CONTEXTUALIZING ATTUNEMENT WITHIN

THE POLYRHYTHMIC WEAVE:

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC SAMBA

“Men cannot see their reflection in running water, but only in still water.”
-Chuang-Tzu

Steven H. Knoblauch Ph.D.

Steven H. Knoblauch, Ph.D. is faculty and supervisor at The New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis, The Institute for the Psychoanalytic Study of Subjectivity, Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy and the Psychoanalytic Psychology Study Center all in New York City. He is also faculty at the Stephen A. Mitchell Center for Relational Studies. He is author of *The Musical Edge of Therapeutic Dialogue* (2000, The Analytic Press) and coauthor with Beatrice Beebe, Doriene Sorter and Judith Rustin of *Forms of Intersubjectivity in Infant Research and Adult Treatment* (2005, Other Press).

This manuscript has not been published elsewhere and is not currently submitted elsewhere for simultaneous publication.
ABSTRACT

Privileging stillness as a central strategy in the activity of the psychoanalyst is questioned as the only effective clinical strategy for optimizing a psychoanalytic focus. Stillness is demonstrated to have an array of potential affective impact as opposed to the traditional assumption of neutral impact or the creation of a space for meaning to emerge. An example of the duration of silence is used to illustrate that attention to the polyrhythmic weave of timing in the interactions constituted by analysand and analyst can prove to be at least as rich a fulcrum for generating meaning in the psychoanalytic process as a strategy of sustaining silence as space for transference projections by the analysand or reverie for the analyst. The impact of cultural practices and beliefs is further considered for how these can shape the scope and focus of analytic attention. In particular, the concept of attunement is revisited to demonstrate how a particular cultural perspective which privileges a linear concept of time and timing, could fail to recognize the generation of subtle affective meanings from the polyrhythmic weave of timing including matching and mismatching, a more complex and richer focus for analytic attention than just a moment of matching.
Central to psychoanalysis as Freud conceived it, has been the use of silence. Within this conception, silence is understood to create an opening for the analysand to fill with symbolic images from dreams, slips of tongue or associations, each of which could carry significant unconscious meaning. Silence is the strategy for creating an ambience of objective neutrality, metaphorically, a blank screen upon which the analysand will transfer meanings in various symbolic forms. The analyst’s stillness provides a unique opportunity for the analysand to have these transference experiences with the analyst. These experiences are understood to illuminate ways that the analysand experiences and relates to others. The analyst’s stillness has also been considered for the ways it can facilitate the analyst’s attention to a reverie process potentially rich in meanings understood as generated in the analytic interaction (See Freud, 1912, p.112; Ogden, 1997, p. 588; Cooper, 2008, p. 1045-1073.)

The question of timing is raised in this tradition (Glover, 1931) with regard to when in response to the analysand’s verbal productions the analyst should break stillness and formulate a verbal interpretation. Considerations of timing with regard to the effects of silence such as duration and the potential contextual meanings of silence, particularly the effect of silence as a non-neutral communication of affect, are not within the scope of such a conceptualization. In other words, within this conceptualization, major emphasis is placed on the timing and form of the analyst’s verbal interpretation as a way to optimize a just right intensity and focus for a mutative impact for the analysand. The analyst’s embodied presence in the space and time between such optimal verbal interventions is conceptualized as best managed with strategies for neutrality, which would reduce, if not, erase any impact and meaning for the analysand.
Recently, the complexities of timing and the many possible meanings that variations in timing could construct as one organizes experience within the flow of clinical interaction have been given increasing consideration by psychoanalysts. Influenced by observations of human interaction using videotape (see Downing 2004, 2008; Stern 1985, 2004; Beebe, 2005; for some examples), the significance of micro-moment exchanges to the construction of meaning is becoming more apparent to clinical observation and intervention. Within this polyrhythmic weave, we can attend to the ways that pauses in speech flow, while representing an absence of talking, can have a variety of meanings. Additionally, rhythmic accents in speech flow or other embodied dimensions of communicative exchange can carry affectively powerful meanings. Recent clinical illustrations by LaBarre, (2001 and 2005) and I (2000, 2005, 2008) have emphasized the role of embodied rhythmic patterning to the creation of affectively significant meaning in clinical interaction. (Also see relevant research describing infant/caregiver interaction including Lewis & Goldberg, 1969; Stern et al. 1977; Stern and Gibbon, 1979; Feldman et al. 1996; Jaffe et al. 2001).

In this text I am reporting further extensions of reflections I have been offering about the weave of polyrhythmic embodied, and symbolic, ways of meaning making. My thinking is extended by considerations for how these meanings are often shaped in the subjectivity of the listener or speaker, in part, by cultural beliefs and practices for both analyst and analysand. These beliefs and practices, often unreflected upon as part of the psychoanalytic process, contextualize subjective experience in addition to the intersubjective dynamics of the dyad within any present moment. For example, in addition to the possibility of creating a sense of abandonment or, on the other hand, a space for reflection, a pause might be considered in other ways than by what is absent. Central to this consideration is the recognition that absence can be experienced or dissociated, as it is constituted within an interaction between a subject and her context, both dyadic and cultural.
Cultural lenses can focus or foreclose the ways available for thinking about and organizing such meaning. This is a central consideration to critical thinking about the pragmatics of theoretical frames used by the analyst for clinical judgment and action. In this text, I am specifically examining the question of what might be filling the interval in a particular clinical moment, by attending to non-symbolic dimensions of interactive activity and their significance for creating meaning. I am additionally interested in the way that the analyst’s experience is shaped by different cultural practices and beliefs.

A Pause Considered in Context

Moments…….really just short bundles of seconds…….seem to stre…….tch,……long stre…………..tches whose duration seems so great in contrast to the minutes marked by the clock on the table by my chair. These clock minutes seem to pass in rapid cadence when Warren and I are engaged in the kind of animated dialogue that can easily characterize the greater part of any analytic session we have. (Warren is a high powered executive. He presses forward. He can do a lot more in his time than most of his peers can accomplish in their time.) But now, Warren’s facial display shifts suddenly and severely. From a kind of mask-like-optimistic-gets-it-done-kind-of-guy-smile, the tips of his mouth slightly turned up, now collapse. (You can feel this in your face if you just mock up a smile and then let it go. Let it flop. Your entire lower facial display around your mouth just drops. Try it.)

This salient signal, flaring into my attention as I sit opposite Warren, is setting off seismic shifts in me, between us and (I infer) in Warren. My gut is filled with a sense of free fall away from the frenetic fantasies of efficiency and responsiveness that shape the timelines of my patient’s days and which have been, and, are even now, programming the patterning of our clinical interaction, and, particularly, my countertransferential sense of who I feel pressed by Warren to be with him.
Warren feels the need to be “on it” all the time. He reminds me of what I consider a distorted sense of empathic responsiveness or what, in recent days, adopting a word twist from the Stolorow group, I have been calling *immaculate attunement*. This use of attunement is uni-directional and has been characterized by Beebe as hypervigilent, hypertherapeutic, hypertracking. Jaffe, Beebe and their co-workers offer a bi-directional alternative that characterizes a more sophisticated understanding of what attunement can feel like. They observe *level of activity* as a co-constructed interactive patterning more pervasively constituting dialogic rhythmic coupling than simply matching of tempo. (Jaffe, Beebe, Feldstein, et al. 2001) This conception is quite close to a similar description offered by Seligman in an unpublished paper written in 1990. (Seligman, 1990) Both the Jaffe group and Seligman, observing infant/adult interaction, emphasize the nonperiodicity of such rhythmic coordination. Here, coordination is a larger unit constituting a “wider ecology” (Jaffe et al. p. 89) to the context-sensitive complex layering of dialogic rhythms, often occurring in nonlinear patterning of different time scales, and like all unconscious phenomena, only available for observation and organization as a kind of tip of the iceberg, a metaphor that I will rework later in this text.

Returning to Warren and me, I realize that until this micro-moment shift which we are constituting, I too have been feeling a press to be *immaculately attuned*. The problem, with this superego expectation, and the reason it is a distorted sense of empathic responsiveness is first, that a nonstop attention to the states of others is physiologically not possible given the limits of human perception, and second, that a too closely entrained tracking and responsiveness to an other, has been associated with the creation of insecure patterns of attachment (See Beebe’s work on attachment and responsiveness in infant/caregiver dyads which emphasizes a midrange of responsiveness characterizing secure attachment bonds between infants and mothers). In other
words, such close tracking would be clinically contraindicated for optimizing patient progress. This kind of closeness constructs an interactive pattern that does not allow for “a certain level of openness” (Stern, in Jaffe et al. 2001, p. 145). As Stern emphasizes the high predictability associated with this close tracking can foreclose space for creativity and novelty, what Winnicott saw as so essential to emotional growth and therapeutic movement (Winnicott, 1971, p.41).

Something else is needed. *Attunement can be mutative, but its contextual meaning(s) are pivotal to its effects.* Attention to context can give clues to when attunement can become immaculate and collapsing, at least, in the experience of the analysand. (I think this is what theories of “thirdness” (see Cooper, 2008) can help us organize if they are used “lightly” or “softly assembled” (Harris, 2005) for clinical reflection and narration. In other words, theories of “thirdness” establish a context sensitive scope of attention for a particular interactive event that optimizes openness beyond expected categories of belief or practice and/or recognition of when such openness is subverted.)

Returning to this session, we can say that prior to this moment of shift, I am enacting, with Warren, a kind of manic defense in the rhythms of our exchange. Our rhythms construct the kind of too close entrainment described above, as we stay “on it” in order to stay “off it” where the “it” we are avoiding is a cataclysmic sense of fear. This manic “on it-ness” is important to understand in the context of the unfolding development of treatment. Warren had presented some 6 years earlier with confusion and collapsing posture reflecting the sense of powerlessness and directionlessness that he was feeling. He described his experience of being stuck in a stagnant organization and working for a boss who was more of a tormentor than a mentor. In our early meetings, Warren described his teenage oppositional behavior involving immersion in a drug culture and a strong need to disappoint his parents’ hopes for him to be successful in some traditional mainstream way. He carried a kind of self persecutory inner world into treatment where, at first, he seemed unable to
find a connection to me or the process into which he was placing himself. He described how he had, at one point, early in his adult years, become active in the world of filmmaking but with little success. After some years of struggling, he became increasingly distant from his drug-using friends, a loner with little self-confidence scratching the bottom of the barrel. Somehow, some years later, Warren entered, and completed a degree at, a small community college. Later, he dragged his way into graduate school, after which he began working in this first successfully achieved, yet deadening, position at a relatively insignificant organization with no sense of inspiration or direction to offer. His early transference experiences of me were highly idealized. From this idealization, Warren drew the motivation to apply for a much better position in a much larger and more prestigious organization. To his surprise, and quite frankly, to mine also, he was hired and subsequently proceeded to blossom in his skills and accomplishments over the next few years, continually winning the “gleam in my eye” that Kohut (1966) has associated with self-object mirroring recognition. Warren’s triumphs over these years became a focus of coordinated “on it-ness” for both of us as I followed and accompanied in mood and attitude, his triumphant push toward professional status, financial reward and marriage. As such, his manic defense against trauma from the past had been simultaneously, a shared construction, a pattern of high expectations for “normotic” (Bollas, 1987) performance into which both Warren and I contributed.

But now, within this micromoment, this disastrous feeling of pressured progression derailed, invades the space between us in the form of an experience of time,…time marked by absence….the presence of nothing….a pause….but not a ‘gap’ or silence in the sense that a Western/Northern ear normatively is entrained to organize silence, but rather a “relation” between two sounds, a filling heard by the ear…an experience for which the Greeks sitting on the border between the North and the South, reserve the term diastema. In the clinical moment constituted by
Warren and me, the expected continuity of manic activity is disrupted by a violation, an unexpected pause in the continuum, a silence, but one that fills out a relation with powerful affective meaning, *diastema*. *Diastema* gives us a term for a different kid of metaphor for silence than space for the analysand’s projection or the analyst’s reverie. *Diastema* allows us to imagine silence as a co-constructed relation, not an absence of activity, but rather as an action full with significations shared.

What is this about….this fear which fills each of our respective attentions?!?!?!?! Now the forward press of Warren’s rhythm begins to vary. I can hear it in the quiver of his voice as he begins to shift his attention from all his triumphs and responsibilities to a narration of the sense of pain and mourning for the kind of responsiveness from both parents that was starkly missing from the timing marking his interpersonal exchanges with each of them. His previously steady, fast moving, stream is now being marked with slight accents, accents that break up the flow unexpectedly. *This rhythmic variation, in itself, communicates affective impact from him and constitutes a nascent shift in me.* I can feel it in my internal “mindlock” where I can find no thoughts and no words…no smart clinical strategies to contain, modulate or begin to transform Warren’s emerging pain. Something in my participation is perturbed and this faintly recognized subtle effect, first experienced in my body, quickly catalyzes a retrospective recognition of my contribution to the manic defense that we have been previously enacting in order to avoid his experiencing such a tremendous hole of emptiness and loneliness.

I have been coordinating with Warren’s rapid flow in an embodied shared sense of connection, an exhilarating glide, narcissistically fulfilling a sense of power and triumph. But now the shift in his rhythm catalyzes for me a different rhythmic response. I can no longer join his fast pace which, I now begin to sense, in retrospect has created for both of us a relatively conflict free
collusion of pseudo-competence. Now my movement with Warren has suddenly become constricted by some signal within me in response to something experienced in his embodied rhythms. The constriction rapidly regresses to collapse and the coordination of my responsiveness dissipates as I open a wide rhythmic chasm between his shifting accents and my responses which are now constituting a dropping out of our flow, a violation of expectation for our previous pattern. I can no longer participate in our rhythmic coordination avoiding his pain and suffering. It is a fear and suffering with which Warren has been both haunted in our work, and from which he has carried the hope that our relating would be a form of liberation. My body can no longer collude in the rhythmic participation that avoids a way of relating that might bring about such a transformation.

**The Polyrhythmic Weave and Time**

Now comes that “stretched moment” for which I was trying to find description in earlier sentences, a moment that, when you are embedded in it, seems never to end. I am going to describe it and also enact it in this text as I “stretch out.” “Stretch out” is a phrase from jazz jargon meaning to take a long interpretive solo, a series of variations on a particular theme or composition. My solo consists of a series of reflections further unfolding and contextualizing the idea of “stretched time” within a consideration of cultural differences that can shape self and other organizations, (and the implications for how these differences can shape our clinical thinking and actions).

In the sense of time and space found in many European based cultural expressions, there can be no such thing as a “stretched moment.” Here, I am thinking of many different cultural traditions evolved over thousands of years. I am aware that in the last century or so, since the advent of audio recording, there has been a process of exchange among different cultures with particular emphasis on music, such that most music we now hear is multi- as opposed to uni-cultural in its origins and expressions. Thus 20th century music throughout the planet is increasingly influenced by traditions
originating in cultural practices first taking shape below the Equator, particularly regarding the use of time. But I would argue that differences in complexity and sophistication are still significant. (There are also less frequently found anomalous examples of the kind of rhythmic complexity which I am emphasizing in some North-of-the-Equator cultural practices emerging before the advent of recording and electronic media. Such examples can be found in Irish, Yiddish and Gypsy musical traditions of music and poetry, and I do not claim the ethno-musicological expertise to argue the origins of these practices.)

Time, therefore in most European based traditions is linear and metric. It moves from point one to point two with measurable beats of repeating regular duration between the two points. This is a metric dimension of experience. Such a practice creates expectations for predictable measures of contingency, affect expression and other kinds of tension and release. Consistent with this set of cultural expectations, percussive musical instruments mark a cadenced sense of time where (to quote the American bandleader made famous on early black and white television, Lawrence Welk, there is “a one, ‘anda’ two, ‘anda’ three ‘anda’ four.”) A one can never be a two. There cannot be two ones. In this Northern sense of time when there is an interval, a gap, a silence, there is an absence of something, marked by something that comes before and something that comes after the interval.

On the other hand, many cultures below the Equator seem to express and experience musical time differently. Polyrhythmicity emerges out of such cultures from the African and South American continents where the ear for rhythm is socialized in a way “somewhat” similar to the way that the European/North American ear is often socialized for tonality, and as these musical traditions have developed, also harmony. The contemporary Brazilian percussionist, Dende describes the polyrhythmicity of samba as drums talking with one another. (personal
communication) He explains that different styles of samba percussion have claves or rhythmic signatures and variations, the interactions of which make up percussive melodies. Here the tonality that one cultural practice associates with a brass, reed or string instrument is carried by skin stretched across a hallowed out tree or sculpted metal cylinder. Within this tonality Dende speaks of different “songs” that one might create through the “fusion” of the different drums, each offering a particular rhythm or rhythmic variation in response to another. For example, the very popular Bahian percussive group Olodum is well known for their “fusion” of the reggae and samba traditions to create a variety of new feelings for song and dance. Another Bahian group, Timbalada, has introduced a rhythm called levada, which creates in contrast to the uplifting, joyous combinations of reggae and samba, a light, relaxed feel. This is a rhythm in which many different drums each create a different rhythm which in a complex combination of patterns creates the feel of strolling down the street. And so, percussionists are heard in dialogue out of the rhythms that they create, similarly to exchanges between soloists and choruses in the European choral and/or orchestral traditions.

Here is a detailed illustration of how this can work. For example, as compared to the metric function where a 1 cannot be a 2 or for that matter a 3 or a 4, when one drum is creating a pattern using a cycle of three beats and another, a pattern using a cycle of four beats, and you try to count linearly, the one of the first drum becomes first, the 4 of the second drummer. Then, in a second cycle of exchange the 1 becomes the 3 of the second drummer. Then, in a third cycle of exchange, the 1 of the first drummer becomes the 2 of the second drummer. Then, in a fourth cycle of exchange the 1 of the first drummer becomes for a “softly assembled” micro-moment the one of the second drummer. Here, we have three mis-matches and one match creating a sense of novelty and uplifting positive affect. (Below is a visual representation of the relationship between the first
drummer’s rhythmic pattern and the second drummer’s pattern. Note that the one beats of the first drummer are underlined and italicized and the corresponding 4, 3 and 2 beats of the second drummer that fall as a match with the one beats of the first drummer are also underlined and italicized.)

First drummer: \(\underline{1} \ 2 \ 3, \underline{1} \ 2 \ 3, \underline{1} \ 2 \ 3, \underline{1} \ 2 \ 3 \ \underline{1} \ 2 \ 3\)

Second drummer: \(\underline{1} \ 2 \ 3 \ \underline{4} \ 1 \ 2 \ \underline{3} \ 4 \ 1 \ 2 \ 3 \ 4 \ \underline{1} \ 2 \ 3 \ 4\)

These rhythmic dialogues, constitute meanings for the participants, and for other listeners when present, evocative of deep emotional responses. The New York Times music critic, Jon Pareles in a commentary on Brazilian rhythm has described how rhythm can pace manual labor, galvanize dancers, rally marchers or summon spirits by “providing soothing regularity or jolting tempo shifts and breaks.” (Pareles, 1998, p 20) It is just this kind of polyrhythmicity, a kind of psychoanalytic samba, that I am highlighting in the subtle micro-moments of a clinical interaction by examining the exchange between Warren and me and the emergent affective meanings that are being constituted within the rhythmic dialogue. Polyrhythmicity as a metaphor for organizing micro-moments of human interaction can open up fascinating and clinically useful possibilities for narrating analytic interaction that extend current psychoanalytic interest in how embodied communication accompanies and interacts with verbal interpretation.

Similarly, in contrast to a linear sense of time, observers of infant/caregiver interaction (See Jaffe et al, 2001; Stern, 2004; Fogel, 2004 for examples) are studying communication that can occur on other dimensions than semantic representation with word symbols. These investigations are consistent with clinical reports from adult treatment that much can be constructed intersubjectively
in the time/space between words on embodied nonspeaking dimensions (see McLaughlin, 2005; LaBarre, 2001, 2005; Orbach, 2003, 2004, 2006; Harris, 2005; Knoblauch, 2000, 2005, 2008, and others for examples) as well as on additional dimensions that can occur with words such as the tonality and rhythmic variation occurring in a vocal utterance. Seligman has offered detailed descriptions of videotaped interactions illustrating nonverbal patterning of projective identification and intergenerational transmission of trauma. (Seligman, 1999) These new considerations are tapping into an implicit sense of time, not just a rhythmic dialogue which can be misconstrued as matching, but what Trevarthan (1993, 1998) terms the coupling of rhythm, Beebe and her group have characterized as the timing pragmatics of dialogue (Jaffe et al, p. 110) and Gentile (2007) has described as a trajectory of uncertainty (2007, p. 28). I am illustrating this patterning as forms of polyrhythmicity, a psychoanalytic samba, containing a nonperiodic organization of matches and mismatches, the weave of which can constitute affective impact carrying either benign experiences of novelty or malignant experiences of disruption. Daniel Stern illustrates a version of this schematically as a violation of an expected accent in the patterning of a particular rhythm interactively constructed. He calls this phenomena “Gotcha” for its capacity to grab and shift attention. (Stern, 2004) Such shifting in accents constituting experiences of heightened affect or rupture and repair, are similar to polyrhythmicity as expressed explicitly in musical practices such as the samba, hence their metaphoric value for helping us to conceptualize this expanded sense of the meanings that timing can have.

**Polyrhythmicity in the Clinical Interaction**

How can thinking about a psychoanalytic samba help us to clinically attend to an expanded sense of the meanings that timing can have in psychoanalytic activity? How does an ear for the polyrhythmic weave in the analytic encounter sharpen our sense for how linear time can be
subjectively shrunk, stretched, contracted or expanded, and thus, contextualized in complex
myriads of echos and counterpoints within a clinical interaction? It is important to offer several
theoretical corrective here. One, most important corrective is that these temporal variations are not
conceptualized as unconscious primary process events. They are recognized as intrinsic dimensions
to the unfolding interactive patterning within a clinical encounter that shape significant affective
meanings. Both rhythmic variation and the emerging affective meanings they can constitute can be
conscious or unconscious at different points in the treatment process. In this sense the complex
patterning of time and timing is intrinsic to the construction of a sense of subjective and
intersubjective space. Katie Gentile, (Gentile, 2007) has provided exquisite descriptions of how
different experiences of time are intrinsic to a sense of coherence, continuity and vitality in the
experience of a sexually traumatized woman. Here, I am specifically using a more micro-moment
lens trying to capture a stitch or two of the polyrhythmic weave (I prefer this metaphor to tip of the
iceberg), to help us understand how the moment I just described between Warren and I becomes
“stretched.” But of particular clinical utility are the unconscious meanings emerging within this
“stretched” experience for each of us.

Warren speaks, something about being overwhelmed with expectations from his boss. (Here
his flow is still a manic forward moving cadence, previously offered with an expectation of a
matching cadence coming from me.) As Warren awaits my response which emerges not as
expected, anxiety begins to build in his face and voice. I am quiet. (My pause creates a violation of
the expected rhythm we have been constituting. Now a new rhythmic weave is nascent. It is a
violation, and at the same time, a perturbation, the potential emergence of something with a more
complex patterning than just matching.) I am thinking about Warren’s need to be recognized and
loved, and his descriptions of the kind of panic spin into which he can fall. He manages this fear of
falling apart with nicotine, alcohol, gambling, intense sexual affairs…anything that will fill his void of emptiness and loneliness with excitement through embodied sensations. These sensations then, counteract a powerful surge of anesthetization constructing a sense of being out of control and terrified, into which he recurrently can fall. These manically constructed sensations paint a false self-surface-sense of coherence over a rapidly deteriorating ability to feel embodied and connected affectively with others.

My reverie, my pause, (as Warren experiences it) seems to go on too long. His speech begins to fragment. (Now Warren’s rhythm is shifting in response to my pause. A powerful set of affective meanings is in formation, i.e. being constituted in and between each of us.) Warren’s words are still coherent. He is wondering if I am there. Am I responding? He asks, his voice tentatively attempting to form the words, “Are you li…..li……. listening?” The tone is weak and high pitched, the sound of a scared little boy. The words begin to fragment almost into a stutter, but no, it seems to be the throat muscles which are faltering…that seem to fail to gather the strength to construct the morphemic shapes that create the form and flow of the word sound. His voice shakes and fills with static. (Now as Warren’s rhythm shifts from a smooth fast pace to a slowed down syncopation with uneven rhythmic accents, a new patterning is emerging, the affective significance of which is becoming increasingly clear.) For me, this shift in rhythmic accent creates an impression that Warren is experiencing an escalation of fear. But seemingly in contradiction, he also seems angry, frustrated. (There is something about Warren’s accents to which I respond, catalyzing in me multiple affective responses with multiple potential meanings.)

Countertransfereentially in this moment, Warren is my father disappointed………no infuriated that I have not met his expectation for emotional closeness that he demands………an emotional closeness that he does not initiate or reciprocate himself. I am able to wonder, am I in the transference
Warren’s father or mother or both? Does my pause feel like narcissistic fury or possibly worse, annihilating indifference? This “long” moment is out of control and terrifying for Warren. And for me?

My silence….my absence of an utterance filling the space, creates a shift in the “on it” rhythms that we regularly have been creating. Where a sound is expected, no sound is experienced. But is nothing experienced? Might Warren be experiencing my silence as a frustration, resentment, anger? How conscious am I of the effect that such a shift in rhythm might construct? I believe that some aspect of awareness of my participation in our interaction, possibly pre-conscious, is a need or therapeutic imperative (coming from my professional culture or my unique voice within that cultural context, I know not for certain) to refuse my complimentary participation contributing to the drivenness of the “on it” timing in which we are entrained. My violation of the expected syncopation of our turn taking destabilizes a pattern of drivenness into which I feel we are locked together. My rhythmic accent, a pause where a rhythmic patterning driving us manically forward is expected, is more powerful in its impact than I am expecting, again, surprising me with the degree of uncertainty marking these troubled currents, the flows of which I am attempting to navigate with Warren. But my pause, a shift in timing, is also a movement which catalyzes a shift in attention as Warren’s imagistic and semantic flows begin to be shaped by reconstructions of childhood, annihilations, “little murders,” which our momentary but cataclysmic dysjunction is resonating into memory and utterance.

Am I out of control, terrified? Well, I am uncertain, at first, without thoughts or words to understand, contain or modulate Warren’s emerging pain. But then, as the pause takes shape (a kind of slow motion experience for me, again, a stretching of time) space opens up… a small space… a glimmer of light… but enough for me to reflect that this shift in syncopation
(crystallizing, in part, from my own sense of helplessness and uncertainty, an undeniable but inevitably unavoidable aspect of surrender [Ghent, 1990] in these kinds of moments), is not just reconstructing an emotional crush (a rupture in rhythm). It is also constructing a space, not as absence, but as a tangible presence, a presence of attention which Warren might be beginning to experience in the gaze of my eyes and changing affective tension in my facial display. What I am experiencing, is not just in a shift of vocal tempo, but also in the shifting of muscle movements that shape Warren’s gaze and facial expression signaling fear and pain. (Now a new rhythm is forming in juxtaposition with the old, a polyrhythmic re-patterning, creating newness.) What fills this space speaks, not with words, of course, but with new timing that allows memories and feelings resonating the presence and the past, in which anger and pain caused by confusion from caregivers who did not respond or support in a good enough, rhythmically reliable enough, way, can have a place in present time and space to be named and felt. So, as Warren is shifting into this reflective retrospective narration of his past pain, a new polyrhythmic weave is emerging between us. What fills this space then, is a form of “language” (Nebbiosi, personal communication 2007), communicating meaningful affective state and state change, a communication that is not possible to articulate in the language of words at this point. But, it is a communication in rhythm that catalyzes a shift in the affective/cognitive/kinesthetic blending that now is transforming into a new polyrhythmicit.

As Warren begins to talk about his pain, tears flow easily. (The short accents in his speech flow marking his shift, now become less staccato. This flow is clearly slowed down and syncopated with unevenly spaced accents that create pauses for reflection, spaces for the previously dissociated suffering to be given form and narration.) My participation at this point becomes more like a musical accompanist. In the Southern percussive tradition that I spoke of earlier there is a practice
in which one drummer offers variations expressive of emergent affective experience. To support this process an accompanist, (often there are two in the original religious form of this practice….We could think of both analyst and the virtually present voice of supervision/tradition.), offers a rhythm that while different than the soloist creating variations, provides a counterpoint that helps to enhance the affective impact of the variations. (This is like the effect of a rhythmic cycle of 3s juxtaposed on a rhythmic cycle of 4s as in my previous illustration.)

And so, in response to Warren’s shift in rhythm and shift in narrative focus, I shift out of “mindlock” and the stretched pause in which we have just micro-momentarily inhabited. Now my rhythm, different than Warren’s, offers a pattern of lightly articulated beats, emerging in a non-periodic pattern, marking and/or echoing his rhythm with my accents of recognition and affirmation as he painfully recounts memories of his traumatizing encounters with father and mother. Here, embeddedness in an enactment with Warren, at first destabilizes my sense of my self state in the clinical role of interpreter and organizer of experience shaped by my expectations as a member of our psychoanalytic culture, and also the larger context in which I am the professional “mind healer.” Here the shift in rhythm is first experienced as unexpected and disrupting the coordinated syncopation of our patterning. But then, this shift also catalyzes for me, an experience, breaking out of rigid culturally shaped categorization, to experience a playful interplay, fluid and multiply textured with meaning. From a moment of freeze and confusion, I begin to sense an emergent vitality that frees me from expectations shaped by the analytic and larger cultures which contextualize my self-reflections. The polyrhythmic weave of our accents creates a new rhythm contrasting greatly with the pressured flow in which we had begun the session. Now there is bearable movement, a dialogue of percussive melody, a psychoanalytic samba, that accompanies, in quiet background, the mourning that is being unleashed for my patient concerning his childhood
suffering. Now the unspoken poly-rhythms, at least for the next “stretch” of this session, constitute the kind of holding (Winnicott, 1954) or selfobject dimensions of transference (Kohut, 1971) that make possible a loosening of the vertical split, initiating an undoing of dissociative lockups capturing both Warren and me. These dissociations have been artfully camouflaged by our previous rhythmic patterning and the cultural meanings concerning power and status out of which such rhythms are constituted and a sensibility to which they then contribute.

And so, it was not nothing that was occurring as we sat in that stretched moment of silence, but rather a powerful mutative emotional metamorphosis emerging from a cocoon of fright and dissociation, both constituted and transformed on subtle unspoken dimensions of polyrhythmicity, marking old and new meanings to timing. These meanings were different for each of us and yet related by the rhythmic flows we were creating. And in this sense, even prior to a period of reflection on possible meanings, we began to experience new possibilities for vitality constituted by the novel syncopations of accents and pauses.

**Timing and Structure**

In the narration of the short stretch of time marking the heightened moment of clinical encounter between Warren and me, a panoply of affective experience unfolded for each of us. While a reader could fix on recognizable descriptions of attunement and rupture, the critical perspectival distance for what is harvested from this textual construction seems to be something different, something of a “wider ecology” (Jaffe et al. 2001). This “wider ecology” provides the lens for the analyst to “see” and “hear” a mutative patterning, a polyrhythmic weave in which attunement is not just an experiential moment of match; in which rupture, is not just an experiential moment of mismatch. Rather, with such a lens, multiple levels of dialogic rhythm become apparent, each of which, as well as the interaction of which, construct a wash of heterogeneous
affective possibilities and meanings. To highlight this significance, let’s take the opportunity that this clinical material affords to consider some other options for how the encounter between Warren and I might have unfolded, to which I might have had conscious reflective access or not. Considering other possibilities helps to emphasize the value of the approach I am illustrating in this text.

For example, in response to Warren’s comments about being overwhelmed by expectations from his supervisor, I might not have paused. Rather, I might have formulated a verbal transference interpretation that, if effective, might have opened up a space for Warren to express feelings of being overwhelmed by expectations from me. This could have eventually moved to transferential understandings connecting Warren’s experience of me and those of his parents. In this case, whereas his parents seemed to be not responsive enough, my responsiveness in contrast to his expectations, might have felt similar, but also, at times, to be too much, and we could explore his fears of not satisfying me, his supervisor or others in his life such as friends and his spouse. On the other hand, my verbal interpretation, however effectively structured, might have been experienced as a reenactment creating overwhelming expectations for him coming from me in ways similar to what he experienced with his boss. Were this the case, the possibility for the creation of a reflective space in this moment of treatment would have been lost.

Alternatively, as my pause became “stretched” too long for Warren, I might have noted the anxiety building in his face and then his voice. I might have attended to facial muscle shifts and shifts in tempo and tone of voice just a bit earlier in my experience of him, than occurred as I reported. This might have led to a different experience for Warren of my responsiveness than I reported. I might have broken the rhythm or feel of the pause just a fraction of a second earlier than I did by verbally inquiring about the anxiety I was observing in his face and voice. This attention
might have catalyzed a new beginning experience for Warren, in which a different kind of violation than that which occurred would serve to trigger a shift in his thoughts and his sense of our interactive patterning. He may have associated to his experiences with his parents. Alternatively, my verbal inquiry might have created experiences of overwhelming expectations for him to regulate his affect, similar to his experience of expectations from his boss. In this case, rather than a new beginning, Warren would have experienced my attention to nonverbal dimensions of our exchange as a reenactment of the annihilating effect of power relations he experienced at work. Again, the opportunity for a space for reflection, symbolization and verbalized association might have been lost unless we were able to notice this effect and begin to verbally reflect upon it.

In both of these formulations, while clearly descriptions of interactions and possible emergent meanings, I am attending to and describing ways that Warren experiences me that reveal meanings frozen by a particular structural dynamic, such as an internally experienced relational pattern of match categorized as attunement or an internally experienced relational pattern of mismatch characterized as rupture. (This would be the reflected-upon foundational motivations for my interventions). In both of the hypothetical alternative responses coming out of different countertransferenceal organizations than in fact occurred, I consider how the analyst’s activity could be experienced by the patient as either serving some kind of mutually regulating holding or selfobject forward movement experience, or not.

The two hypothetical alternatives offer an opportunity to highlight the value of the kind of attention I am illustrating with the example of my attention to the polyrhythms of a particular micro-moment of interaction involving Warren and me. In each alternative I understand attempts at mutual regulation with language expressing internal structures representing relationships. These are the conceptions that concern holding or selfobject experience, two formulations that have been very
helpful in understanding patterns of interactive regulation and dysregulation. But in the actual clinical encounter for which I have offered a post-hoc narration, because of the dissociative processes intrinsic to the enactment in which I and Warren have been caught, I have not been able to formulate any such representations for my or my patient’s internal experience. In such stretches of dissociated enactment, there are no countertransference theoretical “life preservers” for the analyst to organize a coherent sense of activity and meaning. And from the embodied dimensions of Warren’s experience which impacted me, it was not clear that he was recognizing any nurturing relational pattern. Rather, in the case, for Warren (and for me) my pause became an absence, a hole filled with toxic meaning. In retrospective reflection, we can see that for that micro-moment experienced as “stretched”, there seemed to be an absence of anything constructive or growth promoting in our encounter. But, paradoxically, this pause, this rhythmic violation of expected patterning also created a space for mutative symbolic reflection on the part of the analysand, a place where he was able to experience a powerful connection to affective experiences of sadness, anger and vulnerability, previously anesthetized and dissociated. I was able to formulate my awareness of this meaning, not with attention to structural meanings, but with attention to PROCESS CONTOURS, a polyrhythmic weave which constituted powerful emotional impact for both Warren and me.

What is interesting about analytic participation on process dimensions of the clinical encounter is that often the “information” we act upon is not yet available symbolically for reflection. In fact, such experience is rather “in formation,” not yet fully formulated, but nonetheless, shaping powerful experience on nonsymbolic, embodied registers of affect. For the analyst, this is a different kind of countertransference responsiveness than attunement, one that has the potential to be an alternative registration to the symbolic. (See Ingram (2008) for a
consideration of signification without representation). Here is an example of WHERE DISSOCIATION WAS, EMBODIED SIGNIFICATION BECOMES. These embodied significations then become the affective signals for meaning that might later be given verbal articulation as when I sense a shift in the rhythms we are constituting and when my rhythmic shifts contribute to an opening of feelings in the transference that Warren can recognize as similar to unbearable affect, first experienced in childhood that he previously dissociated and/or anaesthetized through various forms of enactment. Embodied signification is, thus, rich and complex with clinical meanings.

This kind of responsiveness, this recognition without verbalized symbolization, is what as introduced earlier, Ghent has described as surrender (Ghent, 1990), but a surrender to a scope of attention constituting a “wider ecology” of multiply woven polyrhythms. Surrendering to the subtle unspoken cues that this attention constitutes, formed for me, a focus from which I subsequently was able to narrate a sense of what Warren and I are/were doing together both consciously and unconsciously. With this scope of attention, multiple meanings come tumbling out of the polyrhythmicity of our exchange. Rather than attunement, as a uni-directional moment of responsiveness, my experience of Warren and me is contextualized in a weave of interacting possibilities none of which, initially, I am able to recognize and respond to verbally. In this instance, my pause emerges (as I can report retrospectively) out of a surrender to possible significations for what is not spoken but felt on so many embodied dimensions of co-constructed rhythms, rhythms which “spoke” the ways we were affecting and affected by each other.

REFERENCES


Ghent, (1990), Masochism, submission, surrender: Masochism as a perversion of surrender. In S. A. Mitchell & L. Aron (Eds.), Relational Psychoanalysis:


Harris, (2005), Gender As Soft Assembly. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.


Lewis, M., & Goldberg, S. (1969), Perceptual-cognitive development in infancy: A
generalized expectancy model as a function of the mother-infant interaction. *Merrill-
Palmer Quarterly*, 15, 81-100.

McLaughlin, J. T., (2005), *The Healer’s Bent: Solitude and Dialogue in the Clinical

Nebbioso (2007), Personal communication re. rhythmic timing as a form of language.


Orbach, S. (2003), The John Bowlby Memorial Lecture Part I: There is no such thing as

_____, (2004), What can we learn from the therapist’s body? *Attachment and Hum.
Dev.*, 6(2), 141-150.

_____, (2006), How can we have a body: Desire and corporeality. *Stud. In Gender &
Sexuality*, 7(1), 89-110.


Seligman, S. (1990), What is structured in psychic structure?: Affects, internal
representations and the relational self. Invited presentation at Spring Meeting,
Division of Psychoanalysis (39), April.

_____, (1999), Integration Kleinian theory and intersubjecivity infant research:


_____, (2001), Face-to-face play: Its temporal structure as predictor of socioaffective
development. In: Jaffe, J., Beebe, B., Feldstein, S., Crown, C. L., & Jasnow, M. D.,


