The Dialectic Between the "Interpersonal" and the "Intrapsychic": With Particular Emphasis on the Role of Memory and Representation

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I will talk from the point of view of the developmental aspects of this problem. I am grateful to Stephen Mitchell for introducing some of the important distinctions between what we call intrapsychic and interpersonal, between fantasy and perception, between psychic reality and actuality, and between inner and outer worlds. The position that I take as a developmentalist is different from that taken by Abend, who posed the confrontation between interpersonal and intrapsychic as a dilemma. If we have to call it a dilemma, it seems to me that it is the right dilemma. Or rather, it is precisely the dialogue or dialectic that is crucial for understanding development. In fact, no other dialectic is of any interest from the clinical point of view of development than the difference and interaction between the intrapsychic and the interpersonal as broadly defined; this is especially so in conceptualizing how it is possible for us to create a world of representations.

We are not talking about the dialectic between nature and nurture. We all agree that the subjective world is a mental construction that emerges from the interaction between "actuality" and the mental processes that encounter that actuality and fashion it into a subjective psychic reality. Because the natures of

objective "actuality" and subjective psychic "reality" are so elusive and sensitive to method of approach, perhaps the closest we can come, at this time, in reexamining the interpersonal as compared to the intrapsychic—from a developmental point of view—is to do the following. Instead of "actuality" let us substitute the "interpersonal reality" of another person as described objectively by a competent, sensitive, and empathetic participant-observer (Sullivan, 1953). (In the developmental context this would be, ideally, some combination of a caring mother and trained baby-watcher.) Let us then enumerate the mental processes that an infant might bring to bear in his encounter with that "interpersonal reality," so far as possible, see how, via those processes, the infant could arrive at a "subjective psychic reality" that was at some distance from that described as the interpersonal reality.

Another way of putting all this is to list the ways the infant could possibly distort what we are calling "interpersonal reality." However, "distort," is clearly not the right

word or concept when talking about the construction of personal worlds. Refashion or construct are better words. So how might an infant refashion "interpersonal reality" so as to construct a different "psychic reality"?

The processes available for this transformation must come from the infant's mind, with which he construes interpersonal reality. There are at least five processes available for this kind of transformation: First are the psychodynamic operations involving the development of the id, ego, and superego and the defensive maneuvers required by the development and equilibrium of these psychic structures. Such would include the traditionally proposed construals of interpersonal reality involving selective modes of perceiving and interpreting during the oral stage and again, but differently, during the anal stage; and of course, later the oedipal interpretations and attendant feelings of the daily events of family life. Let us consider these traditional explanations of "distortion." They have been treated often and deeply, and one function of this essay is to see what other sources of transformation exist so that

we can reapproach these traditional sources of transformation with a better idea of what we will need and what we may not need of them.

A second major source of transformation is development itself. We assume that the infant sees the world, interpersonal reality in our case, at least differently because his capacities keep changing. And he cannot see interpersonal reality (which is defined by the capacity of a participant observer) as we do because he does not have the necessary abilities or observing perspective. A classic example would be an inability to differentiate self from other—or the inability to conserve the identity of objects when in a different affective state. These lacks due to immaturity could account (on superficial grounds) for the delusion of "dual-unity" in Mahler's normal symbiotic stage (Mahler et al., 1975) or for Klein's (1952) schizoid position. However, without some recourse to defensive operations (e.g., projective identification and splitting to maintain the schizoid position) borrowed from the psychodynamic reasons for "distortion" listed above, these "developmental" misconstruals would be trivial and transient. Furthermore, for them to operate as permanent, even in a latent form, some mechanism of fixation or the like must be postulated. And here again, we must rely on the psychodynamic (developmental) explanations.

A third main source of possible transformation of interpersonal reality into subjective psychic reality lies in innate object-related preferences and tendencies. While these are associated with attachment theory or the object relations school, they are in fact no less intrapsychic than are the psychodynamic metapsychologies or theories of development we have just discussed. These preferences (e.g., for the human face) or tendencies (e.g., for physical proximity) are basically the unfolding of intrapsychic givens that require minimal supporting or facilitating help from the interpersonal environment. We usually do not consider these to be intrapsychic in the same sense

because they are designed to be sensitive to, or directed at, the interpersonal object. In any event these too can and will influence constructions of reality.

The fourth source involves the workings of the mind in considering and organizing its own history—irrespective of age or whether the history is psychodynamically conflictual or not, or of specific "intrapsychic" operations as mentioned above. In a sense, then, this fourth source of construal is the most general. It concerns how lived-events (the observed events from which "interpersonal reality" is taken) become memories, how memories are organized into representations, and how representations, in turn, help interpret/construct/distort/create the psychic reality of the next encountered lived-event of "interpersonal reality," i.e., this process will account for some of the distance found between interpersonal reality and intrapsychic reality.

In brief, the process involves several steps. A "reality" is encountered (for the first time, for the sake of argument). That encounter is a lived-event. A memory of that lived-event is encoded. It is a specific memory, i.e., of one particular occurrence. The same, or roughly the same "reality" is again encountered. It also forms a specific memory. A third encounter forms yet another memory. The mind seems to function so that it will begin to process these specific memories. It will search for and identify those features that are common or invariant to each of the separate memories. These invariant features will then be used (merged) to form a composite or prototypic memory that best represents the three specific memories. This prototypic memory has, in a sense, conserved the invariant features of the three encounters with reality and has discarded the features that changed from one event to the next. The prototypic memory is no longer a complete and accurate record of what "actually" happened, it is a representation that provides a serviceable though incomplete rendition of the part that includes these three encounters.

An example of the process from the developmental experimental domain is illustrative. Ten-month-old infants were shown a series of schematic drawings of a face (Strauss, 1979). Each drawing was different in either the size or placement of the eyes,

the length of the nose, or placement of the ears. At the end of the series the baby was "asked" (using a visual preference—dishabituation design) which drawing of those the baby is about to see best represents (is seen as most familiar relative to) the whole series of drawings just seen. The baby will choose as most familiar (equals most representative) a drawing that, in fact, he has never seen before but that is the mathematical average of all the facial features he has seen. This is what is meant by forming a prototype of a series of specific memories. It is important to note that the

prototype has in fact never been experienced. It is a construction from "reality," an abstraction, but represents reality as multiply experienced.

It is in this way that we appear to form representations of classes or categories of many types of events. The mind strikes a balance between, on the one hand, keeping intact and retrievable every single specific memory ever encoded and, on the other, lumping together most specific memories by integrating and abstracting them (and thereby losing them) into prototypic memories which have great advantages for efficient living.

The illustrative examples of face drawings concerned a two-dimensional perceptual stimulus, hardly a subject of great clinical interest. However, the same process is probably involved in creating our representations of repeating life events such as "going to bed," "going to a restaurant," in the form of General Event Representations (GERs) (Nelson & Grundel, 1979), and in creating our representations of our daily affective, sensory and cognitive interactions with ourselves and others—interpersonal interactions—in the form of Representations of Interactions as Generalized (RIGs) (Stern, 1985).

It is the latter set of phenomena that is most relevant here. In the average life of an infant he will each day have dozens of events of "interpersonal reality" of the following sort: laughing with mother, being hungry before she arrives, being fed and satisfied, sharing a burst of enthusiasm with father, being prohibited about lamps and wall plugs, watching someone's face light up (or not) at

the baby's invitations to joyful play, and so on. These different types of interpersonal events will become represented in prototypic form. And it is this representation that will largely determine the "subjective psychic reality" of encountering the current "interpersonal reality."

Since the representation is an abstracted accumulation—under-going constant updating—of historical events it will be a very conservative force upon interpreting any currently lived-event (the interpersonal reality). In other words, past experience will have enormous weight in the construction of present subjective experience. People will repeat the same behaviors, selective inattentions, interpretations, etc. This is, in fact, the single stickiest problem in therapy. This is what Bowlby (1980) means when he says that internal working models act conservatively.

The overall point is that the same clinical phenomena explained by the repetition compulsion or fixation-regression can also be explained in part by the nature of the representational process—without obligatory recourse to metapsychological accounts of psychic processes or their intrinsic development. This does not mean

that other conservative influences on behavior and mental life cannot also act, including other form of "persistence in psychological focus" (Sandler & Joffe, 1967).

This fourth form of transformation of interpersonal reality into subjective psychic reality does not eliminate the central dialectic; it only enriches it. At each encounter with an episode of "interpersonal reality" the two major influences will still be operating to jointly construct a subjective reality: (1) the intrinsic intrapsychic tendencies, biases, sensibilities of both the classical and object relations type, and (2) the full weight of past history in the form of representations as prototypic memories.

There is a fifth form of transformation that may be important: specific memories as distinct from prototypic memories. Not all specific memories get absorbed in the formation of a prototype. Some, perhaps all, remain outside the process and maintain their uniqueness, i.e., all of the variant features that just so happened

to be present at the time of the specific event are conserved and remain co-assembled in the memory with the invariant features which are, in the formation of prototypic memories, the core attributes.

Sometimes a specific memory will act as a more potent guide for interpreting the currently encountered "interpersonal reality" than will the representation. This presents a different form of "distortion." In this form of distortion a singular event among many will stand for all and will guide the interpretation of an event which, at least statistically, is better represented and guided by the prototype.

Here the question arises of why this memory stands as a specific memory. One view is that a specific memory is a particular perspective taken on the representation, the prototypic seen from a not usual point of view (see Gardner, 1985). The next question, then, is what constitutes this different point of view. It could be a different and "truer" sense of the affective tone of the event or a deeper insight into the motives at play that became revealed in an unexpected tone of voice or facial expression or slip of the tongue. Any of these might qualify as sufficient to establish that particular occurrence as a specific memory. What is not known is whether the specific memory is really a better guide to all or just some of those events, past and future. The point is that neither specific memories, even if totally "faithful, nor representations will serve as an ideal model in the anticipation and interpretation of the next-to-be-encountered-event. Representations will err on the conservative side, and specific memories will err on the radical side.

To summarize, we have examined the role of memory and the formation of representations in construing interpersonal "actuality" and transforming it into subjective psychic "reality." We conclude that what is traditionally considered intrapsychic plays an undeniable role in the construction of subjective reality, but we

add that the processes of memory and representation formation—in their very operation—add another and even more general transformation in the construction of "inner reality."

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