being, refuse development. Incompatible felt states, the intimation of difficult feelings often sit inchoate and mute like dead weights in the experiential flow. Anger holds a privileged place as threat or danger in psychoanalysis, given its link to aggression, and through Guntrip, Barbara marks this importance. In its threat, anger (aggression, pique, outrage, resentment, ire,
wrath, dander, seething fury) is often not expressed, its intimations felt and not known. It weighs on the clinical hour like a wet rag, like stone, ice cold removal, at times a void or absence. We call this unconscious. Barbara’s patient awaited her “verdict,” already braced, with Barbara, in her own participation, finding herself holding on in the face of something undeveloped, her pride, her verdict, expressing and hiding at the same time.

Barbara and Paul Russell (1988), call this situation repetition: “a resistance to remembering with feeling.” Freud talks about it in relation to remembering as well, with remembering being seen as “reproduction in the psychical field” (1914, p. 153), a representation of what is presented but not known and symbolized. Barbara and Paul both take on the challenging intersection between psychic representation (remembering), action (enacted, “un-linked”, undeveloped feeling states) and working-through (expression as the productive un-linking and linking of “moving forward”). I love how Freudian this all is, and how it echoes recent work in contemporary Continental psychoanalysis (e.g., Scarfone, 2011) where there is a process of transformation from action-repetition (Agieren) to remembering (Erinnern), where remembering is “recomposing one’s whole mind…not just adding some new item to one’s mental scrapbook” (p. 73). Barbara adds that it is also a recomposing of the nature of involvement.

Very briefly, this is how I see “moving forward.” In the ineffable flow of felt-states we all participate in a development or movement of feeling where the ineffable transforms into the sensible, where the ambiguously lived becomes momentarily known. This very transformation is a dipping into the flow. It is a binding or linking, “a fragile, pulsating, discontinuous, almost evanescent…momentary possession or repossession of
one’s thoughts and feelings” (Scarfone, p. 73). This is not done in isolation, but with others, or in the analytic setting, with another who responds in the immediacy of their own feeling-states, dipping into a mutual flow to bind meaning out of the ambiguous, a meaning that through the repetition of feeling unbinds into further ambiguity only to bind or link again. But given our existential agonies, the innumerable too unsafe impingements of living, certain lived-feeling-states do not develop or move forward. They remain lived but not known, unlinked or unrepresented, procedurally repeated with others in timeless loops, with rigidifying modes of relating to self and other, self-talk that binds by freezing or suspending, reducing…totalizing, as one was once totalized by others, totalizing something inherently fluid. There is an insistence of the familiar, feelings worn as tattoos in the face of the terrors of the unknown.

We, as analysts, can’t help but participate, at once melded with our patients in our unbidden felt reaction, while at a loss of knowing what we are immersed in. We are simultaneously too close and too distant, lacking a sense…a context within which to frame what we feel. Our attempts to understand become one more freeze-framing of the flow, yet another totalizing reduction. So we rely not simply on what we know, but on what we feel. We look for the development of our own feeling, rather than foreclosing that development in a too-ready totalizing knowing of the other, reducing them to identities we already know.

Barbara is right to emphasize anger both with this patient and in our work. Feeling states are not only initially de-linked, but shifts in feeling have a delinking function. These shifts are not willed or determined but are discovered, in the moments where the insistent familiar “second language,” to use Barbara’s term, loosens in
response to the attuned recognition by the analyst of their own totalizing feeling-states. There’s an intuitive symmetry between intimacy and the expression of anger. What could seem less generous from an analyst, but what could express more the ways we are bound together and how in moving forward unbinding happens?

I have three points in discussing the integration of Stuart’s and Barbara’s work. First, generosity, a contemporary formulation of neutrality, is the precondition, the necessary foundational stance of any process of moving feeling forward. To get to the pit of the issue, in Barbara’s clinical work with her patient, her anger becomes the nectarine! Her anger with it’s development from pride, shock, shame, pique, doubt and searching resolve, keeps a door open, and in its development invites the movement of her patient’s anger with it’s own subtle dance. For some patients, this will entail negotiating a close enough distance, or a distant enough closeness (something Barbara calls intimacy) in the form of explicit analyst disclosure (Cooper, 1998), in others it will be found in the poignant unspoken movement with room for the analyst’s surprise in the patient’s development of feeling. But in any case, there is a choice of holding open the experience of felt engagement to what comes next, to the continuation of the flow of feeling states that are not simply mutually influenced but interwoven.

Second, the development of feeling, moving feeling forward, is the process that reciprocally emerges from the frame or stance or attitude of generous involvement. It is the way we capture, after the fact, the processes of totalizing, the inevitable reductions of the other that we do in order to know. Moving feeling forward is our way of de-totalizing,
de-linking, opening up a generous experience of the other as an irreducible mystery.

Generous involvement as an attitude entails the potential awareness of the ineffable flow of felt states. But moving feeling forward is the process, the activity through which this stance is actualized. There is an interdependent relationship between generous involvement as a stance and the development of feeling as a process. Both are necessary reciprocal components of the analytic scene.

Finally, I think there is room for developing these ideas forward. I’d like to hear from Stuart and Barbara how they heard, discovered and learned from the other’s work with these two articles. My hunch is that while they had some intimation of the paradoxical complementarity (the de-linking power of anger in relation to the de-totalizing structure of generosity) they were not quite aware that their work here can be seen as so closely bound, with the one’s stance in relation to the other’s process. I wonder where they would take their work if this interdependence were worked out further, more explicitly. Although there have been other elaborations of process in relation to stance in relational thinking, none have emphasized so clearly the function of feeling in transformation, with a corresponding articulation of a framing attitude that grounds the feeling process. It will be exciting to see what new synergies their deep complementarity will take them.
References


