enactments in the group process. Working through these enactments allows members to have a reparative experience where they can re-own previously dissociated parts of the self.

Every member experiences the group as a whole, other members’ subjectivities, and his or her own uniqueness. The struggle between being separated and connected, belonging and feeling lonely creates a unique learning experience for the group members. Every individual brings a desire to be acknowledged by the group and struggles with this deep need through the group process.

Haim Weinberg

See also Intersubjective-Systems Theory; Relational Group Psychotherapy; Relational Psychoanalysis; Self Psychology

Further Readings


Intersubjective-systems theory is a contemporary relational psychoanalytical perspective. This theory uses a phenomenological-contextual systems approach, which views personal (or subjective) emotional experience as constitutively connected to the relational systems in which it arises, and these two components are necessarily illuminated and addressed together. Perceptions about the relational context are constantly organized into safe, unsafe, and desirable—themes that maintain psychological stability by preserving a familiar world of experience. An analyst (or therapist) using this approach works to understand the unconscious beliefs that shape perceptions and lead to relational difficulties, varying self-experience, behavioral enactments, and distressing symptoms. A process combining deep emotional understanding, interpretation, and a dialogic search for alternative perspectives brings relief.

Concepts based on the use of hypothetical internal Cartesian entities such as the self, the superego, and the unconscious—a practice common among other psychoanalytical relational theories—are set aside in favor of the consideration of nonlinear relational processes of mutual influence. First named as “intersubjective theory” in 1976, it was changed to “intersubjective-systems theory” in 2002 to distinguish it from other uses of the word intersubjective.

Historical Context

Robert D. Stolorow and George E. Atwood met in 1972 while teaching at Rutgers University. They were part of a group (including Silvan Tomkins) interested in the revival of Henry Murray’s Personology, which is the in-depth study of the single individual through a phenomenological perspective (in contrast to the laboratory-based cognitive and behavioral studies then popular in academia). Stolorow and Atwood studied the lives of psychoanalytical theorists and discovered a connection between theoretical precepts and psycho-biography. By 1976, these studies of subjectivity had been collected together in a book, *Faces in a Cloud*, published 3 years later and offering a theory of subjectivity itself.

Philosophy also influenced the development of intersubjective-systems theory, including the hermeneutic tradition of Wilhelm Dilthey and Hans-Georg Gadamer, who emphasized the role of interpretation in all human understanding. Dilthey, especially, emphasized the differences between gaining knowledge in the human sciences, which rely on empathy, and the method of observation used in the natural sciences. The philosophical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre and their frameworks for psychoanalysis, the structuralism of Claude Levi-Strauss, and the
cognitive psychology of Jean Piaget all influenced the crystallization of this theory.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

Stolorow and Atwood developed these ideas together for more than 40 years. They collaborated with Bernard Brandchaft, who developed (among many other contributions) the concepts pertaining to systems of pathological accommodation; Donna Orange, who enriched certain philosophical perspectives; and Daphne Socarides Stolorow, who, with Stolorow, formulated ideas about the centrality of affectivity, the need for emotional understanding across the life span, and how that need determined the nature of relatedness, from narcissistic relating to whole-person relating. Other contributors included Jeffrey Trop and his work on conjunctions and disjunctions and William J. Coburn’s studies of complexity and nonlinear systems theory.

**Major Concepts**

Concepts that have an important role in intersubjectivity-systems theory include subjective emotional development, the organization of experience, selfhood, transference, unconscious process, affectivity, and concretizations. This section discusses how each is conceptualized in intersubjectivity-systems theory.

**Subjective Emotional Development**

Developmental trauma is thought to be the result of states of intolerable affect felt in the absence of an understanding other. When inadequate caretaker systems fail to respond appropriately, the child (or adult) is left in a distressed and emotionally flooded condition, unable to integrate frightening affects. Certain relational interactions, contexts, and affects are thereafter associated with emotional pain and are avoided at all costs (consciously or unconsciously). Possible outcomes include the development of an accommodated selfhood, a crushing self-ideal, self-loathing, obsessional processes, a defensive narcissistic grandiosity, and a dissociative process. Recurring and accumulating malattunements or individual traumatizing experiences give rise to the creation of rigidified and highly activated perceptual-information organizing processes known as organizing principles (with associated symptoms). These encode creative solutions that maintain the once essential connection to caregivers, protect against a sense of annihilation or engulfment, and preserve a familiar world. Intersubjective-systems analysts consider the conditions of the early relational system in which the child develops, and any experiences of trauma, to understand why each analysesd (client) has formed his or her particular hermeneutic about the world.

**Organization of Experience**

Built from past, usually forgotten experiences, organizing principles are usually unconscious in the sense of being out of awareness or “prereflective.” Organizing principles forever shape experience unless interrupted by analysis or incommensurate (counteracting) life experiences. The development of personality emerges from the intersection of a child’s potential with his or her formative context, and the impact of the accrual of a unique set of organizing principles, referred to as “character.”

Once formed, organizing principles continually sort all incoming perceptual information into significant categories by acting as a signaling system of either (a) potential danger, known as the repetitive dimension, or (b) the conditions for the possibility of fulfillment of needed experiences, the developmental dimension. Additionally, a future-oriented dimension of emergent growth, called the expansive dimension, is potentially available as an outgrowth of current contextual resources. Organizing principles shape information (which is usually ambiguous) into familiar scenarios, often resulting in impactful and troubling meaning making. Relational (or emotional) experience is understood as being the result of subjective organizing, not objective truth. Organizing principles are activated in the transference with the analyst and become the basis of the analytic work.

**Selfhood**

In older theories, “the self” has been defined as an entity or thing. In contrast, intersubjective-systems theory studies selfhood as an aspect of...
subjective emotional phenomenology. Self-experience is found to vary according to changing relational and situational conditions and activated organizing principles. The felt sense of me-ness fluctuates with the oscillating dimensions of organizing principles, resulting in an increase or decrease in the sense of self-esteem, sense of agency, sense of identity, and so on. An overall sense of selfhood is emergent from personality, character, style, and mood, all interacting with historical, cultural, and social circumstances. It is thought that a stabilizing benign illusion of unchanging me-ness is necessary to provide a sense of continuity across time in light of fluctuations in self-experience.

**Transference**

Transference is conceptualized as relational experience shaped in the present moment by unconscious organizing activity. When the analysand has unconscious expectations that the analyst will respond in the same manner as early caretakers, with demeaning, intrusive, or abandoning reactions, his or her self-experience is said to be in the repetitive dimension. The assumed dangerousness of the full expression of affectivity leads to “resistances,” which can then be understood and interpreted.

Because emotional experience emerges from systems of mutual influence, any understanding of an analysand by an analyst is influenced by the latter’s own organizing processes and prejudices and also the contextual moment. Occasionally, this can lead to “conjunctions” and “disjunctions,” which interrupt the therapeutic process based either on what superficially appears as agreement (but is not) or on incompatible meanings, both of which can cause impasses. The analyst must reflect on his or her contribution to the impasse by bringing any organizing into conscious reflective self-awareness and engage in a dialogical process (within a hermeneutics of trust) to reach an agreed-on understanding, because all experience is understood to be perspectival.

**Unconscious Process**

The traditional outlook on the psychoanalytical concept of the unconscious is to view it as a container. A phenomenological-contextual study of what organizes and affects subjective experience reveals not a storehouse but three interconnected, unconscious protective processes named in this theory: prereflective, dynamic, and unvalidated, which operate in different ways to maintain psychological stability and safety. The prereflective unconscious process organizes experience through the “lighting up” of new situational approximations of the familiar cognitive-somatic patterns of organizing principles. The dynamic unconscious repressing process acts to prevent historically dangerous or prohibited affects, thoughts, needs, or memories, from being expressed or fully known to conscious experience. The unvalidated unconscious process memorializes all unformulated experience left incoherent by a lack of responsiveness by others. The magnitude of the encompassed experience repressed by the dynamic unconscious fluctuates in response to the context. Therefore, more vulnerable self-experience crystallizes into consciousness given a safe emotional situation (e.g., analysis during a developmental transference), and there is increased backgrounding of vulnerability in the repetitive transference. Unvalidated unconscious self-experience can come into being later, given a conducive articulating and symbolizing surround.

**Affectivity**

Pain is not considered to be pathology, but it does signal the need for an attuned other. Theoretical considerations of the etiology of repetitive organizing principles and symptoms suggest an emphasis on the importance of integrating repressed and unvalidated affect, which can mean facing existential factors such as loss, limits, and the mortality of self and the beloved other. The facing up to traumatic experiences and their outcomes, and our limited resources and situations, by experiencing and integrating grief, is an important component of living authentically. Once grief is largely integrated, it becomes possible for the analysand to identify what really matters and shape his or her life accordingly, eschewing collective preoccupations. Affects such as shame and self-loathing disperse as repetitive organizing principles lose their hold on perception, allowing other affects such as awe, joy, and
appreciation to arise. There can be great improvement in the analysand’s sense of being.

**Concretizations**

Concretizations are symbolic representations of subjective truths, and they play an important role in the formation of symptoms, symbolic objects, behavioral enactments (an organizing principle in action), somatizations (body symptoms), delusions, hallucinations, fantasies, and imagery in dreams. Concretizations stand as metaphors for experience, materialized into a symbol to maintain psychological stability and continuity or to communicate what cannot be said. They are considered to be creative coping strategies rather than a sign of defectiveness.

**Technique**

The philosophical foundations of this theory teach that “emotional kinship in the same darkness” offers a common ground for finding the precise conditions for the integration of unconscious affective experience. The analyst practices “sustained empathic inquiry” and “dwelling with,” necessary to precisely articulate (symbolize) the other’s disavowed intolerable experience, while furnishing a “relational home” (deep emotional understanding and support), a process that helps the analysand integrate affect, become emancipated from repetitive retraumatization, handle his or her situation, and live well.

The analyst provides this facilitating context in two ways: first, by illuminating the analysand’s emotional world, using interpretations informed by precise emotional, cognitive, and intersubjective awareness—a relational process based on the evolving and ongoing transferences—and, second, by responding appropriately to the analysand’s organizing and creative use of the analysis. All understanding is an emergent property of an intersubjective system rather than the authoritative pronouncements of analyst or theory.

Specific, preformulated techniques would interfere with the careful investigation of emotional phenomena that ongoingly emerge in the interplay of subjectivities, unique to every analytic couple. Changes to the analytic process and “structure” are negotiated based on the meanings given to any particular choice, explored, and framed within the analyst’s ultimate concerns: the healing of emotional pain and the facilitation of new developmental directions.

**Therapeutic Process**

Intersubjective-systems theory’s emphasis on emotional integration reduces the grip of organizing principles over an analysand’s perceptual reality. His or her world of experience is then expanded by a lessening of the necessity for protective processes and a reduction in symptoms. The stifling hold on “reality” of old themes is loosened, and alternative, more accurate interpretations of perceptual experience are achievable. This results in less automatism and an opening for reflection about meaning making. There is an increase in the ability to distinguish past from present relationship dynamics and to relate to others in their subjective wholeness. The relationship with the analyst provides the possibility for the formation of new and developmentally advanced organizing principles, and the ability to embrace more opportunities follows. The expression of authentic selfhood, a broadening of the ability to experience a full range of affectivity and improved relationships, leads to a stable, appreciative, and compassionate self-experience.

Analysts are responsible for providing a context in which analysands can learn to tolerate existential anxiety and weather the inevitable traumas of life rather than avoid them. A more fully integrated affectivity becomes the bedrock for contentment, creativity, authentic and healthy concern for others, and other developments that become a part of self-constituting values. Such changes can open up the possibility for greater happiness, more expansive ways of living, and the ability to form relationships of deep mutual understanding.

**Penelope S. Starr-Karlin**

*See also* Existential Therapy; Phenomenological Therapy; Relational Psychoanalysis; Self Psychology

**Further Readings**


