RELATIONAL PSYCHOANALYSIS

VOLUME 4

Expansion of Theory

EDITED BY

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Foreword

Hazel Ipp

History

In ending his 1993 book *Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis*, Stephen Mitchell offered a prescient observation. He noted that “the particular wrinkle for the author of clinical theory is that while the book has stopped, the work goes on…. Books of psychoanalytic theory are less fixed structures, less like buildings, and more like action photos, snapshots of a process that, if it remains alive, is continually changing” (p. 230).

So it was that Mitchell set the stage for a relational theory as a home for many divergent ideas as well as a particular blueprint that encouraged novel ways of conceiving old and new experiences that would be generative, constantly evolving and expanding, impacting and shaping our theory and process, as these mirror and intertwine with each other in dialectic tension.

It is now just over a decade since the publication of Mitchell and Aron’s (1999) *Relational Psychoanalysis: The Emergence of a Tradition*—a compilation of seminal articles from many of our finest thinkers who, while influenced by diverse theoretical currents, shared a sensibility that infused their respective ideas and expanded the psychoanalytic terrain enormously.

In considering the importance of traditions, Mitchell and Aron argue that they cannot be consciously created. Rather, they need to be discovered self-reflectively. In Mitchell and Aron’s (1999) view, “Meaningful traditions become touchstones, adding a depth and sense of connectedness that helps generate fresh thoughts and feelings” (p. ix). Indeed, these words are the very touchstone we can reflect on as we consider how much has emerged within and on account of the relational tradition being forged back then.
Looking back over the past decade, we are struck with the enormous experience of loss we have struggled with in the wake of the deaths of Stephen Mitchell and Emmanuel Ghent—two of the giants behind the relational tradition. Simultaneously, as we reflect on where we were, we cannot but be impressed with how much we have gained in our endeavors to deal with our losses creatively and generatively and as a testament to those who inspired so much. How far we have come in developing, articulating, enriching, extending, expanding, and intertwining the original key ideas into an ever more focused, delineated, yet variegated sensibility. This new thinking has deepened our understanding of the human mind, of the complexity of our clinical endeavors, and of the world in which we live. The political, social, cultural, once simply pitted as background, are now intrinsically interwoven into our thought, recalibrating our comprehension of subjectivity and human psychology.

**Current Thinking**

As the present volume shows, much of relational psychoanalysis is framed within a dialectical sensibility that organizes our thinking in several distinct ways. Within this model, we strive to hold the tension and the complexity to avoid polarizing issues of the learned, the universal, and the particular as we inevitably bump up against them. We struggle to stay with the necessary disruption of social categories and the alterations to our sense of the familiar even as it perturbs our semiotic systems. We strive to inhabit ambiguity, holding in mind the multiplicity of possibilities inherent in any given moment. In so doing, we wrestle constantly with not knowing, with the illusion of finding, with the reality of losing, with refinding and losing again.

In this spirit, we are forced to interrogate our beliefs as we consider ourselves in relation to another whose very being, or so we believe, may pit us against ourselves in ways too painful to imagine or hold. This is our challenge and our opportunity clinically, socially, and politically.

This anthology, the fourth in this series, focusing on “expansion” in terms of the current state of relational psychoanalysis, illuminates not only a deepening of thought but also an intensified intertwining of ideas and domains, with a particular focus throughout on keeping creative and reflective space open.

The papers selected for this volume are diverse, evocative, and compelling. The topics cover a wide range, their emphases vary, and novel ideas are brought to the fore and given life. While most of them hail to earlier writings in the relational tradition, each paper builds on and extends some of the thinking that was revolutionary just a few decades earlier.

As is evident in the diversity of topics and approaches, we are confronted with a multiplicity of ideas that, while bound by a shared sensibility and...
dialectical thinking, do not necessarily fit together. Perhaps this is the very essence of what constitutes a relational collection (Aron & Harris, 2005). We arrive at our positions through the use of multiple analytic and political lenses where different versions become blended with relational concepts along with many other influences. Relational theory strives to mirror its content. In holding complexity and remaining fluid and dynamic, it is developed more with an intention to invite questions than to provide the stock answers of earlier psychoanalytic conceptualizations. Yet there is certainly a sensibility and a way of framing an understanding of mind and relationship that binds our thinking and keeps our dialogic space from simply collapsing into a “confusion of tongues.”

A dominant organizing theme of this volume is the idea of the dialectics of self and other. Subthemes include the following:

- Finding the self in the other as titrated through one's particular attachment patterns and their correlated affect states
- Negotiating the otherness of the other, and engaging the disavowed, not-me self, the otherness within the self
- The shared making of meaning, its creation, loss, and recreation in relation to the other and to the otherness within self
- Self- and mutual recognition, and the serious sequelae of nonrecognition feature in most of the essays regardless of their particular emphasis

Another organizing theme coursing through this volume is predicated on the understanding that psychological trauma is ubiquitous from the very start. Whether one considers trauma from a developmental or existential perspective, it is ever present as a psychological potential, intertwining individual with social trauma and critically shaping personality. The magnitude and intersubjective context of the trauma determine its sequelae. In optimal circumstances, trauma is absorbed and worked into the everyday struggles of achieving a sustainable sense of personal integrity and relatedness. However, more massive trauma, particularly when it occurs within less optimal intersubjective contexts, often leads to greater devastation where powerfully dissociated repetitive patterns of being prevail. This is a state of being that eludes reflection and perpetually courts a sense of personal failure, along with a numbed relatedness that precludes spontaneity, creativity, and intimacy.

Ubuntu

To the theme of self and other, it seems appropriate to apply the idea of ubuntu. This ancient Bantu word familiar to South Africans and used by

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Suchet (this volume) refers to an ethic of relatedness: A person is a person through other people. It is a concept that underscores interdependence and the shared fate of humanity. Tutu (cited in Nicolson, 2008) states:

A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished, when others are tortured and oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are. (p. 2)

As is evident in these essays, the idea of ubuntu overlaps with many relational concepts that emphasize the achievement of genuine subjectivity and empathy with another as predicated on a solid sense of one’s own mind. This requires a flexible but resilient subjectivity of one’s own that can tolerate differences, discontinuities, and uncertainty while remaining bonded within the larger framework of being vulnerably human in relation to the shifting sands of tide and time. This is what we are all grappling with whether it is in the clinical, developmental, social, political, or existential realm.

**Organization of This Book**

The specific topics articulated in this volume fall into rough divides even while evincing clear overlaps and continuities among them. In broad terms, the topics can be organized along the following lines: attachment and developmental theory, models of mind, mental space, identity, sexuality, politics, and culture.

Observations deriving from attachment theory and other developmental models emphasize the life-sustaining force of the early dyad—the dyad that optimally contains and enables the developing infant while simultaneously setting the stage for the increasing differentiation of self and as well as self with other (Coates). We are reminded that the developing infant thrives best in interaction with a parent’s authentic self (Berman)—the self that is felt as affectively engaged and present while holding a distinctly separate center of feeling and perception.

The idea of connectedness, which permits distinct subjectivities to coexist runs through many of the papers in this volume. Spezzano argues cogently that without a home for the mind, the self cannot locate itself. This home or psychic space is possible only when the other (the analyst) has the freedom to be a subjective agent in her or his own right so that dialogue, meaning making, and shifting affect states can be owned, acknowledged, and emotionally tolerated by the self.

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Gentile's essay, in accordance with some of Spezzano's ideas, argues for greater fluidity between private and public selves mediated through a “transitional subject” (Gentile's term) that permits meaning making in the presence of a robust other.

Many of these essays emphasize a core theme: that subjectivities necessarily collide. Conflicting interests, self-interest, the illusions of self-preservation with their ubiquitous deceptions and self-deceptions, anxieties, shame, and other challenging affects, formulated or not, inevitably prevail in the continuous dialectic between self and other and in relation to the multiple, often dissociated self-states intrinsic to any interaction.

Benjamin's expanded theory of intersubjectivity, explicated in this volume, adds much to this conversation of mental space in terms of her ideas about the jointly created sense of safety or rhythmic third that sets the stage for achieving the dialogic shared third—the lens through which knowing and feeling known emerges, leading to mutual recognition and living with difference. Benjamin also expands on her notion of the moral third that speaks to the analyst's responsibility and willingness to affectively confront and acknowledge his or her own contribution to the enactments and inevitable breakdows of mutual recognition.

What are the implications for the developing self when there is no compassionate witness, no home for the mind, no robust or caring other to feel with and be recognized by? We turn to the realms of identity formation, the social and the political.

Many of the papers address the sequelae of misrecognition or recognition cast in binary constructions where self-definition is determined in opposition to another—a determination rife with self-deception and dissociated self-states in the service of apparent self-preservation and power. Emphasizing the sociopolitical construction of identity to include the inherent tensions, paradoxes, and complexities entailed in these constructions, these essays address the perpetuation of binaries in the face of the misrecognizing other that maintains the great divide between being and experiencing. Each of these papers extends its consideration to what happens when the binaries are deconstructed, and we are able to consider paradox and complexity within dialogic space.

The essays focusing on racial identity (Altman, Leary, Suchet) offer a nuanced conceptualization. So Whiteness involves a denial of Blackness, an illusion of wholeness steeped in privilege and constructed in relation to the illusory perception of the lesser, disempowered other—the not-me other who, in Hegelian terms, remains ironically intrinsic to the recognition of the privileged one's superiority, if the latter is indeed to achieve purchase. Leary addresses a similar paradox in the act of passing—a form of camouflage that sequesters the self from expected trauma, usually associated with racism and homophobia—the trauma of variance so to speak (Corbett).
Passing also requires the context of a relationship with the implicit agreement between subject and object of not asking and not telling.

Grand extends the paradox in her relational consideration of terrorism, counterterrorism, and torture, demonstrating that there can be no hero without a sacrificial villain.

The intertwining of the political and mental space is demonstrated in Gerson’s paper on the dead third in which he describes the devastating consequences of nonrecognition too often afforded the survivors of massive trauma such as the Holocaust and genocide. The complexity of surviving unimaginable atrocities, designed and perpetrated by fellow humans, culminates in living with an enduring sense of deadness where phantoms and voids abound and the psyche strains under the constant presence of absence. This is the state that Gerson refers to as the dead third. He argues that psychological survival after such atrocity requires the impossibility of life to be spoken with an actively concerned witness who can bear living with and feeling with unspeakable horror.

In this paper, Gerson offers a nuanced view of mourning and melancholia. While Sigmund Freud posited melancholia as the consequence of incomplete mourning, Gerson maintains that there is no completion of the mourning of genocide—we live with catastrophic loss, we do not work it through. It is truncated mourning that manifests as melancholia or mania characterized by indifference, delusion, and denial.

Bernstein, in her richly evocative reexamination of melancholia and its complex underpinnings, also addresses the history of early or severe trauma in the melancholic who, she argues, cannot risk erasure of the object by relinquishing mourning and moving on. Instead, the melancholic becomes a faithful and perpetual chronicler of his or her own personal history—often alienating the other who cannot find his or her way into this seemingly closed system of despair. Paradoxically, as noted above, Gerson argues that melancholia is the illusory or compromised solution to the irresolvable grief that engulfs survivors of genocide, whose future life is best ensured by living with rather than working through loss, absence, and betrayal.

The essays on gender and sexuality further demonstrate how profoundly deconstructing binaries has shaken the foundations of early categorizations. Goldner's felicitous argument for “theories that refuse to sit still” is well borne out as we consider our evolving understanding achieved through the deconstruction of anatomically fettered thinking that pervaded our culture and our clinics for far too long. We now understand that gender and sexuality are not biological givens but emanate and take shape through mind and culture (Corbett, Goldner). As Corbett states, “Minds are made in relation, genders are made in relation, and gender is routinely read as a marker of mind.” Both Corbett and Goldner, through their respective lenses,
emphasize the “how” rather than the “why” that contributes to the specific features of another’s lived gendered and sexual experience. Recasting our thinking on previously gendered binaries and sexual categorizations has important implications for clinical technique. How we listen and what we listen to become more meaningfully focused on the narratives and fantasies that accompany the complexity of lived experience.

Further expansion in our thinking is evinced in the papers dealing with love and lust and love and power where reflexive categorizations are interrogated and reconceptualized. Frommer, in expanding upon Mitchell’s thinking of the otherness of the other to the otherness of self, argues for the coexistence of lust, traditionally perceived as otherness, and secure love. Frommer argues that the subjective dimensions of sexuality are heightened when our loving is accompanied by the capacity to bring the otherness of self more comfortably within our attachments.

Stein holds a similar view. She argues that excess, usually equated with otherness, makes for lusty relations but, as Ghent has argued before, believes that its transformative quality resides within a context of surrender with a trusted, secure other. At the same time, Stein demonstrates the complexity and paradoxical meanings inherent in the concept of excess, ranging from its impingement on the self to its potential to liberate sexual experience. She cautions us to exercise similar restraint in our theories and clinical practice to avoid foreclosing on understanding the richness and generative possibilities encoded in the term.

Dimen shakes up the habitually assumed binary between love and money; she considers the inherent contradictions between them and argues for us finding a way to inhabit and tolerate the tensions between them, much as we have to wrestle with other affect states invariably linked in dialectic tension.

J. Slavin addresses the historically psychoanalytic binary between love and analytic love. He emphasizes the analyst’s “innocent,” as opposed to coercive, power motivated, sexual, and emotional responsiveness within the transitional space as key to facilitating the patient’s experience of shared intimacy, pleasure, and sense of personal agency in sexuality.

Consistently, the papers reveal that the relational turn, along with the essential influences of feminist thinking, gender and social theory and the deconstructions of many of the polarizations that have served as dogma in our sociopolitical realm, continues to open up dialogic space, posing challenging questions that encourage a constant rethinking and deeper understanding of what renders us human, vital, and engaged. Similarly, the authors force us to confront much more of what has compromised us, deadened us, blinded us in terms of our views of self and others, of otherness within self and disowned parts of self in the other.

Malcolm Slavin’s paper reflects an intertwining of the developmental, the clinical, and the cultural through a perspective rooted in both evolutionary
biology and existential philosophy. From this perspective, relational theory is extended, as we are encouraged to inhabit *the breach*, a position that enables a more dialectical view of issues of self and otherness, of the innately adaptive and relationally constructed.

Slavin (M.) captures the essence of what we need to work toward in his plea for “a radical level of empathy, based in a universally shared ancient trauma … a form of empathy linked, deep down, to that far greater embeddedness in nature that we all lost when we became human. Linked ironically, to our common suffering … there may emerge a poignant yet reassuring and potentially creative human bond.”

We are living in a time of intense uncertainty and angst and international instability. It is a time that will continue to draw on us and from us in challenging and novel ways. The essays lay out much of the terrain we are grappling with in terms of the inherent intertwining of the domains of the clinical, the existential, and the sociopolitical. Through this volume we, as an ongoing relational community, are invited to think more deeply about and question more piercingly many of the contradictions we have accepted far too readily and reflexively.

References


