Reply to Commentaries

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My first reply in this symposium is to Reis regarding his elaborations of Mitchell’s ideas that lend to comparisons of the Relationalists and the Intersubjectivists. I concur with Reis that differences between the two have less to do with language use per se than their views about analytic authority, to which I add the issue of analytic attitude. In replying to Clement, I underscore her important elaboration that Kohut’s self psychology revolution has for Relational Psychoanalysis. In my final reply I address Jacob’s argument that my comparison of the Relationalists and the Intersubjectivists is mired in “category errors” as well as my conflation of the “explanatory versus the phenomenological” levels of abstraction, which leads to spurious comparisons of the two theories. I argue instead that the “levels of abstraction” is essentially a specious argument that complicates rather than clarifying both theories use of language.

If illusion is defined as a false appearance, a belief that does not have its correspondence in the physical world, the current view in neuroscience is that everything the brain constructs is an illusion. Selves do not exist in the physical world; our perception of the self is a construction of our brain. Therefore, the self can also be described as an illusion. We essentially imagine ourselves. But we should not depreciate or disparage belief in illusions as false conceptions; if the self is an illusion and the feeling of agency is an illusion, these are illusions without which we cannot live. (Modell, 2008, p. 362)

All theories are metaphors; metaphors help us bridge from the theory to the phenomenology. (Thelin, 2005)

Having begun my article, “Meeting Mitchell’s Challenge …” (this issue) with an epigraph involving Einstein’s ideas about our “optical delusions,” I begin this reply to Reis’s, Clement’s, and Jacob’s compelling discussions with a comparable point from Modell about how our models of the world are necessary illusions. Both Einstein and Modell provocatively capture that our subjective experiences involve constructions of reality. It is in our use of language in particular, though much more, that our uniqueness and commonality manifests. This especially applies to this symposium in that it is in how the Intersubjectivists and Relationalists employ language that we find commonalities and differences in their models and it is in how the three discussants take up the issue of language that these points of comparison become ever more refined. Before launching into the daunting issue of language, however, I want to make a few comments about the discussants’ eloquent, evocative and highly educational articles.

Each of the authors, in their own unique ways, raises some questions about how I chose to organize my article comparing the Intersubjectivists and Relationalists. Reis (this issue), while ac-
knowledging my comparative analysis article is long overdue, nevertheless lamented that framing my comparison on the basis of the Intersubjectivists’ chapter Five “Cartesian Trends in Relational Psychoanalysis” (Stolorow, Orange, & Atwood, 2002), allows the Intersubjectivists to structure the points of comparison, inescapably leaving out numerous other important issues that are also worthy of comparison. Clement (this issue) concurs with Reis, adding that while my article is an “incredibly encyclopedic analysis” it nevertheless evinces “some gaps” (p. XX). Finally, Jacobs (this issue) challenges whether my article should be seen as a comparison at all.1 She reads it more as a relational critique of the Intersubjectivists’ perspective. Her commentary struck me as her engaging in a critique of what she reads as my critique of what may be read as the Intersubjectivists’ critique (Stolorow et al., 2002, chap. 5) of the Relationalists’ Cartesian use of language. I think that all three discussants make compelling points.

I am also struck, quite positively, by how each of the discussants spoke of what is either missing (Reis and Clement) or mistaken (Jacobs) in my paper. For example, Reis questioned my comment that “mutual recognition is not an analytic ideal to be foisted upon the analytic participants, but a repair of [inevitable] relational ruptures.” He does not challenge my interpretation per se, seeing as consistent with many Relationalists’ denial of mutual recognition as a universalized ideal, but questions this conceit in relational psychoanalysis. I think that he is right, that perhaps I soft-pedaled my statement. What I would say, however, is that mutual recognition is not a Relationalist goal in the sense that the Intersubjectivists interpreted it.

I also appreciated Reis’s recognition of the value of the Intersubjectivists’ critique of projective identification, while then pointing out that it is more than a bit dated in light of the Relationalists’ contributions regarding the concept of enactments. Enactments, Reis notes, are irrevocably dyadic, stressing “the contribution of both analyst and analysand to therapeutic process” (p. XX). In this manner Reis captures that the Relationalists’ concept of enactment is inextricably a two-way model of intersubjectivity, in contrast that is to the Intersubjectivists’ more one-way model of intersubjectivity (in practice though, not in their explanatory theory) as evidenced in their attunement-based model.2 I have more to say about this in my reply to Jacobs.

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1For the record, I too have never been completely comfortable with my strategy for comparing these two incredibly important and yet disparate paradigms. However, I simply could not think of a more fitting way. Nor, for that matter, have I yet read any other comparison that has succeeded in accomplishing the task any better. So, I am very grateful to be able to respond to the discussants in hopes of further clarifying some crucial points of comparison. Also, for the record, the final paper published in this issue of Dialogues represents a seventh major rewrite. The original title of the paper was “Between the ‘Doer’ and the ‘Done-to’: A Comparison of Relational Psychoanalysis and Intersubjective Systems Theory.” The other six versions spanned 3 years in development and were graciously vetted by over 50 readers, some reading several versions of it. Most importantly, the vast majority of these readers were more identified with the IST’s school than that of the Relationalists.

2Regarding the potentially prescriptively linear course the advocacy of affect attunement can take. Slavin (in press) wrote, “At many moments in [Orange’s] discussion of recognition, she focuses heavily on what sounds like one person, the analyst, recognizing, while the other, the patient, receiving an experience of the other’s recognition. … In the absence of the vantage point of the patient as an often perceptive interpreter of the analyst’s subjectivity (Aron, 19xx; Hoffman, 19xx) Dr. Orange’s model seems to keep the process of recognition more unidirectional and, I think, unnecessarily, limited.” Correspondingly, Benjamin (in press) wrote, “As I read Orange’s critique, the subtext of her argument is actually that only one partner can contribute—attune, formulate or recognize—at a time, indeed, that the complementarity of giver and given is never truly overcome. … If anyone, and only one, ‘must’ recognize, it should indeed be the therapist. But if things remain polarized in this way, so that different realities never come to be held in mind by both partners together, italics added) it is hard to see how healing actually takes place. … If the patient were only to absorb without returning all this good nourishment of recognition, the patient would never develop faith in her ability to feed herself or others. I believe this would be an unnecessary price to pay in order to receive empathy, witnessing, and yes, recognition.”
But what I appreciated most in Reis’s commentary is that the Intersubjectivists’ cautious critique of what they read as the Relationalists reified use of language is much less about language than it is about the question of authority, or what I would argue are attitudes about “authority” in the clinical situation as well as in language use. As I demonstrate more in my reply to Jacobs, the issue of language use in psychoanalysis becomes profoundly prejudiced by what our attitudes allow us to utilize of the enormous range of theoretical concepts in psychoanalysis. These attitudes shape whether we see theory as either constricting or opening the analytic space, especially in terms of our rich use of metaphors that can enliven how we both describe and explain our clinical work.

Clement’s (this issue) discussion to a large extent focuses on what she finds is missing from my paper. This in particular involves the myriad of ways that the Kohutian infused clinical theory of the Intersubjectivists is actually more congenial to the Relationalists’ point of view than one might ever derive from what the Intersubjectivists themselves write. This is a byproduct of what she reads as “the enormous distance between the intersubjectivists’ definition of their paradigm as a ‘metatheory,’ a definer of the field in which all experience is constructed, and their clinical theory which is … grounded in self psychological constructs” (p. XX). I believe that Clement’s breathtaking exegesis makes a powerful case for how many ideas in the Kohutian canon can be interpreted as resonating well with many ideas in relational psychoanalysis. In a manner somewhat similar to Reis, she notes that the Intersubjectivists “have hoisted themselves on their own petard in creating such a flat-out dualism between the intersubjectivist way and the Cartesian way” (p. XX). The outcome of this is that rather than using their theoretical modifications of Kohutian theory as a way to bridge a connection to the Relationalists, their “levels of abstraction” argument deters. I address Clement’s, Reis’s, and my concerns about this more in my reply to Jacobs.

Jacobs (this issue) is a cogent authority on Intersubjectivists’ theory, especially in their use of language and their critique of the Relationalists use of it. In particular, Jacobs argues that my comparison of the two theories is fraught with errors because I engage in conflating “levels of abstraction,” specifically what she and the Intersubjectivists refer to as the “explanatory” level versus the “phenomenological” (i.e., experiential) levels of abstraction, which they argue must be kept separate. First among her criticisms is what she refers to as “category errors,” which are part of her larger argument about the importance of distinguishing “levels of abstraction.”

By “category errors,” Jacobs notes that in my comparison of the Intersubjectivists’ version of intersubjectivity with the Relationalists, I am confusing the “explanatory” level of the Intersubjectivists’ version, which is defined as “the contextual precondition for having any experience at all,” with the “phenomenological” level of Relationalists’ version, which involves the phenomenon (experience) of “mutual recognition” between two subjects versus their “mutual negation” (i.e., misrecognition of one another). According to Jacobs, this means that the Relationalists’ definition is actually a “subset” of the Intersubjectivists’ definition, thus making them incomparable. Without a moment’s reflection on the hegemony of hers and the Intersubjectivists’ theoretical position, Jacobs elaborates that “one could say that [the Intersubjectivists’ version of intersubjectivity] is the condition for the possibility of the other [the Relationalists]” (p. XX).

What Jacobs is pointing out as my “category error” is really more a semantics problem that occurs whenever the same term—in this case, “intersubjectivity”—is employed regarding differing levels of classification. This is a common, everyday occurrence, such as when a friend says, “I am in the mood for fish tonight.” His comment potentially invites confusion (at least to philosophers, though probably not anyone else) because the same word “fish” involves both the classification
“all fish” (ever in existence—past, present, and future), though typically we understand that the speaker is most likely commenting on a particular kind of “fish” for which he is hungry. Nevertheless, the term “fish” applies to the class “all fish,” to subclasses of fish (e.g., shellfish, fresh- and saltwater fish varieties) as well as a particular member of a subclass, for example, salmon.

Sometimes distinctions of “levels,” whether about “categories,” “language,” or “abstractions,” truly matter. Indeed, “levels of classification” confusion is frequently the essence of a good joke, for instance, the one about the Dalai Lama entering a pizza parlor and saying to the order clerk, “Make me ‘one’ with ‘everything’.”

Also, in theories of psychopathology, the “levels” distinction can matter. For example, the essence of “double bind theory” (Ringstrom, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2003) involves “confusions of logical types” that then lead to the pathologically mystifying and obfuscating processes of paradoxical communication, culminating in the maddening experience that “one is ‘damned’ if he does and ‘damned’ if he doesn’t” while being prohibited from commenting on his dilemma (“meta-communicating” about it), as well as being unable to escape the field.

However, when the “levels” of abstraction distinction is applied in the manner that the Intersubjectivists employ it, it strikes me, as it also does Clement, Reis, and Stern (2008), as a largely specious argument that does more to confuse and constrain our use of language than its professed purpose, which is to clarify it. Making this point requires first describing what the Intersubjectivists mean by these differing levels of language and abstractions.

When the Intersubjectivists refer to the “explanatory” level of their theory, they are referring to a set of metaphysical “explanatory” assumptions (Coburn, 2009) that are derived from principal theoretical propositions emanating from contextualism and systems theory. For example, regarding the overarching explanatory principle of their theory, Stolorow et al. (2002) wrote, “Our view … is that the trajectory of self-experience is shaped at every point in the life cycle by the intersubjective context in which it crystalizes” (p. 73). On this level of abstraction, the Intersubjectivists’ many volumes outline a host of what might be called “contextual” presuppositions and systems principles about processes that describe the workings of the analytic pair.3

What Jacobs overlooks is that on this level of abstraction, the Intersubjectivists and Relationalists are virtually in complete agreement, though the Intersubjectivists clearly have been more specific and even emphatic in discussions about both contextualism and systems theory. Nevertheless, as Fosshage (2003) noted, “Intersubjective and relational fields are equivalent concepts, both capturing the embeddedness of the individual within an intersubjective or relational

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3 For example, both parties’ experiences are constituted by mutual and reciprocal influence. The fact that neither party in the dyad can ever step outside their ongoing mutual influence means that the analytic process can never be “neutral, anonymous, or objective.” The parties’ emotional experiences are contextually intertwined and are therefore sensitive to and in effect dependent upon the contextuality or relationality of their pairing. Furthermore, their positions vis-à-vis one another are inherently “perspectival” and since “perspectivalism” eschews “objectivism,” they are also inherently “fallibilistic.” The “explanatory” level also involves processes reflective of chaos and complexity theory (Orange, Coburn, Weisel-Barth) with “emergent properties” in the analytic work arising from an indeterminate “sensitive dependence on initial conditions” (the so-called butterfly effect) that are nevertheless organized in relation to “attractor states” that can only be discerned retrospectively. Finally, in accordance with principles of nonlinear dynamic systems theory (Stolorow, 1997), “all living systems are part of a hierarchy of subsystems,” which, for the purposes of psychoanalytic investigation, the “dyadic system” of analyst and patient is the most relevant system. This dyadic system is further elaborated into two subsystems, that is, the two analytic participants, and these respective subsystems (analyst and patient) are further parsed in terms of the two subsystem organizations of their respective “organizing principles.”
field (matrix)” (p. 411). In short, “contextuality” for the Intersubjectivists and “relationality” for the Relationalists are synonymous.

These essentially agreed-upon metaphysical assumptions are what have distinguished both the Intersubjectivists and Relationalists as new psychoanalytic schools of thought which have most decidedly moved psychoanalysis into thinking more in terms of a two-person psychology and no longer simply a one-person one. They are also largely responsible for a huge epistemological “sea-change,” one that has forced a number of the traditional psychoanalytic schools to reevaluate what was already the two-person nature of their respective canons and to begin highlighting this more.

A key point, and perhaps a somewhat ironic one, however, is that the so-called explanatory level that the Intersubjectivists are proffering is actually more descriptive than explanatory in so far as it asserts at its essence that since all human experience is relational, everything necessarily influences everything without ever specifying how, most often, some parts of a system are more influential than others. What after all does “hierarchical subsystems” mean? Indeed, there is nothing on the most abstract levels of systems theory, or contextualism, or relationality, for that matter, that explains how, when, and under what circumstances the two parties in a psychoanalytic system specifically influence one another.

Exactly what systems theory explains (or doesn’t) versus describes has been a point of debate since the 50s. In principle, systems-within-systems-within-systems are always informing and influencing one another, though it requires much more than this to explain what is going on in highly complex circumstances like psychoanalysis. This point is underscored by one of the most noted authors on general systems theory, Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968), when he states that “if and when we are able to insert the necessary parameters, system-theoretical explanation ‘in principle’ becomes a theory, similar in structure to those of physics” (p. 36). But, in the case of psychoanalytic theorizing those “parameters” must involve phenomena. This suggests that explanation actually requires being wedded to phenomenology to have any real meaning and application, at least, that is, on the level that psychoanalysts ultimately explain their work (Stern, 2008).4

It is only when we begin to supply “parameters” of the phenomena of which we are speaking that we are able to discern patterns of information processing within a system. It is on this basis that we can begin to discern what may be “gumming-up” or “bogging-down” the to-and-fro of the analytic exchange. Is there something in a particular exchange more at stake for the patient or for the analyst? Is there some pattern in their relating (“thirdness”) that sheds light on what is interfering with deepening understanding (explaining) what is going on?

For example, a patient exhibiting severe symptoms of paranoia can radically constrain the to-and-fro exploratory nature of the mutual influence system of the analytic dyad through his interpreting everything with extreme suspicion. No doubt there is a contextual basis for this patient’s “paranoia” in terms of his developmental history, his present-day interactions with others—including those in his analytic treatment—as well as the context of his future imaginings (perhaps even the context of his biological heritage). Furthermore, irrespective of what the patient brings to the intersubjective field, it also becomes incumbent upon the analyst to help the two of them “break out” of its tightly constrained mode of interacting—a point upon which the Intersub-

4Bacal (2006) wrote, “In other words, therapeutic efficacy is a function of the specific capability for requisite responsiveness of the particular participants interacting within a particular system” (p. 135) and this cannot be known until we take up the phenomenology of the analytic pair.
jectivists and Relationalists are quite in agreement. To do so often means that the analyst must consider in what manner her responses to her patient may be amplifying and fortifying his suspicions versus finding a means of response that begins to mitigate them and allow for other possibilities. And, notwithstanding that many of the analyst’s reactions may in part be induced by her patient’s seemingly intractable suspiciousness, she must still examine what within her is vulnerable to this induction. This will become essential to disentangle them from their both being mired in their respective roles in this tenacious transference–countertransference pattern (Pizer, 2003; Ringstrom, 2003) or what I have referred to as a pattern of “mutual inductive identification” (Ringstrom, in press). But none of this obviates that the locus of control in the system, at least in this example, is powerfully fixed in an information processing system organized around suspicion.5 I have more to say about this momentarily in terms of the debate about what becomes the greater point of emphasis in the case examples of the Relationalists and the Intersubjectivists, that is, transference organization, or the contextual trigger of a transference reaction.

Clearly, a point that the Intersubjectivists and Relationalists share is that oftentimes for transformation to occur, something in the analytic relationship must change, which may require the analyst to change as well (Slavin & Kriegman, 1998). Here the Intersubjectivists’ and Relationalists’ principles of contextuality and relationality are in sync. However, explaining the particular phenomenological concerns of analytic engagement produces a number of differences between the Intersubjectivists and Relationalists and these differences are not resolvable through the “levels of abstraction” distinction that the Intersubjectivists are positing. That is because the Relationalists are unwilling to follow the Intersubjectivists’ admonition that they “must choose” between the Cartesian world that Freud inherited and post-Cartesian world of contextualism that the Intersubjectivists embrace.

Instead, the Relationalists value a dialectical position in which they take up these opposing worldviews. Relationalists typically embrace the intrapsychic complexities of a patient’s issues (described by the Intersubjectivists as a remnant of Cartesian philosophy) while emphatically retaining a contextualist view of the analyst’s participation in how those issues manifest. It is because of these differences that the Relationalists and Intersubjectivists at times seriously differ, while at other times they differ more in terms of semantics.

It is true that the Intersubjectivists place much greater emphasis on the theme of contextuality than do the Relationalists. Maduro (2008) provided an excellent example of how “contextuality” is taken up in IST literature. He argued that it is in our misrecognition of the inherent contextuality of emotional experiencing that we engage in the process of “decontextualization.”6 This occurs, for example, when we circumscribe a patient’s complaint, or symptom, or duress, in terms of the patient’s intrapsychic processes without taking into account the contexts (past, present and future imagined) including (and even sometimes especially) the patient’s experience of the analytic treatment itself that may be giving rise to them.

Maduro illustrates his point with the case of a 14-year-old boy named Allen. When Allen would complain to his father about his fears and insecurities about his school, his peers and his ac-

5An excellent example of how paranoia as a syndrome constrains the information processing of the analytic dyad is Artificial Paranoia: A Computer Simulation of Paranoid Processes by Colby (1975).

6What is frequently missing from the IST’s argument is the impossibility of evading “decontextualization,” which is inherently the case the moment we employ language to either describe or explain phenomena. See Cilliers’s (1999) quote in footnote 3 of my paper in this issue.
ademic demands, his father—“an emotionally flat man who had learned to devalue his own feel-
ings”—would completely fail in meeting Allen’s longings for “soothing understanding and reas-
suring perspective.” When Allen would dare to protest these failings, his father would fall into a
discernable, depressed shame state. To defend against this, his father pronounced a “wish,” which
read to Allen like a “commandment.” That is, that Allen would see himself—as his father saw
him—as possessing “a natural gift, and burden, of inborn emotional sensitivity.”

Allen’s father recognizes neither the contextual impact his depressive response had upon his
son nor how his son’s insecurity played a role in his depression. Instead, he sees his son’s reac-
tion as an “isolated mind” phenomenon best explained by Allen’s “oversensitivity.” Absent att-
tuned responsiveness to Allen’s needs, his father demonstrated to Allen that his expression of
his insecurity and fear is contextually “prohibited” and therefore must be “repressed.” In place
of his experience of his insecurities, Allen must “substitute” his father’s version of him, to os-
tensibly relieve both of their sufferings. Notably, a key explanatory principle in this case, as it is
in virtually all Intersubjectivists’ cases, is based on Allen’s father’s affect misattunement to his
needs.

The question that Relationalists would likely ask, however, is, How different is this explanation
from one emergent from object relations theory? That is, wherein the father’s disavowed feelings
of shame, regarding his own and his son’s insecurities (e.g., the father’s intrapsychic world), re-
sults in defensive processes deflecting Allen’s concerns and further defensively “projecting” an
alternative worldview with which Allen must adaptively “identify,” at least that is if he wishes to
preserve their emotional bond. In fact, this explanatory description from object relations theory is
virtually the same as what is discussed by the Intersubjectivists in terms of “pathological accom-
modation” (Brandchaft, 2007; Marduro, 2008). Meanwhile, it appears that the “levels of lan-
guage” distinction hardly seems critical to how either the Intersubjectivists or the Relationalists
explain what was occurring between Allen and his father.

Nevertheless, it is precisely with the Relationalists’ retention of the language of intrapsychic
explanation that Jacobs and the Intersubjectivists object. Indeed, Jacobs (this issue) challenges
that there “is strong evidence that there are limits to how thoroughly Cartesian (or objectivist) con-
structs can be recontextualized” and she uses as “evidence” my invocation (as both Reis and
Clement do in their discussions) of the term “omnipotence” (p. XX).

It is true that I think of “omnipotence” as a highly common version of fantasy—among count-
less others. However, I would never argue that it is “universal and therefore needs no questioning,”
as Jacobs assumes I do. To clarify my point, omnipotence pertains, as I have written elsewhere, to
the fantasy that either oneself or another is capable of, in control of, and responsible for things
which are actually beyond their capacity, control, and responsibility.

What Jacobs discounts is that when “omnipotence” is understood in systems information pro-
cessing terms it can become evidentiary of how at times one party may exert a “stronger” influence
within the analytic relationship than the other. Omnipotent fantasy, as a mode of information
processing, is prone to negate the subjectivity of the other, indeed to borrow an Intersubjectivist’s
term, to “decontextualize” the subjective experiences of both parties in relation to one another.

This point segues to Jacob’s next objection regarding the Relationalists’ position on “fantasy
versus reality” about which she writes, “Intersubjectivists cringe at the notion of separating reality
and fantasy, preferring instead simply the notion of using dialogue to increase the complexity of
the experiential worlds of both therapist and patient” (p. XX). I am sure there is no objection from
the Relationalists on this path of exploration; still, it seems somewhat disingenuous to not take up
what is sometimes the manner in which fantasy undermines a patient’s capacity to more fully engage the world of which he is a part.

Unfortunately, part of the Intersubjectivists’ problem with the Relationalists’ view of reality versus fantasy involves their persistent misreading of the Relationalists, and this carries over in Jacob’s discussion as well. The Relationalists’ position is surely not anything like what the Intersubjectivists characterize as an objectivist one involving a “God’s-eye-view” from which objective reality is discerned rather than the illumination of the patient’s and the analyst’s subjective meaning of reality. In my paper (this issue) I went to considerable lengths to challenge this persistent misreading (see pp. XX–XX as well as footnotes 13 and 14).

Mitchell’s (2000) reintroduction of Loewald’s ideas is quite informative of the Relationalists’ position on a subjectivist sense of “reality” versus an objectivist one is. Mitchell noted that when Loewald was writing in the 60s and 70s, psychoanalysis was still mired in the notion that fantasy either distorted or supplanted reality. Instead, as Mitchell notes, Loewald saw the connection of “reality and fantasy” (vs. their separation) as critical “for life to be meaningful, vital, robust.” Mitchell (2000) wrote, “Fantasy cut adrift from reality becomes irrelevant and threatening. Reality cut adrift from fantasy becomes vapid and empty. Meaning in human experience is generated in the mutual dialectically enriching tension between fantasy and reality; each requires the other to come alive” (p. 29).

Clearly, our imagination shapes how we experience reality, just as reality impacts our imagination in ways that give our imagination shape. Ultimately, to adapt and hopefully to thrive, we are required to make some coherent sense of our experience—and certainly part of coming to coherence involves differentiating our deeply personal and subjective sense of fantasy from our deeply personal and subjective sense of reality. As Modell notes in the epigraph, even though our sense of self and sense of agency are illusions, “these are illusions without which we cannot live,” and I would add, the stakes this entails are huge. They place a special requirement on our coming to terms with what we hold to be real, what we hold to be fantasy, while allowing the two to constantly inform one another in ineffable ways that lend to a vital and real sense of creativity, passion, connection, and affective engagement with the world. In this sense, whatever we are referring to as reality is neither a static “thing” nor an “object,” nor a mechanism as the Intersubjectivists would have us believe, but is the temporal “by-product” of ongoing active engagement of ourselves in the world. Our views of reality, as has been said of memory, “is not so much like a snapshot as it is like a painting that we are constantly painting.”

Be that as it may, Jacobs is not convinced, and therefore argues on behalf of why maintaining the “levels of abstraction” distinction is meaningful to her. She writes, “One of the advantages for me in drawing a bright line distinguishing levels of abstraction is that it helps me to keep a phenomenological, exploratory attitude” (p. XX). I heartily agree with Jacobs that an attitude that is highly exploratory is a crucial one in psychoanalysis. I question, however, if this exploratory attitude has much of anything at all to do with the “levels of abstraction” arguments she and the

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7As Strenger (1998) indicated, “The more the individual’s image of a life worth living is formed by images created in fantasy, the more the distance between actual life and a life informed by authorship is increased. The fantasy image transcendentalizes the idea of a ‘real’ life to the point where nothing in actual life could correspond to it anymore. In therapeutic work this manifests itself by the patient’s contemptuous rejection of real-life options which could provide a step toward authorship, because he or she cannot see any connection between these steps and the image of real life they have gotten used to in fantasy” (p. 180).
In fact, I think that Jacobs and the Intersubjectivists have the argument reversed, it’s not that attitude is shaped by “language use” as much as our attitude shapes how we think about “language use.” Orange (2003) illustrated this latter point well, particularly in her outline of numerous convictions that shape the Intersubjectivists’ attitude about theory and its use. Orange’s points are very much in evidence in Jacob’s critique of my article. Indeed, Orange (2003a) referenced Jacob’s regarding what she referred to as the presumable “mindlock” that ensues from “holding onto words from earlier psychoanalytic contexts” (p. 78). This “mindlock,” Orange and Jacobs argue, appears to necessarily involve (a) easy answers that interfere with further exploration, (b) a foreclosure upon what patients really need and that is an “endless willingness to go with them wherever they need to go,” (c) a defense against looking at the analyst’s contribution to what is occurring in the treatment, (d) a ready dismissal of contextuality through attributions about the patient’s transference, and (e) a tendency to blame and shame the patient’s experience by making claims such as patients are “projecting” their “toxicity” into analysts.

I would argue, and I believe most Relationalists would too, that this version of Intersubjectivists’ attitude towards theoretical language reflects its own “mindlock,” or what I would prefer to call the risk of engaging in conceptual “cu-de-sacs.” I invoke this latter metaphor in relation to how Reis describes one of Mitchell’s metaphors, and that is about how the uniqueness of each psychoanalytic treatment reflects its own journey. Mitchell, according to Reis, referred to this when he said, “All roads do not lead to Rome.” Reis describes from his study group experience with Mitchell that “he could take theoretical positions and think from inside them; he could turn concepts around in his mind as if they were holographic diagrams, and examine them from all angles” (p. XX). Reis’s experience certainly captured my own during my lengthy third control case supervision with Mitchell in the mid-90s. For Mitchell, much like Thelin (2005) (see epigraph quote), “All theories are metaphors; metaphors help us bridge from the theory to the phenomenology.” This is a remarkably different position than the one Jacob’s argues on behalf of IST, wherein she ardently argues that I have “confused experience (metaphor) and explanation (theory about experience)” (p. XX). Jacob’s position on metaphor is especially striking in contrast to Thelin’s, who is after all one of the principal architects of “nonlinear dynamic systems theory.” Nevertheless, as I point out in my paper (this issue), the Intersubjectivists’ use of language seems to involve an attitude colored very much by their primary explanation of human suffering, at least on the phenomenological level, which, looking at their case studies, virtually always seem to arise from trauma. From this vantage point, it makes perfect sense that their primary concern in treatment is with retraumatizing the patient through any use of language that “decontextualizes” the patient’s experience, thereby isolating his suffering in a manner that leads to shaming or blaming him. Equally understandable from this vantage point is their argument that it is only through relentless attunement to the patient’s experience that retraumatization can be averted, especially at moments of duress or controversy (Ringstrom, 2009, in press).

Still, it is in situations like the Intersubjectivists’ case vignette alluded to in my paper (this issue) that how analyst and patient take up important differences of experience from one another clearly makes a huge difference. Not surprisingly, where there are significant factual differences over their experiences, the participants’ intersubjective encounter evinces moments of mutual negation, that is, mutual misrecognition. I recap as briefly as possible the essence of that vignette. In it, the patient accuses his analyst of calling him a Borderline, an act that in her reverie she seems quite certain that she could not have, in fact, committed. This, she informs us, is because she
neither believes in the concept nor remembers ever having called anyone by that name. However, instead of finding a means for tactfully taking up their diametrically opposed experiences, she tells her patient “that what she has done to him is terrible and asks him to tell her when it happened and what they had been talking about. She acknowledges that his memory is generally better than hers” (Stolorow et al., 2002, p. 103).

Jacob supports the analyst’s decision, noting the analyst’s explanation for her response arose out of her understanding of “some developmental history” (p. 10) about the patient. That is, that the patient “had grown up in a home where the DSM … was the family dictionary” (p. 119). Reflecting later on her spontaneous response to her patient, the analyst believes that somehow this recollection about the patient’s background, combined with her having “set herself in a know-it-all position vis-à-vis her patient” (p. 119), made her, at least in the patient’s mind, an understandable replica of his diagnostically know-it-all parents. Jacobs suggests that to then distance herself from this correspondence, and to therefore avoid retraumatizing her patient, the analyst chose to acknowledge the impact of what she had “done,” rather than taking up their disagreement over what occurred.

This scenario also calls forth another case vignette by the same analyst in which she argues on behalf of “seeing as” as in seeing the world as the patient does. Orange (2003) wrote,

when another [patient] says he believes I am laughing at him, I can easily say this is an instance of transference. The prototype is his father, whose attitude toward his son was a constant smirk, and my patient is just confused. But if I ask myself, or we ask ourselves together, what is true to his experience, we may find that three times this week, I have commented on his reactions with a thinly veiled sense of superiority. Now, although I may feel that I was simply smiling at ironic incongruities between his girl friend’s professed feelings and her recent behavior, my patient has very good reason for feeling that I may be smiling out of scorn and condescension. (p. XX)

In the first vignette it makes sense that the analyst’s “know-it-all position vis-à-vis her patient” might trigger his transference interpretation that she was behaving like his DSM-obsessed parents. Likewise, in the second case illustration, it could make perfect sense that her “smiling at (his) ironic incongruities” might be construed as her “thinly veiled sense of superiority,” which the patient might understandably interpret as her being like his father. In each case, however, it is by and through the patients’ transference organizations that they each interpret the actions of the analyst. Different patients with different organizations might not experience their analyst as being a “know-it-all.” They may, for example, experience her as someone exhibiting a quality of confidence, someone with whom they can more comfortably let their guard down and “feel safe in her hands.”

Surely acknowledging what it is an analyst may have conveyed nonverbally that triggers patients’ reactions may make sense, especially when the analyst has knowledge of their patient’s “relational contexts” of development, (at least in terms of their narrative—which is also circumscribed by their organizing principles). However, none of this obviates that how each patient interprets his analyst’s behavior is tightly woven in terms of his transference organization, that is,

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8The problem, as Steinberg (personal communication, 2009) noted, is that reading these case vignettes begins to feel like “the ISTs appear to rest their case at the ‘trigger’ of the patient’s response, as in what it is the analyst appears to have done to them. If fear of re-traumatization dictates treatment, there’s a risk of foreclosure on exploration and discovery.”

9Jacobs says that the illumination of the patient’s “organizing principles, central themes and emotional convictions” is (much like the Relationalists) a focal point of treatment. However, the clear emphasis in most of their case illustrations seems to land more on the contextual “trigger” of this organization and therefore the risk of retraumatizing the patient, than in illuminating the patient’s organizing principles.
in the central transference themes, which organize his experiential world view and his emotional convictions about it.

I would argue that until the patient acquires this capacity, he is vulnerable to potentially misrecognizing the motives and actions of others because he cannot imagine outside the constraints of his particular transference paradigm. In this vein, the patient is doomed to a life of feeling perpetually misrecognized as well as misrecognizing others, both of which are at the heart of the Relationalists’ concerns in their version of intersubjectivity, which is operationally defined in terms of mutual recognition versus mutual negation.

Returning to the first vignette, Jacobs is satisfied with the IST analyst telling her patient that calling him a Borderline was a terrible thing she did to him. Jacobs is confident that analyst’s not challenging their respective versions of what really occurred sets the stage in which “a dialogical exploratory atmosphere was restored.” On this faith, Jacobs (this issue) allows that “perhaps at another point in the treatment, differing experiences might be spoken of more directly” (p. XX). Frankly, I have a very hard time imagining how this could happen. I simply do not see how the analyst’s abdicating what is true to her experience and corroborating her patient’s view of her as a fact, creates any dialogical, exploratory atmosphere, which, as I understand it, would be far better constituted by addressing differences, not by obscuring them. In a worst-case scenario, the analyst’s actions potentially set up a voraciously demanding patient who can only be agreed with. In such implicitly if not explicitly coercive circumstances, it is hard for the analyst to engage in an authentic, organically felt sense of empathy, versus defensively telling the patient what he requires hearing.

In fact, if the analyst corroborates the patient’s factual view of her (that she did in fact call him a “Borderline” and it was a “terrible” thing that she did), and then seals his view by stating that “his memory is generally better than hers,” I am hard pressed to see how this will facilitate their speaking of differences later on. What happens when in a later moment of duress the patient fires at the analyst, “This is just like the time you called me a Borderline!”

Of course, the Intersubjectivists would correctly argue that it would be important to take up what is giving rise to this recollection (the current “trigger”) but how different might that circumstance be if the patient were able to say, “This feels just like the time that I thought you called me a Borderline!” Perhaps therein might allow for an opening rather than a closing. An opening where-upon through deeper examination the patient might recall that while it was his analyst’s admittedly “know-it-all-attitude” that provoked his fantasy that she called him a Borderline, that it ultimately had more to do with triggering in him a reaction that felt like she was being just like his DSM-obsessed parents though ultimately not necessarily being like them at all. That’s because, unlike them, she is indefatigably interested in her patient’s reaction to her in a manner that is both nonjudgmental and nonretaliatory while especially interested in the meaning of the rather enormous disparity in what they recall happened to both of them.

Thinking about how all of this might occur, however, seems much more an issue of what Mitchell took up as a critique in contemporary psychoanalysis regarding the analyst’s “authority” rather than about a problem of levels of abstraction, use of language, or even the conundrum regarding “reality versus fantasy.” As Reis notes, in times of profound difference about what was going on in an analysis, ‘Mitchell [1997] felt it crucial both that the analyst not pull rank and that he also hold his ground when necessary.’ (p. 228)” (p. XX).

By contrast, the Relationalists might see a rupture of the kind in both vignettes as a necessary part of the process, especially when that which cannot be gotten to through attunement, must be
enacted. In their enactment, both analyst and patient can feel misrecognized and negated—the patient for what it is he is saying about his experience and for the analyst in terms of what understanding she is attempting to bring to bear about it. An enactment of this sort sets the stage for examining this misunderstanding, their misinterpretations that are plunging them—at least for the moment—into a state of mutual negation, wherein neither one’s subjective experience feels recognized. Indeed, both can end up feeling objectified by each other, thereby constituting a state of nonintersubjectivity (mutual negation or mutual misrecognition), until that is, elucidation of each one’s subjective position is grasped (mutual recognition).

Arguing against the fundamental place enactments hold in the RP canon, Jacobs (this issue) asserts that

where Relationalists might want to use the concept of enactment to guide them in working with disruptive experiences that analyst and patient are having, the Intersubjectivists are likely to redouble their efforts to refine their understanding of the patient’s experiential world. (p. XX)

The Relationalists might playfully counter, “We’ll ‘see’ your ‘redouble’ and ‘raise’ you ‘quadruple’!” However, a careful reading of the Relationalists reflect that they simply do not share the Intersubjectivists’ indefatigable faith in their affect attunement model. Indeed, by contrast, Hoffman (1996) wrote,

The ideals of accurate empathy and perfect affective attunement, like the ideal of perfect neutrality, encourage the development of inappropriate ego ideals which in turn promote defensive illusions about what we have been able to accomplish, along with misleading acknowledgments of our “imperfections.” All of that distracts from the more relevant issue which is to consider, not whether, but how we have been personally involved with our patients. (p. 122).

CONCLUSION

Jacobs (this issue) concludes her discussion stating it was “unfortunate that the Relational concepts address a different level of abstraction than the Intersubjective Systems ideas, and yet they were compared as if they were on the same plane and responding to the same questions” (p. XX). By now it should be clear that both the Intersubjectivists and Relationalists share the same highly abstract plane, what the Intersubjectivists refer to as the so-called explanatory level. This level of abstraction, as Fosshage (2003) noted, embraces the epistemology of contextualism, systems theory, and relationality. As such, comparisons of real differences between the two theories must occur more upon explanatory terms wedded to the phenomenal or experiential world of psychoanalysis.

It is only when phenomena is taken up in relation to explanation, such as the Relationalists’ assertion that intersubjectivity involves the mutual recognition of two separate though inextricably mutually influential and mutually regulating human subjects, that our explanatory theories begin to take on flesh and blood. It is only then that they are available for our dialogical interrogation of their meaning. In fact, taken at this level, the Intersubjectivists’ self psychologically infused clinical theory has a lot to contribute to relational psychoanalysis, which is what Clement (this issue) captures so beautifully. She notes that the “flesh and blood” of their theory richly reflects the essence of Kohut’s 1959 “revolt against the dominant ego psychological objectivist position of the time” (p. XX). Clement continues that from this the Intersubjectivists elaborated the importance
of “the empathic/introspective mode of observation” (p. XX) including this mode as a clinical method, as well as underscoring both the contextualist and constructivist nature of the psychoanalytic process. Whereas historically the Relationalists were prone to read Kohut in a predominantly one-person psychological position, Clement argues the Intersubjectivists were capturing much of its intrinsic relationality.

Regrettably, however, while I believe that the Relationalists have much to contribute to the Intersubjectivists, the Intersubjectivists’ strictures regarding language use, “category mistakes” and their unwavering faith in the importance of the “levels of abstraction” issue, obstructs what it is they can make use of from the Relationalists. It could be said that in effect the Intersubjectivists actually did meet Mitchell’s (1992) challenge, though not so much in a comparison of the two theories as a criticism of the Relationalists. To reiterate, their criticism took up all the ways they read the Relationalists’ tome as mired in Cartesian dualities, ones from which they inferred some dire clinical consequences, leading up to their ultimate challenge that as the Intersubjectivists have, the Relationalists “must choose” which world they wish to operate in, “the world Freud inherited from Descartes and the world of the post-Cartesian contextualism.”

It is clear that the Relationalists argue that there is an enormous amount to be gained by not engaging in this either–or choice but instead preserving a sense of dialectical tension between these two worlds that allows for retaining much of the rich treasure trove of psychoanalytic thought while always contextualizing it in terms of a two-person (at least) psychology. The Intersubjectivists argue that these two philosophical worlds are fundamentally incommensurable” (Stolorow et al., 2002, p. 96). I believe that there is too high a price paid for such philosophical rigors, especially when applied to psychoanalysis.

The psychoanalytic process, at least as I conceive it, flows optimally from a freer use of language over a constricted one. Metaphors enrich our dialogue, even ones informed by the history of traditional psychoanalytic ideas, as long as their held lightly and employed imaginatively. When linguists discuss language use, they note that there are “descriptive” versus “prescriptive” ways in which it is employed. When language is applied “descriptively,” it occurs without making judgments on whether a particular feature of language use is “right” or “wrong.” When it used “prescriptively,” however, language use becomes highly judgmental and in its most extreme version prescriptive linguistics attempts to eradicate language that is felt to be destructive. For my money, language use in psychoanalysis rarely profits from a prescriptive approach, notwithstanding some of the interesting debates the dialectic between the descriptive and prescriptive can foster. Descriptive language is fluid, is messy, crosses categories, and sometimes even mixes them up. However, when authors take time to present their ideas as clearly and as simply as possible—instead of engaging in astruse and abstract language—the dialogical approach of argumentation becomes far more accessible to a community of discussants.

There is no question in my mind that the Intersubjectivists’ radical contextualism has an important place in contemporary psychoanalysis, and it is a position the Relationalists would be wise to closely read and to pay heed to the implications of the Intersubjectivists’ rigorous contextualism. However, it remains questionable as to whether incorporation of this idea requires the draconian language translation the Intersubjectivists argue.10

10The principle of parsimony, often referred to as “Occam’s Razor,” argues “Do not multiply postulated entities without necessity.” In other words, unless retranslating theory with other language makes a real difference in explanation, it is a questionable proposition.
Thirty years into the history of family systems theory (which began in the 1950s), McNichols (1987) warned that the idea of “self” had almost all but been lost from that field. He wrote, “We have become) systemic thinkers, practicing systemic therapy; we ask systemic questions, and expect systemic answers. … Not content to ‘think systematically,’ (we) have adopted the concept of ‘epistemology’ to differentiate right thinking (circular) from wrong thinking (linear).” Pressing his indictment of his field, McNichols argued that the lofty abstractions of systems theory “suggest weighty thoughts, but they cloud over their subject, surrounding it with a haze of scholarliness while actually saying very little.” The lost subject being clouded over was the phenomenological sense of “self in the system.” Contemporary psychoanalysts infatuated with systems theory may want to consider McNichol’s warning.

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