

WHEN “SOMETHING MORE” IS LESS: COMMENTARY ON THE BOSTON CHANGE PROCESS STUDY GROUP

BCPSG represents a synthesis of several trends that have been emerging in our psychoanalytic discourse over the past decades. With British object relations theories and then the self psychologies, there has been a shift to infancy as the period of psychic structure formation, equal to—perhaps even more critical than—the oedipal period. As a result, theorists have turned to infant developmental studies, seeking knowledge of the competencies of this early period. The influence of the observational methodology (including videotaping) of those studies on the gathering and interpretation of data has focused attention on observable phenomena emerging in a real-time present (the “here and now”) that is even closer to the surface than the “experience-near” emphasis of self psychology (Kohut 1984).

At the same time, the focus on infancy has justified a turning away from a traditional view of an unconscious formed by repression, itself tied to the oedipal period—an unconscious revealed therapeutically through interpretation of its derivatives. Instead, infancy-influenced theorists see behavioral patterns (e.g., of attachment or other relatedness) imprinted procedurally as implicit memories that are revealed through enactments and altered (as they were generated) in present, here-and-now relational encounters.

The BCPSG paper provides us an example of the application of this line of thinking to the therapeutic discourse of an adult analysis; as such, it affords us an opportunity to interrogate the assumptions of this approach. Every reader will have his or her own line of inquiry, as the

material presented raises both theoretical and practical questions. For example, there is the question of unconscious mentation: Can procedural behaviors and implicit memories of relational interactions replace the “dynamic unconscious” of traditional theories? Although one could conceptualize unconsciously driven behaviors, thoughts, etc. beyond (i.e., not limited causally to) repression, isn’t some notion of defense required for a “dynamic” unconscious? In other words, it is the idea of defense, and not specifically repression, that defines what we mean by “dynamic.” Nor is unconscious mentation confined to verbal knowledge; for example, doesn’t an “avoidant” attachment pattern imply a defense? (Eagle 1995, p. 143).

As a psychoanalyst with a background in linguistics and semiotics, my line of inquiry addresses the Boston Group’s concept of “sloppiness” as the “something more than interpretation” that they are claiming is the major agent of change, as it enables the co-creation of meanings in therapeutic discourse.

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When we view clinical behavior as motivated by (derived from or instigated by) unconscious mentation, such as an unconscious fantasy, we are making an interpretive hypothesis based in a particular theory. It may appear that, by contrast, only the behavior itself is captured by the videotaping methodology of infant studies. In the BCPSG paper’s focus on the “local” surface, empirical phenomena appear, like videotaped behaviors, to provide a first level of analysis unencumbered by any prior theoretical interpretation. Thus, staying with surface phenomena may signify for the Boston Group an approach apart from and prior to a more traditional interpretive stance.

What theory is invoked by the authors is that of dynamical systems, a theory that models the behaviors of complex physical systems such as traffic or weather.¹ However, as a complex system a human being differs from traffic and weather in a significant respect: each human seeks meaning through the mediation of semiotic systems shared with other humans, who at the same time seek meaning from him or her (this is the “double hermeneutic” implied by BCPSG). We are *intersubjective* systems *by virtue of* the mediational systems that we share, which are not confined to language alone but include affective signaling

¹Many recent theorists have sought out this model as a replacement for a psychoanalytic metapsychology seen as outdated in its ties to the linear causality of mechanical models.

systems such as facial expressions, etc. As the philosopher and semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce (1903) comments, “modern philosophy has never been able quite to shake off the Cartesian idea of the mind, as something that ‘resides’—such is the term—in the pineal gland. Everybody laughs at this nowadays, and yet everybody continues to think of mind in this same general way, as something within this person or that, belonging to him and correlative to the real world” (in Colapietro 1989, p. 102). For Peirce, mind is distributed in consequence of shared semiotic mediation, a position central to both Vygotsky’s and Bruner’s writing. Although the Boston Group cite Vygotsky and Bruner, is this position what they have in mind when noting the “deeply relational nature of the human mind”? Rather, it appears that they conceptualize the relationship as apart from and prior to semiotic mediation. If the claim is that procedural/implicit knowledge is nonmediated, then it must be seen as existing in one mind (nondistributed) and “correlative to the real world.” If, however, mind is distributed, then even procedural/implicit knowledge is mediated, as one would expect since every child exists first in parental fantasy and is born into a specific culture. Then, in the latter case (though not in the former) it would make sense that change will occur through discourse.

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Because it is not clear whether the relationship is being proposed as ontologically (and ontogenetically) prior to mediation, there is another ambiguity in the BCPSG paper: Do they mean to propose “sloppiness”—defined as indeterminacy, variation, redundancy, etc.—as inherent in an intersubjective system (i.e., an analytic dyad) or as a property of its discourse? Although human subjects are overdetermined and multidetermined in ways that Freud, Waelder, and others have described, it is not clear what the Boston Group mean if their claim is that sloppiness applies directly to us.² By contrast, “indeterminacy,” “variation,” “redundancy,” etc. are indeed properties of the mediational systems that bind us to one another and determine the *inter* of intersubjective. In locating analytic discourse as *the* place (or, at least, the *first* place) to seek an explanation for therapeutic change, the BCPSG paper places mediational systems, de facto, in the spotlight. Examining the properties identified in this paper can tell us a lot about the possibilities inherent in the shared mediational

²For a discussion of these terms and their relation to equi/multifinality and redundancy, see Litowitz (1978).

systems we use in discourse, a topic that is relevant to all “talking” therapies.³

The Boston Group, with their focus on analyst-analysand discourse as the primary (first and foremost) level in the analysis of therapeutic action, are responding perhaps to the intuitive impulse to proceed from lower to higher, from surface to depth. The pull to inductive analysis of data is particularly strong when the zeitgeist’s focus is on observable behavior, as it was, for example, during the positivistic 1930s and 1940s. In those days descriptive linguistics enshrined this methodology as “biuniqueness”; linguists were told to analyze each level of language, beginning with sounds, moving upward to larger units of language (e.g., morphology), without recourse to other levels, such as syntax (Lyons 1970, p. 90). Of course, it didn’t work, and its failure prepared the context for Chomsky’s anti-inductive (purely deductive) structuralist paradigm (1964).

We tend to think of our theoretical evolution in psychoanalysis as *sui generis*, but we reflect our intellectual moment as much as Freud did his; and in many ways the Boston Group are expressing the post-structuralism of our period in their questioning of metanarratives, focusing attention on local contexts, and even emphasizing discourse. BCPSG as a group believe that metapsychology as a deductive approach has failed, and they now search for explanations by building inductively upward from the “local level” of empirical data. But can one explain therapeutic change by invoking “sloppiness” at the surface level of discourse, as they propose?

For change to occur, there must be some “degrees of freedom,” a concept Thelen (1995) mentions in applying a nonlinear dynamic systems model to her studies of infant motor development. She explains how an abstract plan, say, to move an arm or leg, can be realized in many ways, depending on the shifting constraints or affordances of the organism and its environment. Similarly, in explicating the principles of informational systems, Ashby (1968) defined degrees of freedom in open systems as the relationship between a system’s constraints (redundancies) and its “requisite variety.” Language provides an illustrative example of these principles.

³However, in the name of full disclosure I must reveal my bias: just as exploring what is narrative about therapy does not mean we are engaged in a “cure by narrative” (Malcolm 1987), so exploring discourse does not mean an endorsement of it as the therapeutic agent, as against a therapeutic medium, of change.

Language—even nonsense—is never completely random or chaotic; noise is chaotic. Rather, language, though highly constrained at abstract levels, has the requisite variety that enables the transmission of new information through dialogue with another person. It is true that one cannot predict exactly what will be said in discourse.⁴ However, although speech output is unpredictable, it is not uncertain; in the same way, we can say that evolution is unpredictable but its mechanisms are not uncertain. In fact, the same principles of constraint and variation apply. In communication between humans what is certain are the constraints within the language/discourse systems—systems shared by both members of the dialogue. How do these principles work in conveying and changing meanings through dialogue?⁵

The words we use must have fixed meanings; we cannot be like Humpty-Dumpty, who claimed that words can mean whatever he wants them to. But the decontextualized, shared meanings (those listed in a dictionary definition) are only part of the story. The other part of meaning is contextualized and constantly in flux, changing with each new usage (see the illustrative quotations that some dictionaries include). In the course of development, children can learn general meanings only through the specificity of individual contexts of usage. Those contexts of use remain with us and grow. As W. V. Quine (1960) has noted, “beneath the uniformity that unites us in communication there is a chaotic personal diversity of connections, and, for each of us, the connections continue to evolve. No two of us learn our language alike, nor, in a sense, does any finish learning it while he lives” (p. 13). These past communicational exchanges cling to our words and enter into our discourses with others as we take up positions from past dialogues, often unawares, when we speak (see Bakhtin 1981).

In psychoanalysis we have traditionally accessed these personal experiences through free associations, dreams, and transferences, as well as in our reconstructions of unconscious fantasies formed in childhood that continue to impact meaning-making. The BCPSG paper asks us to turn our attention away from that tradition, to focus instead

⁴The generation of an infinite number of sentences by means of finite rules is axiomatic of a post-Chomskian view of grammar. No matter how one conceptualizes language, an abstract level of constraints must be hypothesized that both permits and restricts novelty at the surface level. These constraints can be compared to *attractors* in Thelen and Smith (1994) and to *values* in Edelman (1992).

⁵Pragmatics—how we do things with words—is equally critical for understanding discourse, but I confine myself to meaning, since that is BCPSG’s focus.

on the co-construction of meaning in the dialogues of therapeutic exchanges.⁶

Writing decades before Quine, Peirce (1905) states that “no man’s interpretation of words is based on exactly the same experience as any other man’s” (p. 295). But the general shared meaning serves as an entry point to get the dialogue going. In this way a “temporarily shared social reality” is established, as the Norwegian psychologist Ragnar Rommetveit (1974) describes: “Initiating a dialogue . . . is to ‘transform a certain kind of silence into speech’. Once the other person accepts the invitation to engage in the dialogue, his life situation is temporarily transformed. . . . From that moment on, they become inhabitants of a partly shared social world, established and continuously modified by their acts of communication” (p. 23, citing Merleau-Ponty).

The fixed abstract meaning of a word is both an entry point into this process and also a constraint on the degrees of freedom of its possible meanings. Although one isn’t free to use a word to mean just anything, every use changes—both expands and narrows—its meaning (Vygotsky 1934). Rommetveit writes of the *Vorverständnis*, or anticipatory comprehension, that sets up expectations of understanding that often turn out to be misunderstandings. The Boston Group note, as does Goldberg (2004), that this is inherent in the very nature of psychoanalysis.

Coming from the slightly different perspective of semiotics, Peirce (1905) describes another potential source of failures to communicate, one due to the inherent nature of all signs. Every sign is always inherently vague, made determinant only in terms of, and for the duration of, a specific discursive moment: “Leaving its effective interpretation indeterminate, [a sign] surrenders to the interpreter the right of completing the determination for himself” (p. 295). What the patient communicates to us, or we to the patient, is always completed by the other member of the dialogue. What we traditionally call transference is the refusal to surrender to the interpreter the right to participate in meaning in just this way—a refusal to accept the generality of the sign made newly determinate for a specific context. Then, meaning is not indeterminate and vague, but safely closed and determined for all time.

⁶The authors do not refer to earlier literature in this area (e.g., Shapiro 1979; Makari and Shapiro 1993) or to Leavy’s prescient *The Psychoanalytic Dialogue* (1980), perhaps because these writers approach the same topic from a more traditional psychoanalytic perspective.

Of course, refusal to surrender works in both dialogic directions. An analyst may perceive that it is *always* the “primal scene” or *once again* the “unresolved oedipus complex.” Reacting to such theoretical determinacy, some theorists, in search of “something more,” will perhaps be driven to find indeterminacy and surprise in the “moment-to-moment micro-foreground or local level” of specific dialogic exchanges. It remains for those theorists to explain why, despite constant updating and revising, some memories and meanings persist.

CONCLUSION

What appears as “sloppiness” to the Boston Group are actually various expressions of the principles that determine the functioning of open systems operating at multiple levels of informational exchanges between subjects. “Sloppiness” is not “something *more than* interpretation”; rather, when more clearly defined, it is at the very heart of interpretive processes in general, and the co-creation of meaning specifically.

As we have seen, by definition an open system necessarily requires both constraint and sufficient variety, which taken together determine its degrees of freedom. Some degree of vagueness is necessary for the transmission of new information, but communication of information from one person to another can occur only when the inherent indeterminacy of signs is accepted. There is a vast body of literature in other disciplines, only hinted at here, that can help us understand how the principles of informational and communicational systems operate in therapeutic dialogues.

Writing about language universals, the semanticist/semiotician Uriel Weinreich (1966) states that “perhaps the most impressive conclusion is that languages are universally less ‘logical,’ symmetrical, and differentiated than they could be. . . . The greatest challenge arising from this finding of a property of “*limited sloppiness*” in language is to determine what good it does. Man demonstrates somewhere in every language that he is capable of greater symmetry and discrimination than he employs in the average discourse. *We want to consider why this should be so*” (p. 190; emphasis added).

As we have seen, some degree of variety and indeterminacy is necessary for establishing a shared social reality (i.e., intersubjectivity), but an additional rationale is offered by Labov and Fanshel (1977) in *Therapeutic Discourse: Psychotherapy as Conversation*: “speakers

need a form of communication which is *deniable*. It is advantageous for them to express hostility, challenge the competence of others, or express friendliness and affection in a way that can be denied if they are explicitly held to account for it” (p. 46). Now we are getting into the unique contribution of psychoanalysis—not to explain the means (i.e., the mechanisms) of mediational systems, but their ends (i.e., the purposes they serve). The latter can never be understood by staying on the local level, as the BCPSG paper paradoxically demonstrates when the therapist interprets his patient’s “need to claim her agency” (p. 21) or her enduring belief (dare one say, unconscious fantasy?) that “to be connected, one must be sick” (p. 28).

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