

# RELATIONAL KNOWING, MEMORY, SYMBOLIZATION, AND LANGUAGE: COMMENTARY ON THE BOSTON CHANGE PROCESS STUDY GROUP

N othing has emerged with more force from infant observation than the finding that the baby is oriented to the object in reality, i.e., to interpersonal reality. At the center of this paradigm shift in our understanding of mental development is the work of Daniel Stern. Scarcely less dramatic is the contribution of Edward Tronick, whose work with the "still face" has transformed our understanding of the infant's shared consciousness with the caregiver.

We have just begun to work out the significance of these new understandings of infant mental development for later mental development, cognitive psychology, the theory of mind, and the technique of the psychotherapies, including psychoanalysis. Although the Boston Change Process Study Group (BCPSG) invoke dynamical systems theory,<sup>1</sup> the power of their paper comes from these new

<sup>1</sup>Dynamical Systems Theory (DST) is a mathematical approach to the behavior or "self-organization" of complex systems using differential equations. DST has been invoked, rather controversially, to explain human thinking (Edelman 1973, 1987; van Gelder 1995). Van Gelder gives the Dynamicist Hypothesis as: "Natural cognitive systems are certain kinds of dynamical systems, and are best understood from the perspective of dynamics" (van Gelder 1995). DST, as a theory of mind, is linked to connectionism. We believe a serious problem for this model of mental functioning is that it seems to entail a return to associationism, the dominant theory of mind in scientific psychology for two centuries, from Hartley in the 1750s through Skinner in the 1950s. For the past fifty years, associationism has been viewed as woefully inadequate, if not thoroughly discredited.

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developmental insights. Like its predecessor (Stern et al. 1998), this paper attempts to apply findings from infant mental development to the theory of technique of adult psychoanalysis. The extrapolation is theoretically stimulating and often intuitively compelling but involves some problematic leaps we want to examine in detail.

In this paper, as in that earlier group effort, the authors present their goals with restraint. They seek to "illuminate insufficiently recognized levels of psychoanalytic process." They "do not wish to set up a false competition between . . . mutative events . . . [but] rather to explore the *something more* [than interpretation], as it is less well understood" (Stern et al. 1998, p. 904). This modest language obscures some of the problems, as the issues raised extend to the foundations of psychoanalytic theory and technique. In the preface to his new book on the same themes, Stern (2004) is more precise and reaches further: "The aim of the journey is to alter your vision of what is happening in a psychotherapy session, and thereby change how you approach it and what you might do in it" (p. xiii). In the BCPSG papers, the most revolutionary ideas are presented in the muted tones of common sense and established science. Consider, for example, the profound treatment implications of this claim from the present paper's "Summary and Conclusion": "One could say that sloppiness is to a two-person psychology what free association is to a one-person psychology." Given the relational turn in psychoanalytic thinking and the currently negative connotations of a "oneperson psychology," it is hard to read the sentence without questioning the foundational value of free association. Although suggestive, the Boston Group's paper does not explicitly pose, still less discuss, this interesting question.

It appears as unobjectionable common sense when, in their opening section, they write, "we make the following assumptions. Most of the affectively meaningful life experiences that are relevant in psychotherapy are represented in the domain of nonconscious implicit knowledge." Yet, for the Boston Group, this is more than an assertion about what may well be a universal aspect of human interaction. It is the basis of propositions about *implicit relational knowing* that are as questionable as they are far-reaching.

#### IMPLICIT RELATIONAL KNOWING

The concept of implicit relational knowing (IRK) is at the heart of the BCPSG's theorizing. IRK "refers to representations of the ways individuals relate to one another that are outside both focal attention and conscious verbal experience." IRK is the essence of a "local level," characterized by "sloppiness" where "fuzzy intentionalizing" and "shared intentional direction" are two aspects of dyadic encounters.<sup>2</sup> IRK is also used to refer to an aspect of the interaction between an analyst and an adult analysand. Most important, IRK is said to be "represented nonsymbolically" (Stern et al. 1998, p. 905). This assertion is essential to the Boston Group's argument: if IRK is not symbolized at the local level, it can be separated from and treated as fundamentally independent of a number of familiar concepts including narrative, psychodynamic meaning, repressed motives, and unconscious fantasy. It is here we think the Boston Group go astray.

The notion that IRK is unsymbolized at the local level is not developed as an argument but rather is conveyed by the use of two analogies.<sup>3</sup> In the first, adult IRK is treated as parallel to infant IRK, while in the second it is treated as a form of procedural knowledge. These analogies are presented as if self-evident, but on close examination they obscure important questions about implicit relational knowing in adults.

The Boston Group define IRK as "the knowledge of how 'to be with' someone" (Stern et al. 1998) and exemplifies this conception by pointing to how "the infant comes to know early in life what forms of affectionate approaches the parent will welcome or turn away" (p. 905). It is this kind of infant relational knowing that is analogized to adult IRK. This analogy tacitly assumes that neither the development of language nor the emergence of the sexual and aggressive drives is integrated into the mental expectations and experiences of "how 'to be

<sup>2</sup>These four new terms—local level, sloppiness, fuzzy intentionalizing, shared intentional direction— are introduced as part of a conceptual apparatus but, perhaps because of space limitations, are not clearly defined in the present paper. As the BCPSG would no doubt agree, an account of the nature of indeterminacy need not and should not rely on thinking or concepts that are less than rigorous. The uncertainty of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is expressed in precise equations applicable to a precisely defined field. Similarly, the notion that the observer may impact the observed is not itself a fuzzy notion.

<sup>3</sup>At times the Boston Group seem to assert that IRK is not symbolizable. We need not take up this point since if IRK is symbolized at the local level, it must be symbolizable. with' someone." Unlike the Boston Group, we think it implausible to contend that the ways in which IRK is acquired, stored, or represented should be the same for infants and adults. More important, we believe that the mental processes that make up the adult's implicit relational knowledge have been transformed by drives, affects, defenses, the acquisition of language, the development of psychic structure, and a growing ability to appreciate reality.

Infant observation has shown us that symbolic capacities may emerge as early as the first two months of life. In the *Interpersonal World of the Infant*, Stern's description of the earliest "sense of self" includes the following: "Infants thus appear to have an innate general capacity . . . to take information received in one sensory modality and somehow translate it into another sensory modality. . . . it involves an encoding into a still mysterious amodal representation, which can then be recognized in any of the sensory modes" (1985, p. 51). Such capacities are reasonably understood as a form of symbolic thought that is later integrated into adult symbolic functioning. Indeed, we would say that Stern's "sense of emergent self" entails symbolic competencies.

In their recent book, Beebe and Lachmann (2002) remind us that by 1937 Piaget had shown that symbolic thought emerges in the infant between nine and twelve months. After summarizing extensive experimental and observational data, they conclude that infant capacities and interactions "as early as three to four months generate . . . a rich, discriminated set of experiences that come to be remembered and expected . . ." (p. 84). We see no reason to regard such capacities and experiences as nonsymbolic. Rather, they are on a developmental continuum with linguistically based symbolization and what Bucci (1985) calls the "nonverbal symbolic." If so, the parallel capacities and experiences of adult IRK must also be symbolized.

The other analogy the Boston Group draw on relates adult IRK to procedural knowledge. To clarify the notion of procedural knowledge, consider this excerpt from Westen's 1999 *JAPA* review article, "The Scientific Status of Unconscious Processes." He defines "the distinction between implicit and explicit thought and memory" as "between ideas and memories that can be consciously retrieved and manipulated, and those that are expressed in behavior without conscious awareness."

The consensus among cognitive scientists today is that human thought and memory involve at least two systems, one conscious (called explicit) and the other unconscious (called implicit). Explicit memory involves conscious retrieval of information such as childhood memories or the name of a friend, whereas implicit memory refers to memory that is observable in behavior but is not consciously brought to mind. One kind of implicit memory is *procedural memory*. (Although much of procedural memory is implicit, many procedures, such as problem-solving strategies, are actually explicit.) This refers to "how to" knowledge of procedures or skills: the motor memory involved in throwing a ball or playing on the piano a complex piece that once required considerable conscious attention, or the behaviorally expressed knowledge of subtle social rules, such as how close to stand to another person in conversation. People typically cannot report how they carry out these procedures, and when they try, their plausible explanations of how they did what they did are often incorrect. . . .

Another kind of implicit memory, of particular relevance to psychoanalysis, is *associative memory*—the formation of associations that guide mental processes and behavior outside of consciousness [pp. 1065–1066].

Three points are important to emphasize in this account of the science of memory. First, procedural memory is only *one kind* of implicit memory. Associative memory is also implicit, as are those mental phenomena grouped under the term *the dynamic unconscious*. Second, there is nothing about implicit thought and memory that is necessarily unsymbolized. Indeed, associative memory entails symbolic systems. Third, procedural memory itself may be symbolized consciously and unconsciously: it is only certain mental procedures that cannot be put into words.<sup>4</sup>

While it is plausible to liken IRK to procedural knowledge, it is incorrect to equate the two. Yet that is what the Boston Group seem to do. The equation allows them to "explain" much of what is going on at the "local level" as procedural knowledge. The notion that IRK

<sup>4</sup>The current status of implicit thought/memory is even more complex than the Westen excerpt might suggest. In *Psyche*'s symposium on Implicit Learning and Memory, Willingham and Preuss's paper, "The Death of Implicit Memory" (1995), summarizes the status of current research on implicit memory phenomena at the neuroanatomical and information-processing level in animal and human studies. They conclude that "there is such variety among the implicit memory phenomena that nothing holds them together in a common category. . . . there is currently not a reason to retain the construct 'implicit memory.'" Note that the construct of explicit think-ing/memory *is* well established as a single neuroanatomical system. So too is the distinction between what is explicit and what is not. What Willingham and Preuss point to are the problems of grouping various nonexplicit mental phenomena under the single rubric *implicit*. For a further appreciation of the complexity of current thinking on these questions, see Mayes, Gouding, and van Eijk (1997).

is a version of procedural knowledge leads the authors to ignore the possibility that IRK may involve more than procedural memory. Any form of adult IRK might require associative memory and/or those forms of implicit memory sometimes called the dynamic unconscious, the *implicit* memory of conflicted motives.

Even if one were to accept the reduction of implicit relational knowing to procedural memory, there is another problem: the conceptual tension between representation and symbolization. The Boston Group assert that IRK is mentally represented but not symbolized.<sup>5</sup> For them procedural knowledge is neither verbal *nor* symbolic. However, only the knowledge of *certain* skills and *certain* procedures, like those involved in generating grammar or three-dimensional vision, are unsymbolizable. Much of what is correctly called procedural knowledge *can* be symbolized, even consciously. For an everyday example, imagine the following scenario: someone replies to a question, "Turn right down that hall, go up the stairs, and it's the first door on your left." Not only the directions but the other procedures and skills involved are well represented in acoustic and visual symbols, that is, in words and gestures.

Like many others, the Boston Group use the everyday experience of riding a bike to explain procedural knowledge (Stern et al. 1998). The lesson we are to take away is that, though you know how to ride a bike, you can't verbalize the procedural knowledge involved. The intuition you are invited to share is that bike riding is in some way unsymbolized, without a "verbal/symbolic label," and thus distinct from dynamic meaning, unconscious fantasy, etc. It is clear how problematic this intuition is if one substitutes for bike riding another everyday experience that is hard to put into words—having sex. Although poets and novelists have despaired of giving a good verbal account of making love,<sup>6</sup> psychoanalysts

<sup>6</sup>Our favorite account of this problem is in John Berger's novel G (1992), in which the narrator discusses the difficulty of describing lovemaking. In the ensuing description, Berger must provide drawings to illustrate what his words fail to convey (pp. 110–114).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>Unless they use "symbolize" to mean "verbalize," this is problematic. The OED defines *symbolize* as "represent (something) by a symbol" and *represent* as, inter alia, "symbolize." Although many mental representations are nonverbal, all mental representations are symbolic. Some mental *processes* cannot be *represented* mentally (a fortiori in language), including some, but not all, of what is called procedural knowledge. In her 1999 paper, "The Two-Person Unconscious," Lyons-Ruth, a member of the BCPSG, carefully develops the notion that "procedural systems of relational knowing develop in parallel with symbolic systems, as separate systems with separate governing principles" (p. 579). Many of our reservations about the present paper are relevant also to the line of thinking Lyons-Ruth advances, as well as to the 2002 BCPSG paper, "Explicating the Implicit."

are well positioned to affirm that the skills and procedures involved are multiply symbolized, consciously and unconsciously.

Actually, riding a bike is itself a dubious example if the procedural knowledge involved is supposed to show that riding a bike is not symbolized in "affectively meaningful life experiences." Riding a bike is represented linguistically precisely by the phrase, the verbal/symbolic label, *riding a bike*. One of us will never forget when his daughter called out, "Look, Dad, I'm riding a bike!" Even if the procedural memory involved in riding a bike were not "symbolized," for father and daughter the affectively meaningful experience is saturated with symbolization.

While procedural and other forms of implicit knowledge certainly play a part in "affectively meaningful life experiences," it ought not be assumed that they function independently of language and fantasy. When the Boston Group write that "teasing apart the contributions of the implicit nonconscious and the repressed unconscious is beyond the scope of this paper," they are saying that it is in principle possible to separate implicit knowledge from the other components of "meaningful life experiences." While that may be possible, it would be akin to separating the spelling of a word from its meaning: useful for certain purposes, but hardly the lived experience of literature.

The importance the authors give IRK cannot be exaggerated. It is equated with transference: "the implicit relational knowings that both partners bring to the encounter, i.e., the transference and countertransference." By putting this equation in a subordinate clause, the authors obscure the novelty of using transference to mean something independent of fantasy, narrative, and the symbolic. Shortly after identifying IRK with transference, the authors add that IRK is "automatically or implicitly updated in small ways with each relational encounter. . . ." A less sanguine approach might focus on how IRK (transference) can prevent, impede, or distort the "updating" that otherwise might occur. "Updating" seems to mean a change of the IRK in the direction of the "reality" of the relational encounter. If so, automatic updating is possible only if past and present relational knowledge is based on veridical perception and is relatively immune to fantasy and distortion. This may be the situation of the infant, but it is not the case for adults in whom memories of trauma (explicit and implicit) and fantasies (conscious and unconscious) color past and present experiences of the other. For adults, what is automatic may be closer to repetition than to "updating." Indeed, our understanding of the intergenerational transmission of trauma from parent to child is centered on the tendency to repeat rather than to update implicit relational knowing.

## SLOPPINESS, FUZZY INTENTIONALIZING, AND THE LOCAL LEVEL

The authors point out that "new conceptual and descriptive approaches require new terminology. . . ." Fair enough, but it is then particularly important that such terms be defined clearly, especially when common words are used for technical purposes. There are a number of unanswered questions about the authors' use of their new terminology. For example, the concept *relational moves* appears to us to reduce to "actions that are motivated in relation to the other." Similarly, the new terms *sloppiness* and *fuzzy intentionalizing* seem to entail no more than what is commonly understood as the complexity and difficulty of communication between two people. In any case, one is left wondering about the relation of "sloppiness" and "fuzzy intentionalizing" to overdetermination, to interactions in which each dyadic partner has multiple and sometimes contradictory motives for each behavior, and to the condensation and displacement of intentions.

Matters are even more perplexing when the concept of local level is distinguished from but said "not [to] replace traditional psychodynamic descriptions at the more *macro* level" (emphasis added). The local level is contrasted with "the background and metatheory of the psychoanalytic framework" and there is a call for future "integrating of the local level with the level of larger psychodynamic meanings and narratives." Here again, the Boston Group say that what happens at the local level, including much that is beneficial, should be considered as importantly independent of psychodynamic meaning, conflict, fantasy, metatheory, narratives, and the like. But in what sense are meanings and narratives "macro"? It is no news that a simple percept can be altered by unconscious fantasy-think of Arlow's patient who, "entertaining fantasies of revenge," saw the word "murder" on a familiar shop sign that actually read "Maeder" (1969, p. 9). Likewise, it is a commonplace of clinical experience that the smallest interaction may be chock-full of meaning and fantasy.

### SHARED INTENTIONAL DIRECTION, REPRESSION, GOALS OF TECHNIQUE, AND KINDS OF CHANGE

"Shared intentional direction" (SID) is, for the Boston Group, central to the process of change. Referred to as a "moment of meeting"7 (MOM) in their first paper (Stern et al. 1998), SID is contrasted with the notion of undoing repression. At one point in their commentary on the case material in the present paper, SID seems in fact to be a goal of technique: "When the analyst 'got' what the patient meant by pressure, [the patient] also became clearer about it herself. ... "A stance that emphasizes the benefit of "shared intentional direction" may come naturally enough when interacting with a baby, but runs into problems in the analytic consulting room. The important question of technique is whether "successfully joining in an intentional direction" is ever harmful or undesirable or ever functions as a defense or a transferencecountertransference enactment. The authors' parenthetical comment is noteworthy: "Not every direction that could be co-created would be healing or constructive for the patient. But this is a matter of technique and conception of therapeutic efficacy, beyond the scope of this paper." This is a shame, because insofar as their paper is a contribution to the theory of technique, we need to know on what basis, and at what point, we make the distinction between what heals and what hurts. Perhaps there is a theory of technique or "conception of therapeutic efficacy" that does not require the analyst to make this distinction. But if distinguishing between healing and hurting interventions is a necessary part of technique, it must involve symbolization and conceptual thought. Similarly, when a therapist believes that a shared direction is not "healing or constructive," any technique to resist joining in, or to redirect, such a SID would entail conceptual thought, language, and symbolization.

<sup>7</sup>In *Moments of Meeting*, Cissna and Anderson (2002) attribute the first use of this phrase to Carl Rogers, in his famous 1957 public debate with Martin Buber at the American Psychological Association meetings. Rogers's existential humanism challenged the psychoanalytic notion that dynamically unconscious mentation is an inextricable component of the vicissitudes of mind. The debate concerned change-inducing moments in psychotherapeutic dialogues. Using "moments of meeting" and similar phrases like "moments of meaning," "moments of movement," "molecules of meaning," and even "molecules of therapy" to identify an auspicious conjunction of interpersonal circumstances that produces reciprocal awareness of some aspect of the patient's mental activity, Rogers argued that it was during these moments of meeting that psychotherapeutic "change actually occurs" (Rogers 1961, p. 130).

As the impressive clinical material documents, the analytic work of the BCPSG leads to beneficial changes in their patients. An important question arises about the meaning of those therapeutic changes for the theory of technique. Recall the moment of SID in which the analyst "got" what the patient intended. While affirming both the therapeutic value of that moment and the understanding of the analyst for his patient, we could speculate as follows: in that particular moment of SID, what the analyst "got" was only what the patient intended on balance; however, in his relational move, the analyst did not simultaneously "get" her conflicted intentions. For instance, the patient may have at other times or "on another level" not wanted or even feared "communicative competence." In moments when a patient predominantly wants to get better, a technique emphasizing SID may be more useful than in moments when a patient does not want to move in a healing or constructive direction. In the first case, empathic, nonjudgmental openness to the fuzzy, sloppy, indeterminate aspect of the dyadic interaction may be essential and sufficient. In the second, something more may be required.

The issue is not whether interpreting to undo repression is the only way to help people. Of course it isn't. Even outside of the therapeutic situation people change, problems are resolved, desired capacities are acquired. Infants, children, and adults develop, mature, and learn. Help and cure are fostered not only by psychotherapy but also by teaching, love, friendship, conversion experiences (James 1902), and fate (Freud 1895, p. 305), among other things. Some changes that involve undoing repressions occur without a therapist. Since Strachey's 1934 classic paper, therapeutic action has been attributed both to interpretation and to the relationship with the analyst. For the Boston Group, moments of meeting, SIDs, aim at a healing revision of implicit relational knowing, just as, for them, interpretation aims at making the unconscious conscious.<sup>8</sup> SIDs are both the "intervention" and the mechanism that creates the changes attributed to the therapeutic action of the relationship. In their first paper (Stern et al. 1998) they use the difference between "explicit (declarative)" mental representations and "implicit

<sup>8</sup>In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud (1923) rejected the idea that the sole goal of interpretation is to make the "unconscious conscious." Bringing into awareness mental contents that previously have been repressed or split off is a *part* of interpretation, reasonably viewed as a necessary first step, but few analysts today see it as the whole story. After 1923 many analysts came to understand the therapeutic goal of interpretation to be a reconfiguration of the relations among ego, id, superego, and reality.

(procedural)" mental representations to account for the difference between the effects of "moments of meeting" and of interpretation.

The emphasis on psychotherapeutic changes that do not involve undoing repression opens the question of which patients, which problems, and which therapeutic moments require undoing repression and which require other goals. One answer would be a theory that guided our technique by relating diagnosis to the nature of the desired change. We need to improve our psychoanalytic nosology, our DSM-Freud, which, in opposition to the numerological DSMs, must be rooted in etiology. A nosology worthy of that name might distinguish troubles whose treatment requires an emphasis on interpretive techniques aimed at undoing repression (and at structural change) from troubles in which the essential emphasis should be on interventions aimed at providing educational experience that fosters mentalization<sup>9</sup> or other desirable cognitive and emotional capacities.

## POTENTIAL DANGERS OF PRESENT-MOMENT THEORIZING

Up to this point we have argued that for infants the mental content and the mental processes constituting relational knowing are importantly symbolizable. We have also maintained that the extrapolation to adults of this early version of IRK is questionable because of the ways in which the development of language, psychic structure, drives, affects, defenses, and object relations transforms the mental content and processes underlying affectively meaningful life experiences. Finally, we have pointed to the limitations of the analogy to procedural knowledge.

In the six years since its publication, the "Something More" paper has been much read, much taught, and widely influential. It is to be expected that the present paper will extend the influence of this line of thinking. For this reason we have tried to be precise about our concerns. For the same reason, but with less rigor, we would like to raise some deeper concerns.

This BCPSG paper illuminates an aspect of human interaction that is not based on language. The philosopher Jerry Fodor has remarked that although other animals may have language, humans are the only

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>Defined by Fonagy (2004) as "the implicit or explicit perception of the actions of others and oneself as intentional."

ones who are any good at it. While Fodor is certainly correct, one might wonder, "What is language good for?" We would answer that it serves to preserve history through the intergenerational transmission of individual and social knowledge. In other words, language facilitates the accumulation, reproduction, and transmission of culture. Pushed too far, the Boston Group's present-moment theorizing risks abandoning the individual's personal "culture," which is bound up with and constructed out of language and the repressed. Such theorizing is analogous to the theorizing of certain postmodernists who construe culture as little more than a present tense "co-construction" of power and its victims. Such theorizing minimizes the significance of history in the social and psychological realms. Concepts like implicit relational knowing and the "present moment" are seductive in part because they tend to minimize the radical otherness of ego-alien unconscious motivation arising out of the repressed. The relation between the repressed and what is (pre)conscious necessarily involves the past. It is a complex two-way temporality sometimes elaborated as après coup. To focus on what is unconscious but not repressed is to lose track of an important aspect of the influential richness of the individual's past.

In contrast, social theorists like Guy Debord (1994) and psychological theorists like Sigmund Freud see the two-way temporality of history and the present as constituting the essence of what is human. For humanity, the past is the soul of the present; for the individual, the repressed is the soul of consciousness. As an epigraph for his new book, *The Present Moment*, Daniel Stern (2004) invokes the mysticism of Blake: "To see a World in a Grain of Sand . . . And Eternity in an hour." If, however, the past is the soul of the present, then elevating the here and now to be the very grammar of technique risks mystifying psychoanalysis and moving toward the optimistic but soulless ideology of self-improvement.

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