

RESPONSE TO COMMENTARIES

We appreciate the thoughtful consideration our colleagues have given the somewhat new and unfamiliar directions taken in our paper. From varied perspectives, their commentaries raise numerous points for further dialogue regarding the fundamental assumptions underlying a view that privileges the implicit process between analyst and patient. While it is tempting to engage in dialogue concerning all the points raised, we will confine our closing comments to those we consider most salient and crucial to the theoretical framework we are proposing.

First, we should briefly clarify that we do not view sloppiness per se as the “something more than interpretation” that leads to change. Rather, we describe sloppiness as an inescapable feature of therapeutic exchanges (at the local level) that is used *in the service* of co-creating new ways of fitting together. Sloppiness encompasses the spontaneous, improvisational, unexpected interpersonal events that “pop up” in interaction and then can be captured to catalyze intersubjective moments of meeting and bring about change. House and Portuges translate sloppiness and fuzzy intentionalizing into “the complexity and difficulty of communication between two people,” whereas we find that the two concepts move us toward elucidating this very “difficulty.”

MEANING: SIGNS, SYMBOLS, AND INTRINSIC MEANING

We will begin by addressing Litowitz’s elegant description of the psychoanalytic endeavor from the point of view of semiotics, because we find our viewpoint both closely aligned with hers regarding the social origins of meaning, yet deeply divergent from hers, as well as from that offered by House and Portuges, in our view of the processes that give rise to such meanings.

We find many points of agreement with Litowitz in her description of the process of communication as co-created, as needing constant

disambiguation between partners, and as the process through which meanings emerge. We are also in agreement regarding the positions of Quine and Bakhtin that beneath the generalized meanings of words lies a history of “past communicational exchanges [that] cling to our words.” Hobson (2002) has similarly noted that “every word has a hidden glow of feeling,” accrued from the specific relational encounters in which it has been embedded. Litowitz’s citing of Rommelveit reveals further similarities in our thinking about the fuzziness of communication, particularly the idea of “anticipatory comprehension, that sets up expectations of understanding that often turn out to be misunderstandings.” Further underscoring this point, Litowitz also notes that “every sign is always inherently vague.” However, Litowitz includes affective cues in her list of signs, and herein lies the origin of our deep differences in perspective. Affective cues, as well as intention cues, exude meaning but are not accurately viewed as symbols or as signs, either in the most usual sense of those terms, or in the view from developmental research. Instead, affective cues have an inherent, biologically wired meaning or valence or valuation (value in Edelman’s terms) from birth onward.

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So where does meaning reside if these cues are not signs? Affect cues (as well as intention cues) are mainly movements composing facial expressions, gestures, and positions. To use facial expressions as an example, certain expressions can be conventionalized by a society and thus become signs that have a referent beyond their own performance (e.g., a disgust face when referring to last night’s dinner). But how are we to consider a disgust expression while eating something disgusting? It is not true to say that it refers to something else, such as the inner feeling of disgust, because the facial expression is biologically part of the inner feeling. This can be true even for many conventionalized facial behaviors, such as a smile. It can be a sign, but it is also a performance with a specificity that carries it beyond the conventional sign. It is this specificity of performance that carries the authenticity of the affect compared to its sign value. It refers to itself only, so to speak.

Others, Darwin included, point out that facial expressions can act as signals to other members of the species (not to eat what has disgusted one member). But even in this case, the status of a sign is questionable because recent findings on mirror neurons and other forms of “other-centered participation” make the facial expression not a signal

or a means of referencing but the initiator of resonance or contagion. So we are left with authentic affective cues that refer to themselves only, where the communication is in the performance. Infants understand the basic valence of such cues from the beginning, so they are not arbitrary. Not at the beginning of life nor thereafter are they pointers or signifiers of something else. They have inherent meaning as positive or negative communications in and of themselves. These communicative signals form the basis for the elaborate face-to-face exchanges of affect that are one of the uniquely human features of early communication (see Jaffe et al. 2001; Hobson 2002; Stern 1985; Tomasello 1999). Most of what we are talking about in the affective flow between mother and infant, or therapist and patient, consists of sequences of acts that have intrinsic meaning. These, of course, are mixed with true signs and symbols.

So the infant certainly does create meanings prior to the use of symbols, and meaning need not be symbol-connected. Viewing videotapes of mother-infant interactions leaves no one questioning that the mother's actions mean something to the infant and that the infant's responses reflect the meanings generated within him. We view this implicit (nonsymbolic) understanding of relationships (implicit relational knowing) as foundational to our meaning systems, and as a necessary substrate to the subsequent mapping of more arbitrary signs and symbols onto the already acquired implicit meanings of lived experience. Hobson (2002), in his recent book, *The Cradle of Thought*, lays out this argument and the wide-ranging evidence for it in eloquent detail.

In sum, affect and intention cues have inherent meaning from a biological standpoint that is not arbitrary or vague. And this difference is important to any theory of the emergence of meaning. Therefore, approaches that fail to distinguish between affect cues and other, more arbitrary semiotic systems will contribute to confusion rather than clarification regarding how meaning is co-created, developmentally and therapeutically.

Based on current scientific views of mind and brain function, we advance the view that implicit relational knowing is a form of representation distinct from language-based explicit knowledge. Implicit relational knowing does not change with the acquisition of language, nor is it transformed into language when language arrives. It is a separate domain of represented experience that continues to develop throughout

the life span, just as explicit semantic knowledge develops. Implicit relational knowing is not confined to anticipations of relational actions alone, but includes their associated feelings and intention cues. The richness of implicit knowing is one of the most important findings of the last decades of infant observation and attachment research. These findings have made it clear that implicit relational knowing is one vehicle through which the past is carried into the present. Implicit relational knowing cannot express *anything but* the past (as personally experienced), and the present moment contains everything from the past that organizes the person's response "now."

Analysts must consider the possibility that the most important levels of psychodynamic meaning can be carried, enacted, and expressed through nonsymbolizing processes. Perhaps the confusion that this assertion generates stems from a belief that meaning can be generated only through symbolization. Basch (1975) defined meaning as "a dispositional effect on action." This applies to both explicit and implicit meanings, but is a particularly good description of implicit forms of meaning. The relationally embedded meanings that are exchanged through rapid affective communications during lived experiences are the ones that most fundamentally organize one's directions, and these are central to psychoanalysis. We therefore dispute Litowitz's statement that "each human seeks meaning through *the mediation of semiotic systems* shared with other humans. . . ." While semiotic systems are unquestionably important, they are merely part of a much more inclusive intersubjective system that begins with the sharing of affective and intentional orientations toward one another and toward the world, and such sharing of orientations is at the heart of interpersonal exchange and the generation of meaning. We believe it is a fundamental error—one carried forward in psychoanalytic thinking—to base meaning (and mediation) in semantic meaning. Language and abstract forms of thought build on earlier modes of making and representing meaning, but these earlier modes are not symbolic, nor are they superseded by the symbolic. A variety of work proves that both complex rule-learning and the learning of affective valence can occur in the absence of the capacity for explicit, declarative forms of memory. To quote Lewicki, Hill, and Czynewska (1992), "nonconscious information-acquisition processes are not only much faster but are also structurally more sophisticated, in that they are capable of efficient processing of multi-dimensional and interactive relations . . . knowledge that is indispensable

for . . . encoding and interpretation of stimuli and the triggering of emotional reactions” (p. 796; see also Tranel and Damasio 1993; Knowlton, Ramus, and Squire 1992).

Although innately the infant is biologically prepared to develop the ability to use symbols, a large cognitive and neuroscience literature supports the view that the kinds of generalized expectations that the infant elaborates, as well as the generalized perceptual prototypes that emerge from repeated experiences with different exemplars of objects, are not to be equated with their eventual symbolic representations. We would not agree, then, with House and Portuges’s argument that the processes through which “a rich discriminated set of experiences come to be remembered and expected” are symbolic or proto-symbolic. Instead, they rest on cognitive and perceptual capacities different from those that support symbolic functioning (for the dual neural sites involved in representing the thoughts and feelings of others, see, e.g., Sabbagh 2004). Indeed, symbolic functioning does not become available until the middle of the second year. This does not mean that the infant is not thinking. Thought and symbol use are not synonymous, nor are they isomorphic.

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WHERE DO PSYCHODYNAMIC PROCESSES RESIDE?

Litowitz also raises a crucial question when she asks how the notion of a dynamic unconscious can be included in our model of implicit processes and further asks, “Isn’t some notion of defense required for a ‘dynamic’ unconscious?” Although she agrees that defense does not need to be tied to repression, as in Freud’s original model (as an example she cites the avoidant attachment patterns observed among infants at the end of the first year of life), and that unconscious mentation does not need to be tied to verbal knowledge, she has not taken this to the conclusion we have reached (and that House and Portuges seem to find so problematic): namely, that conflict, defense, and what is referred to as unconscious fantasy reside in the implicit domain, rather than as part of the repressed. House and Portuges needlessly fear that our theorizing is an attempt to do away with the dynamic unconscious and “risks abandoning the individual’s personal culture.” We do not, however, locate such personal culture as primarily within “language and the repressed.” We are trying to bring greater attention

to the implicit domain as a vast and clinically important part of the nonconscious, and to emphasize how much of what is “psycho-dynamic” is nonconscious not by virtue of repression, but because it is organized implicitly.

As one of us (Lyons-Ruth 1999) has elaborated, defensive infant behaviors around attachment needs are precisely the evidence we need to locate the onset of defensive processes in implicit (nonreflective, nonsymbolic) affective processes available prior to the mediation of semiotic systems. (For recent evidence for the relation of early forms of dialogue to later dissociative processes, see Ogawa et al. 1997; Lyons-Ruth 2003.) In our view, both nonconflicted affective exchanges, as well as the more conflicted defensive stances that may be a part of those exchanges, are grounded in implicit or procedural forms of representation of lived experiences with others. While, with development, verbal exchanges increasingly become a part of interactions with others, the “rules” governing those interactions are negotiated through affect cues from the beginning of life and are rarely raised to the level of conscious verbal description. Instead they remain part of our implicit relational knowing. Such rules for interaction include expectations about what forms of affective relatedness can be expressed openly in the relationship and what forms need to be expressed only in “defensive” ways—that is, in distorted or displaced forms. Like the syntax governing language use, we begin deriving and using these rules from very early in life, as part of our procedural knowledge, long before we’re capable of generating any conscious verbal description of what such rules are like.

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WHAT IS DEEP AND WHAT IS SURFACE?

These comments should begin to make clear that our most profound difference with Litowitz, as well with House and Portuges, is around the issue of what should be considered the level of deep, as against superficial, “meaning.” In our view, previous work in psychoanalysis has conceptually reversed what should be considered the deeper level of meaning and what should be considered the more superficial. The deepest level of meaning, from which all later forms of meaning emerge, is the level of lived engagement with others around central developmental needs, as these engagements are represented in implicit, procedural forms of memory. Litowitz wants to equate observing the

structure of affectively rich lived experience with the reductionist methodologies of an earlier, behaviorally oriented scientific era. She, House, and Portuges feel that we are not dealing with the “deep” material. For example, Litowitz conflates “local,” meaning moment-to-moment, and “surface,” stating that we are speaking of “the local surface.” A few sentences later she speaks of our “staying with surface phenomena.” However, the central implication of what we are saying is that the traditional view of what is “profound” or “deep” and what is “superficial” must be turned on its head. Our suggestion is that conflict, defense, and unconscious fantasy originate in the implicit knowing of lived interactions. We consider the local level to provide the raw material, the foundation, for the grasping of the psychodynamics that then will be responded to implicitly and rendered interpretively by the analyst. It is here that the past is carried forward into the present. The concepts of conflict, defense, etc., as explicated in language, are useful abstractions that arise from the lived experiencing of conflict and defense in the interaction that is encoded in the implicit. It is in this sense that these abstractions are secondary. One of the reasons for this misunderstanding is that in analysis one talks about these issues many times over, so that one loses sight of the fact that the explicit version comes from an original implicit experience.

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Although relational transactions have been considered the “surface” level of meaning in previous analytic theorizing, this level of enactive representation encodes the most profound aspects of human experience, including their elements of conflict, defense, and affective resistance. Therefore, this level can no longer be considered “surface” or superficial.

LANGUAGE: OLD AND NEW

Our use of dynamic systems theory was questioned by Mayes, who was uncertain about its utility. She notes that “it is important to ask what the self-ordering, complex systems point of view adds to their central argument that cannot be found in other, perhaps more accessible, points of view.” In our view, the dynamic systems perspective offers at least two things. First, it offers a new explanatory framework for the unpredictability of what happens when we are in the thick of a session; second, it changes our tolerance and use of what may at first seem like errors but may instead be considered indications of flux and new emergent properties taking shape in the dyad.

Mayes also would like to put our description back into the more usual language of “understanding the patient.” However, reverting to the usual language means that we revert to a language that has not made many of the distinctions we feel are needed to carry our understanding forward. “Understanding the patient” is a global description that privileges the analyst’s perspective. It is not a two-person conception of the complex process that is occurring as the two therapeutic partners negotiate the therapeutic encounter. Such “understanding” is also usually conceived as something conveyed to the patient via the explicit content of what the analyst says. We searched for a different language in order to begin to distinguish more clearly between what is conveyed explicitly (through the semiotic vehicles that Litowitz emphasizes) and the more implicit level at which patients recognize the therapist’s adjustment to the most important level of meaning they are trying to convey. The therapist’s adjustment may have no semantic content and no explicit verbal level: it could be a silence, an emphatic rise in voice tone, or any of an infinite variety of other subtle adjustments, such as what is left uncommented on as against what is taken up next.

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We think that “understanding” is communicated at this implicit level of how the therapist’s next relational move feels fitted or not fitted. This understanding or fittedness is constantly negotiated by small moves between the two parties, as we have tried to illustrate. We feel that reverting to the more usual language leaves us without the more fine-grained descriptive terms we need. A new language is needed to open up and explore these complex elements of the exchange.

As we explain, the interpretation by the therapist that the patient needs to claim her agency or that “to be connected, one must be sick” is an after-the-fact, abstract summary of what has already played out in the interaction between them. However, as this new level of agency was in the process of being negotiated, no such after-the-fact summary was available of the pattern that would emerge. Instead, patient and therapist had to mutually feel out the interactive path and wait to see what kind of organization would emerge in their encounters. It is at this primary level of negotiating a new path in the moment-to-moment therapeutic interaction that we locate Litowitz’s “ends (i.e., for what purpose)” we engage in therapeutic work. Fitting the direction of the work to an abstract verbal summary will always be derivative of, and secondary to, the accomplishing of the new direction in the moment-to-moment therapeutic interchange itself.

One of the central challenges for science will always be to find the level of description of a phenomenon that leads to generative insights regarding fundamental processes. We feel that observing the moment-to-moment exchange of meaning and relatedness in the two-person therapeutic exchange is such a rich and generative level of inquiry.

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