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*It could be said that with human beings there can be no separation,  
only a threat of separation.* —D. W. WINNICOTT

Mitchell, Steven, 1998, Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis: An Integration  
Chapter 1, "The Relational Matrix", pp. 17-40, Hillsdale: The Analytic Press.

## I The Relational Matrix

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Psychoanalytic theories of the past several decades have undergone what Kuhn, in his depiction of the evolution of theories in the natural sciences, calls a paradigm shift. The very boundaries around the subject matter of psychoanalysis have been redrawn, and that broad reframing has had profound implications for both theory and clinical practice. *Mind has been redefined from a set of predetermined structures emerging from inside an individual organism to transactional patterns and internal structures derived from an interactive, interpersonal field.*

As a social theory of mind, the relational model is by no means the exclusive province of psychoanalytic theorizing. Interpersonal theory and object-relations theory are part of a larger movement in the direction of social theories of mind in several closely related disciplines. Although a full substantiation of this claim would lead us too far astray, let us briefly consider two parallel shifts.

Late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century anthropologists assumed that humans evolved at a single point, all of a piece. It was thought that physical attributes, most notably the human brain, evolved because they were adaptive for physical survival, and that this increased cognitive capacity then allowed the possible development of culture and other features of social interchange. In the last several decades, mostly because of recent fossil discoveries, we have come to believe that various human attributes evolved sequentially over time, and that cultural rela-

tions are not just a *consequence* of increased brain size, but a major factor in *selecting* for increased brain size. That is, protohumans gradually became involved in social interchanges such as sharing, mutual sensitivity, perhaps empathy, and so on, and these social skills provided a selective advantage which made larger brains more adaptive. As Clifford Geertz put it:

In a sense the brain was selected by culture. It is not that the human brain came first and culture, or rather man's capacity for culture, emanated from it; and this carries the additional implication that the human brain probably could not effectively function outside of culture, that it would not work very well if indeed it would work at all. (in Miller, 1983, p. 195)

Human beings did not evolve and then enter into social and cultural interactions; the human mind is, in its very origins and nature, a social product.

A very similar shift has taken place in the field of linguistics. Earlier theories regarded language as essentially separable from and secondary to experience. The individual lives in a world of experience, which is then translated into language as a social medium and vehicle of interaction. The separability of language from experience is now generally questioned; experience is understood to be structured *through* language, making experience essentially and unavoidably social and interactive in nature. Preverbal experiences developmentally antedate the emergence of language, and nonverbal communication can be extremely important in adult relationships. Once a semiotic matrix is established, both preverbal and nonverbal dimensions of experience can be retrieved, experienced, and expressed only within a socially shaped system of linguistic meanings.

The hallmark of the "linguistic revolution" of the twentieth century, from Saussure and Wittgenstein to contemporary literary theory, is the recognition that meaning is not simply something "expressed" or "reflected" in language: it is actually *produced* by it. It is not as though we have meanings, or experiences, which we then proceed to cloak with words; we can only have the meanings and experiences in the first place because we have a language to have them in. What this suggests, moreover, is that our experience as individuals is social to its roots; for there can be no such thing as a private language, and to imagine a language is to imagine a whole form of social life. (Eagleton, 1983, p. 60)

The relational model within psychoanalysis is a social theory of mind in a similar sense. Sullivan and Fairbairn, its purest representatives, felt

that Freud had established the wrong unit for study of emotional life by focusing on the individual mind, the psychic apparatus, rather than on the interactional field. Freud, like the nineteenth-century anthropologist and the nineteenth-century linguist, portrayed the human being with mental content outside of and prior to social experience. Meaning is inherent in man's physiology, his biological equipment. Thus, the individual mind has a priori content, which seeks expression within the larger social environment, either in absorbing the culture, learning a public rather than a private language, or in taming and channeling drives. For relational-model theorists, as for the modern anthropologist and the modern linguist, the individual mind is a *product* of as well as an interactive participant in the cultural, linguistic matrix within which it comes into being. Meaning is not provided a priori, but derives from the relational matrix. The relational field is constitutive of individual experience.

In the more radical statements of the relational position, the very notion of a single mind as a meaningful unit for study is called into question. From the earliest days of infancy the individual is in continual interaction with others; his very experience is in fact built up out of these interactions. The representation of self which each of us forms is a secondary construction superimposed upon this more fundamental and fluid interactional reality. "We organize our acquaintance with the world," Sullivan suggests, "in order to maintain necessary or pleasant functional activity within the world with which, whether the objects be manageable or unmanageable, remote or immediate, one has to maintain communal existence—however unwittingly" (1940, p. 34). Similarly, Stern's synthesis of infancy research leads him to the view that "the infant's states of consciousness and activity are ultimately socially negotiated states" (1985, p. 104). Furthermore, "the infant's life is so thoroughly social that most of the things the infant does, feels and perceives occur in differing kinds of relationships . . . In fact, because of memory, we are rarely alone, even (perhaps especially) during the first half-year of life . . . The notion of self-with-other as a subjective reality is thus almost pervasive" (p. 118).

Establishing the relationship as the basic unit of study does not eliminate the "nature" in contrast to the "nurture" dimension of things. On the contrary, it makes it possible to view nature and nurture less dichotomously. Social relations are not regarded as a secondary addition, an overlay upon more basic and primary biological functions such

as sexuality and aggression. Social relations are regarded as themselves biologically rooted, genetically encoded, fundamental motivational processes. Thus, sexuality and aggression are understood not as preformed instincts with inherent meanings, which impinge upon the mind, but as powerful responses, mediated physiologically, generated *within* a biologically mandated relational field and therefore deriving their meaning from that deeper relational matrix.

None of the major relational theorists regards the child as a blank slate onto which are imposed external events and qualities of significant others. Early relationships, like later relationships, are multiple and complex. They are not simply registered, but experienced *through* physiological response patterns, constitutional features of temperament, sensitivities, and talents, and worked over, digested, broken down, recombined, and designed into the new, unique patterns which comprise the individual life. The work of Bowlby and a great many of the data from infancy research suggest that relationships are best understood not as wholly externally derived, but as grounded in the genetics and physiology of human experience and therefore transcending the nature-nurture dichotomy. The study of cognitive development, the ways in which infants and children think and organize experience, continues to yield increasing understanding of the ways in which early relational experience is processed and reorganized.

Why are relations with others the very stuff of human experience? What is the nature of personal relatedness? Why are we so much entangled with other people? Why are our earliest relationships with others so crucial that we are actually composed of these relationships—"precipitates," as Freud (1923) put it, of our earliest attachments?

There is no consensus on these questions; the past several decades in the history of psychoanalytic ideas have been characterized by exploration of a variety of possible answers. The political heterogeneity of the field results from the fact that these avenues of theory building have been regarded as unrelated, or perhaps mutually exclusive. Their conceptual interfaces, their rich compatibilities, however, are actually quite striking. To illustrate this overlap, I consider some of the major relational-model theorists, neither chronologically nor in terms of political groupings, but in terms of conceptual angle, the manner in which they establish relational primacy within human experience. The three basic strategies into which most relational-model theorizing can be grouped represent different angles of approach to this common puzzle—the relational

nature of human experience. In what follows, I consider these various efforts not in the fullness of their argumentation and evidence, which would require a volume in its own right, but in an effort to highlight the key premises and strategies and to explore their interpenetrability. I have made no effort to be comprehensive or representative of the entire range of analytic literature; I have chosen the theories that are most influential or illustrate most clearly a particular conceptual strategy.

### Relational by Design

The first general strategy for addressing the question of the origins and motivations of personal relatedness might be characterized by the answer, *because we are built that way*. People are constructed in such a fashion that they are inevitably and powerfully drawn together, this reasoning goes, wired for intense and persistent involvements with one another. This strategy has been developed in various forms, differing in their levels of abstraction and the kinds of mechanisms proposed.

Bowlby's concept of "attachment" represents an extended attempt to place human relatedness on a primary footing of its own. Bowlby was concerned with preserving a biologically rooted explanation for motivation and, like Freud, draws heavily on Darwinian theory as a frame of reference. Yet Bowlby felt Freud had construed the baby's built-in survival mechanisms too narrowly. The infant's survival is contingent on more than just specific physical needs like eating, temperature regulation, and so on. For the infant to survive, the mother's more or less constant proximity and attention is necessary—the infant's *need for the mother* is the most important, pressing need, as a precondition for the satisfaction of all other needs. Therefore, argues Bowlby, the infant is powerfully drawn to and involved with the mother from the very start. Much as the young of other species at an early "critical period" become forever imprinted on their caretaker in a powerful, automatic, and irreversible fashion, the human infant intensely and automatically attaches itself to its caretaker, both behaviorally and emotionally. The mother need not *do* anything in particular. She need not earn her importance through gratifying the infant's needs. In effect, she simply has to be there.

Bowlby draws on ethological studies of instinctive behavior in other species to argue that species survival necessitates complex systems of behaviors, hierarchically organized through internal control and feed-

back mechanisms. Attachment in humans is mediated, he suggests (1969), through five component instinctive responses: sucking, smiling, clinging, crying, and following, which collectively serve to establish a powerful bond between mother and infant, ensuring the former's proximity to the latter and thus maximizing chances for survival. These responses directly mediate the child's attachment to the mother, in contrast to the traditional psychoanalytic concept of orality, which is prior to, and separate from, the later development of any affectional bonding.

Since children under the care of the mother are less vulnerable to predators and other threats to survival, Bowlby sees the child's attachment to the mother as representing an "archaic heritage," genetically encoded, from the earliest beginnings of the human species. Attachment is not, as in the drive model, derived from more basic biological needs; attachment is itself a basic biological need, wired into the species as fundamentally as is nest-building behavior in a bird.

Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1975) draws on a wide range of empirical evidence, both animal studies and observations of the effects of separation on children, to support his claim that attachment is primary in its own right, rather than becoming established secondarily through the gratification of physical needs such as orality. Some of the most dramatic evidence, however, for the biological, physiological, and psychological primacy of the early relation of the child to its caretakers has emerged from another field entirely—infancy research.\*

If personal relatedness were a vicissitude of more basic drive processes, the infant would necessarily have to *learn* to relate to the mother. Mechanisms for need gratification (feeding mechanisms, sucking reflexes, and so on) would be wired in, but the infant would only slowly become aware that needs were being satisfied by an external human figure, who would only then become interesting in her own right. From this perspective, that of the drive model, personal relatedness is less "natural" than drive pathways, social relations being an overlay necessitated by the exigencies of reality. But over the past two decades the increasingly sophisticated field of infancy research has yielded an im-

\* A great deal of contemporary psychoanalytic thinking about infants derives from empirical studies of mothers and babies. Although much of this research is very persuasive, I am not presenting it *as fact*; for reasons which will become apparent in subsequent chapters, I would consider it a mistake to do so. Current thinking about infants, like all psychoanalytic ideas, is a blend of facts and theories and is presented here as an example of a way of thinking, a conceptual strategy, not as incontrovertible truth.

pressive array of data suggesting that the infant is capable of and in fact seeks out an extremely personal kind of interrelatedness from the earliest days of life.

Contrary to the traditional image of the infant's beginning life in an autistic blur (James's "blooming, buzzing confusion") and only gradually becoming oriented to the external social world, it now appears that all of the perceptual systems of the infant are functional at birth. Further, what is most interesting to the infant, even in the moments after birth, is other human beings. The human voice is the auditory stimulus most likely to capture the infant's attention, and studies have shown that babies move in distinctive rhythms to human speech patterns (Condon and Sandler, in Tronick and Adamson, 1980, p. 137). The human face is the visual stimulus most compelling even to the newborn. A study of infants in the delivery room uncovered a preference for the visual configuration of the human face even before the newborn had seen real human faces (that is, without surgical masks; Goren, in Tronick and Adamson, 1980, pp. 59–60). For the first several weeks of life, the infant's eyes converge not immediately in front of him, as one would expect if feeding at the breast were the major, predetermined object of his concern, but eight inches from his face, the distance of the mother's face in the normal nursing posture (Stern, 1977, p. 36). Observers are continually impressed with the quantity and the complexity of the infant's interactions with other people, both in response to their initiative and as actively initiated by the baby himself. "Very clearly then, by 3 months at least, the infant is well equipped with a large repertoire of behaviors to engage and disengage his caregivers. All of his behaviors—the simple motor patterns; the more complex combinations of these simple patterns into integrated units; and the patterned sequences of these units—have a strong innate predisposition" (pp. 48–49).

In addition to being active and responsive to people in general, the infant very quickly learns to discriminate the most significant people in his life from one another and from strangers. By the end of the first week, the mother's face has become a familiar perceptual gestalt, so that the mother's face obscured by a mask, or paired with a different voice, becomes disturbing (Tronick and Adamson, 1980, p. 141). By the eighth day he can discriminate pads soaked with his mother's milk from pads soaked with the milk of other nursing women, and he prefers the smell of his own mother. By four weeks the baby moves hands and feet in distinctive patterns, one for the mother, a different one for the father.

Lichtenberg, in reviewing this research, concludes, "Study after study documents the neonate's preadapted potential for direct interaction—human to human—with the mother" (1983, p. 6). The phrase "pre-adapted potential" is crucial here. The evidence seems overwhelming that the human infant does not *become* social through learning or conditioning, or through an adaptation to reality, but that the infant is programmed to be social. Relatedness is not a means to some other end (tension reduction, pleasure, or security); the very nature of the infant draws him into relationship. In addition, relatedness seems to be rewarding in itself. Babies seek human contact, and many studies have shown that simple human contact or the opportunity to observe human activity is itself a powerful inducement for infants to solve puzzles or do work of various sorts.

This line of infancy research complements Bowlby's theory of attachment by uncovering and charting some of the built-in, physiological equipment and newborn-to-mother patterning which mediate attachment. Bowlby's hypotheses derive from data on separation and psychopathology in older children and adults, and macrocosmic considerations concerning species survival; the infant research provides a microcosmic analysis of the infant's capacities for, intricate mechanisms for, and powerful interest in interactions with other people.

Is it not true that Bowlby and theorists drawing on infancy research (perhaps all relational model authors) are in effect establishing "attachment" as a "drive," with the same sort of inherent properties as Freud's "libido"? Yes and no. Of course, any positing of attachment or relatedness as primary suggests that it has motivational properties *within* the organism and might meaningfully be considered a "drive." But because "attachment" is by definition interactional, this is a concept of motivation very different from Freud's "drive." The latter presupposes motives and meanings in the individual a priori, in the tensions in bodily tissues themselves, which are brought to the interaction and which shape the interaction. Bowlby's motive of attachment and the built-in patterns of interaction described by infancy researchers propel the individual to seek *contact qua contact*, interaction in and for itself, not contact as a means of gratifying or channeling something else. This reversal of means and ends (captured in Fairbairn's slogan, "Libido is not pleasure-seeking but object-seeking") is crucial. *Who* the other is, *what* the other does, and *how* the other regards what is going on become much more important.

The other is not simply a vehicle for managing internal pressures and states; interactive exchanges with and ties to the other become the fundamental psychological reality itself. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, this difference has major implications for all facets of psychoanalytic theorizing.

Sullivan's theoretical perspective represents another variant of the principle that humans are inherently structured in relational terms, although his focus is not on genetic coding or perceptual capabilities, but on a theoretical perspective which highlights the way human needs interact and become intertwined with one another in the patterning of human experience.

One of the chief impediments to our self-understanding, Sullivan feels, is our tendency to think of ourselves in concrete, reified terms. People "have" a personality, this way of thinking goes, they "are" a collection of traits or characteristics which they carry around, as if actually located inside them, from situation to situation—like a door-to-door salesman revealing the same product at one home after the next. For Sullivan this way of thinking obscures the extent to which people are responsive to, and in fact take form in, situations involving other people. Human beings manifest themselves not in the same identical performance; the performance varies according to the situation, the audience, the other performers. A personality is not something one has, but something one does. Consistent patterns develop, but the patterning is not reflective of something "inside." Rather, the patterns reflect learned modes of dealing with situations and are therefore always in some sense responsive to and shaped by the situations themselves.

In Sullivan's way of thinking, people are not separate entities, but participants in interactions with actual others and with "personifications" (or "representations") of others derived from previous interactions with actual others. In short, the individual is understandable only in the context of the interpersonal field. Thus, Sullivan also sees people, from infancy through senescence, as inherently social, by design. Their very self-expression draws them into relatedness. By the time the infant has begun to be able to develop an image of himself, to reflect himself to himself, he has long since become embedded in a living web of interactions with others. His needs, his thoughts, his very sense of himself, has taken shape in the context of others' needs, thoughts, and self-understanding.

A second broad grouping of approaches to the primacy of relatedness sees human relations less in terms of wiring than of intent. We develop intense attachments because we *crave relatedness*, and this is regarded as a phenomenological fact and an irresistible clinical deduction. Patients seek and maintain relatedness at any price. Fairbairn's object-relations theory is the most developed exploration of this point of view.

Fairbairn dated the beginnings of the development of his innovative theorizing to his encounter with the puzzling phenomenon of the loyalty of abused children to their abusing parents. According to classical drive theory, people are essentially hedonistic, seeking to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. Fairbairn encountered children whose relationships with their parents were extremely painful; yet when offered alternative caretakers, they uniformly declined and expressed great devotion to their natural parents. If libido is primarily pleasure seeking, Fairbairn reasoned, libidinal objects ought to be more exchangeable.

Further reflection leads to the realization that this is a problem not just with abused children, but with psychopathology in general. Psychopathology, throughout its entire spectrum, may be defined in its broadest terms as the tendency of people to do the same painful things, feel the same unpleasant feelings, establish the same self-destructive relationships, over and over and over. How is this pattern reconcilable with the hedonistic premise of the pleasure principle? If people operate on the basis of pleasure seeking, why are unpleasant experiences, early conflicts, and traumas not simply dropped and forgotten rather than restructured so systematically and persistently throughout life?

Freud was not unmindful of this problem and struggled with several possible solutions. He spoke of the "adhesiveness" of the libido in its tenacious loyalty to early object relations, even if painful, and the "repetition compulsion," the continual re-creation of earlier traumas. Freud initially attempted to account for these phenomena *within* the framework of the pleasure principle: the suffering in psychopathology represents punishment for forbidden wishes (1900); the libido picks up "cliques" of loving, which remain attached to it throughout later life (1912b); suffering itself is inherently sensually pleasurable (1924a); and so on. Freud himself, however, considered these attempts to account for the repetition compulsion within the framework of the pleasure principle to be insufficiently persuasive, and he argued (1920a) that the

repetition of painful early experiences operates "beyond the pleasure principle" and is an instinctual characteristic of mental functioning, derivative of the death instinct. This explanation has not been very persuasive to most analysts, and there have been numerous attempts since to reexplain painful repetitions *within* the pleasure principle.

FOR FAIRBARRN, a basic shift in premises leads to a much more economical explanation, neither within nor beyond the pleasure principle. Libido is not pleasure seeking, he argues, but object seeking. The superordinate need of the child is not for pleasure or need gratification, but for an intense relationship with another person. If the caretakers provide opportunities for pleasurable experiences, pleasure is sought, not as an end in itself, but as a vehicle for interaction with others. If only painful experiences are provided, the child does not give up and look for pleasurable experiences elsewhere, but seeks the pain as a vehicle for interaction with the significant other. It is the contact, not the pleasure, which is primary. In Fairbairn's view, the central motivation in human experience is the seeking out and maintaining of an intense emotional bond with another person. If we start with this premise, the adhesiveness of early relationships and modes of gratification and the ubiquity of the painful redundancies of the repetition compulsion seem less puzzling. Painful feelings, self-destructive relationships, self-sabotaging situations, are re-created throughout life as vehicles for the permeation of early ties to significant others.

The child learns a mode of connection, a way into the human family, and these learned modes are desperately maintained throughout life. In some families, sensuality is the preferred mode of emotional contact; in others, it is rageful explosions; in others, depressive longing. In Fairbairn's system, it is precisely the parents' character pathology to which the child becomes most compulsively connected and which he internalizes, because it is there that he feels the parents reside emotionally. By becoming like the depressed, masochistic, or sadistic parents, he preserves a powerful bond to them. Thus, in Fairbairn's system, at the core of the repressed is not a trauma, a memory, or an impulse, but a relationship—a part of the self in close identification with a representation of the actual caretakers—which could not be contained in awareness and in continuity with other experiences of the self. Psychopathology for Fairbairn is structured around conflicts, not between

drives and defenses, but concerning split loyalties to different others and to different dimensions of one's relations with others.

To abandon these bonds and entanglements is experienced as the equivalent of casting oneself off from intense human contact altogether, an impossible option. Thus, patients in analysis who are beginning to sense the possibility of living and experiencing themselves and their worlds in a different way, are generally terrified of profound isolation. To be different, even if that means being open to joyfulness and real intimacy with others, means losing ties to internal objects which have provided an enduring sense of belonging and connectedness, although mediated through actual pain and desolation.

Fairbairn regards object seeking as innate, and his approach is closely related to and complements Bowlby's notion of attachment. Bowlby portrays attachment as an automatic mechanism, the product of instinctive, reflexive behavioral subsystems, and he focuses for the most part on physical proximity; Fairbairn adds a consideration of intention and emotional presence or absence, and thereby highlights the longing, the hunger for contact and connection, that propels human relationships. Fairbairn's concept of object seeking similarly complements Sullivan's notion of the interpersonal field. For Sullivan, the child is object related more by design than by emotional intent, drawn into relatedness by virtue of the form and nature of his various needs. The child does not seek caring connections with others; rather, the very structure of his needs for satisfactions and his responsiveness to anxiety in others pulls him into those connections. An intense longing for contact appears in Sullivan's scheme of development only in preadolescence, in the first truly loving relationship with the "chum," which Sullivan describes with lyric intensity, as an antidote to the warping effects of earlier relationships and the threat of isolation. Sullivan takes pains to argue that only at preadolescence does the child begin to seek intimacy and really care about others. Parents who see caring in their child's egocentricity are, Sullivan suggests, sadly if perhaps necessarily deluded. Fairbairn, on the other hand, sees this longing for connection and intimacy in the earliest relationship of the infant to the mother.

There are also striking similarities between Fairbairn's theory and the variant of interpersonal theory developed by Erich Fromm. The latter regarded the dread of social isolation as the major dynamic factor in the development of all forms of psychopathology, which he saw as regressive efforts to escape the existential rigors and terrors of the

human condition. People take on cultural and familial roles and identities so as not to face the realities of their independent existence. Fairbairn's perspective, although less philosophical in language and concern, has a similar implication. The overwhelming motivational priority is entry into the human community, intense ties with others, and these are established and preserved at all cost.

Melanie Klein's concept of reparation (1935, 1940) should be noted in this context. Her focus on aggression and envy often obscures the extent to which love and gratitude also play a central role in her theorizing. The infant, Klein posits, feels a deep sense of appreciation for the good breast and the loving object, and an intense regret at the fantasized damage he fears he has caused them in his destructive, vengeful reveries. The urge for reparation expresses a longing to repair, to console, to make amends. Envy becomes such a powerful dynamic in Klein's account precisely because the uncontrollable other is so important that love and gratitude become painful.

Klein developed her concept of reparation in the context of her theoretical emphasis on constitutional forces and fantasy. However, her depiction of the struggle between gratitude and reparation on the one hand and envious spoiling and manic triumph on the other is usefully relocated and translated into the interactional matrix of Fairbairn's metapsychological framework, rooted in a consideration of parental character and actual transactions. The urge for reparation can be understood as emerging not as a reaction to fantasized damage, but to the other's real sufferings and characteristic pathology. Envious spoiling can be understood not as an excess of constitutional aggression, but as an attempt to escape from the painful position of loving and desiring a largely absent or damaged parent, or, particularly, an inconsistent parent. The central dynamic struggle throughout life is between the powerful need to establish, maintain, and protect intimate bonds with others and various efforts to escape the pains and dangers of those bonds, the sense of vulnerability, the threat of disappointment, engulfment, exploitation, and loss.

#### Relational by Implication

Philosophers have traditionally distinguished human from other forms of animal consciousness on the basis of its reflexivity; human beings are *self-conscious*. We develop and maintain a self-awareness, self-images,

self-esteem, and these play a significant role in the way we experience and record our encounters with the external world and other people, and the choices we make throughout our lives. It is often assumed that a sense of self is easy to come by, that it unfolds maturationally or is just provided to us by experience, like our body parts or perceptual functions. But psychoanalysts have come to regard the development of a sense of self as a complex process, an intricate and multifaceted construction, that is a central motivational concern throughout life and for which we are deeply dependent on other people. Some relational-model theorists regard the establishment and preservation of a sense of identity or selfhood as *the* primary, superordinate human motivation, which also posits certain kinds of interpersonal relations, those crucial for reflexivity, as key psychological building blocks.

Two features of human consciousness contribute greatly to the difficulties involved in developing a sense of self—its temporal quality and its complexity. Human consciousness operates in time, it is a stream of thoughts, feelings, sensations, and desires in continual flux. Anything that is constantly changing is necessarily at any particular moment incomplete. As soon as you have grasped it and characterized it, it has shifted within your grasp and is now something different. This quality of ineffable, continual change has always been problematic for humankind, both historically in the evolution of cultures and developmentally in the life of each individual. Plato's theory of forms is probably the most elegant effort to establish a static superstructure, to fix an atemporal frame of reference, a world of Being outside the flow of human consciousness. But the need to establish fixed reference points is also a need within the life of each individual, to find a way of ordering experience that transcends its shifting discontinuities.

The child's gradually dawning grasp of who or what he is amid the temporal flux and complexities of consciousness is no simple process. All of the hallmarks of healthy mental life—durable and integrated self-representations, object constancy, and resilient self-esteem regulation—are slowly acquired. If experience does not just provide us with an organized mental life and reflexivity, how is it attained? According to most contemporary psychoanalytic theorists, it is attained at least in part through relationship. The child's organization of his experience is mediated through the mother's experience. Individual cognition grows out of recognition, whereby the child learns to know himself, finds himself, in the mother's eyes and words. Thus, the self as a phenomenological

entity is a developmental achievement. In this line of relational-model theorizing, the pursuit and maintenance of reflexive stability, a sense of self, is innate and motivationally central, and powerfully and inevitably draws us into relation with others.

This approach to the primacy of relatedness has been a central theme in Freudian ego psychology. In the work of both Mahler and Loewald, for example, the infant's ego is seen as dawning within a psychic merger with the other. For Mahler, the development of a healthy sense of self is contingent upon the mother's provision for the infant of adequate experiences of symbiotic fusion, gradual self-articulation and differentiation, and continual, periodic returns and reimmersions. (See Mahler, Pine, and Bergman, 1975.) Loewald (1960a) stresses the parental organization and processing of the child's experience, which the child gradually learns, through identifications, to do for himself. Parental secondary process, applied to the child's more fluid, primary process experience, eventually results in a secondary process of the child's own. (Bion, 1957, has characterized the mother's holding and organizing functions relative to the child's inchoate early experience in terms of the metaphor of the "container.")

The two contemporary theorists who have addressed the development of the self most directly and comprehensively (and in remarkably similar fashion) are Winnicott and Kohut.

Winnicott came to regard the establishment of a solid sense of self as the central achievement of normal early development. Some patients only *seem* to be persons, argues Winnicott. They lack an experience of themselves as real, as actually existing over time—as opposed to something fashioned *de novo*, differently for each interpersonal occasion. How does this happen?

Winnicott portrays the infant as becoming aware of spontaneously arising needs. The key feature of the necessary "facilitating" environment provided by the mother is her effort to shape the environment around the child's wishes, to intuit what the child wants and provide it. The infant's experience is one of scarcely missing a beat between desire and satisfaction, between the wish for the breast and its appearance, for example. The infant naturally assumes that his wishes produce the object of desire, that the breast, his blanket, in effect his entire world, is the product of his creation. The mother's provision and perfect accommodation to the infant's wish creates what Winnicott terms the moment of illusion. Thus, in the earliest months of life, Winnicott's "good-enough

mother" is invisible, and it is precisely her invisibility which allows the infant the crucial megalomaniacal, solipsistic experience which Winnicott characterizes as the state of "subjective omnipotence." In his view, a relatively prolonged experience of subjective omnipotence is the foundation upon which a healthy self develops.

Early in life, says Winnicott, the infant is almost oblivious to the mother as a person; she "brings the world to the infant" and is the invisible agent of his needs. Later, the infant becomes more aware of her as a presence, but a key aspect of her role is reflecting back to the child his own appearance, his own being. The capacity to experience and hold a sense of one's own being as real depends on the mother's doing so first, mirroring back to the child who he is and what he is like. Thus, in Winnicott's system the first developmental task is the establishment of a sense of self. The caretaker must perform certain kinds of roles for this to happen, provide certain kinds of experiences.

Kohut's thinking developed along similar lines. Certain kinds of patients suffer not from conflicts concerning drives and defenses, but from deficiencies in their sense of self—experienced as brittle, lacking in cohesion or integrity, vulnerable to sudden plunges in self-esteem. Like Winnicott, Kohut moved from clinical observation to developmental questions. How does a healthy, cohesive, stable sense of self develop? How does this process get derailed? In Kohut's view, the self develops out of certain key relationships, which he terms self-object relationships, in which the parents serve not just as objects of the child's needs and desires, but as providers of certain "narcissistic" functions. Kohut's early formulations (1971) emphasized two distinct self-object functions, "mirroring" of the child's spontaneously arising grandiosity (this concept is closely related to Winnicott's notion of the parent's providing the moment of illusion), and allowing the child to idealize the parent. The sense of self as stable and valuable grows out of these "narcissistic" experiences, reasoned Kohut, in which either the child is seen as perfect by the admiring parent or the parent is seen as perfect and linked to an admiring child.

Little by little the narcissistic glow of these experiences is consolidated into a more realistic, abiding sense of self as valuable. Kohut's later formulations and those of subsequent authors within or influenced by the self-psychology tradition have emphasized the self objects' general "empathic" function, from earliest infancy on, "attuning" themselves to the child's subjective experience, resonating with it and reflecting it

back. From this perspective, like Winnicott's, it is as if the child's experience comes to take on a subjective sense of reality only when it is mediated through the mother's consciousness. From the self-psychological point of view, relational issues are primary because the analysis and suffering disorders of the self seeks out and uses self-objects to supply the crucial parental functions that were missed in childhood. A shaky sense of self is bolstered or a low sense of self-esteem is raised through the establishment of relationships with mirroring or idealized self-objects. Thus, for Kohut, as for Winnicott, the establishment of reflexive stability is the central motivational thrust in human experience, and relations with others and the roles they play in this pursuit is the primary context for human experience.

#### A Multiplicity of Voices

The relational model rests on the premise that the repetitive patterns within human experience are not derived, as in the drive model, from pursuing gratification of inherent pressures and pleasures (nor, as in Freud's post-1920 understanding, from the automatic workings of the death instinct), but from a pervasive tendency to preserve the continuity, connections, familiarity of one's personal, interactional world. There is a powerful need to preserve an abiding sense of oneself as associated with, positioned in terms of, related to, a matrix of other people, in terms of actual transactions as well as internal presences.

The basic relational configurations have, by definition, three dimensions—the self, the other, and the space between the two. There is no "object" in a psychologically meaningful sense without some particular sense of oneself in relation to it. There is no "self" in a psychologically meaningful sense, in isolation, outside a matrix of relations with others. Neither the self nor the object are meaningful dynamic concepts without presupposing some sense of psychic space in which they interact, in which they do things with or to each other. These dimensions are subtly interwoven, knitting together the analysis's subjective experience and psychological world.

Theorists emphasizing *relateness by design* have contributed tools for understanding the specific interactions which transpire between self and other, focusing not so much on either pole, but rather on *the space between them*. Thus, developmentalists such as Stern who have studied the "interpersonal world" of the infant have focused on the highly subtle

interactions and mutual regulation of caretakers and babies. Similarly, interpersonal psychoanalysis tends to highlight actual transactions between the analysand and others, to make a detailed inquiry into what actually took place in early family relations, into what currently takes place between the analysand and others, and into the "here and now" perceptions and interactions in the analytic relationship. What does the analysand actually *do*? What takes place between him and actual others? The central question for the interpersonal analyst, as Levenson (1983) has put it, is What's going on around here?

Theorists emphasizing *relatedness by intent* have contributed tools for exploring and understanding the *object pole* of the relational field, the manner in which various kinds of identifications and ties to other people serve as a latticework, holding together one's personal world. Thus, Klein regards moods and self experience as determined by unconscious fantasies regarding various kinds of internal objects, and Fairbairn sees ties to "bad objects" as determining the latent structure of personality. The self is always at least implicit in these formulations. Klein's psychodynamic descriptions imply different ego states corresponding to different fates of internal objects, and Fairbairn sees particular aspects of the self fragmenting to retain specific dynamic configurations in their ties to various internal objects. Nevertheless, the focus, the clinical highlight, is on the object images themselves largely as internal presences. What are the residues of the analysand's earlier experiences with others? What does he experience, consciously and unconsciously, when he does what he does with other people?

Those theorists emphasizing *relatedness by implication* have contributed tools for exploring and understanding the *self pole* of the relational field. Thus, Winnicott focuses on the internal fragmentation and splits in self experience and the presence or absence of a sense of authenticity and reality. Kohut stresses the superordinate need of the "self" to preserve its continuity and cohesion, and the complex intrapsychic and interpersonal processes through which this is accomplished. "Others" are always at least implicit in these systems. Throughout, Winnicott emphasizes the function of the mother in providing experiences which make possible a sense of vitalization and realization, and Kohut's "self" is always embedded within and buoyed up by a supporting cast of "self objects." Nevertheless, the focus, the clinical highlight is on the nature and the subtle textures of self-reflective experience.

The process involved in the preservation of one's personal psycholog-

ical world might be compared to the factors involved in maintaining the structural cohesion of the human body. To assign priority to sense of self, object ties, or patterns of interaction is like trying to decide whether it is the skin, the bones, or the musculature that preserves the body form. The sense of self, like the skin, is generally closer to the surface, nearer to consciousness, and provides a continuous surface and shape in the flow of mental life. Ties to others, like the bones, are often not visible to the naked eye but provide an underlying skeletal framework which holds experience together. Characteristic patterns of interaction, like the musculature, make possible the action in which both self experience and object relations take place. Just as the different dimensions of the physical body contribute simultaneously and interdependently to the preservation of physical existence, so these different dimensions of the relational matrix are indispensable facets of the analytic inquiry.

In this view, human beings are simultaneously self regulating and field regulating. We are concerned with both the creation and maintenance of a relatively stable, coherent sense of self out of the continual ebb and flow of perception and affect, and the creation and maintenance of dependable, sustaining connections with others, both in actuality and as internal presences. The dialectic between self-definition and connection with others is complex and intricate, with one or the other sometimes being more prominent. Self-regulatory and field-regulatory processes sometimes enhance each other and sometimes are at odds with each other, forming the basis for powerful conflicts. The intrapsychic and the interpersonal are continually interpenetrating realms, each with its own set of processes, mechanisms, and concerns.

Schafer (1983) has suggested that different theoretical traditions, like the drive model and the relational model, generate different "story lines." The various theories operating within the relational model, such as interpersonal theory, object-relations theory, and self psychology, generate what is essentially the same story line, but in different voices. These traditions regard mind as developing out of a relational matrix, and psychopathology as a product of disturbances in interpersonal relations. The *differences* among these traditions concern the various kinds of questions they pursue, based on these same fundamental assumptions. They tend to generate complementary interpretations, and the questions they pose and the answers they generate do not provide alternative visions, but instead different angles for viewing the same, consensually acknowledged scene.

## A Dream

Consider the following recurring dream, reported after several years of a productive analysis.

I am on a subway somewhere—it is very chaotic—I feel overloaded, both mentally and physically, carrying several bags and my briefcase—something catches my attention, and for a few seconds I leave my things to explore it—when I get back, the briefcase is gone—I get very angry at myself for having done this—then I feel a great terror.

The dreamer associates the sense of chaos and mental and physical overloading with the pervasive depression and masochistic entanglements in which she began treatment and with which she still struggles. The briefcase is laden with meaning. She carries around in it much that is important to her. Her briefcase represents her identity—to lose it would be terrifying. Yet she experiences herself as overburdened, heavy with excess baggage, shackled by that same identity. The part of the dream in which she goes after something that interests her is associated with the predominant theme of the analysis in the past several months—her difficulty in allowing herself to really want anything unmediated by sacrifice for or submission to another person—an inability to allow herself to spontaneously wish or desire.

This dream, somewhat typical of the middle phase of analysis, represents a central dimension of the analytic process; different ways of understanding a dream like this highlight similarities and differences between various psychoanalytic traditions. (Of course, no analyst of any persuasion would simply interpret the dream as presented without gathering many more associations; I am using it as an exercise to set out differences in approaches.)

What is happening here? The analysis reaches for something new, and something burdensome yet precious is lost. How are we to understand this? Within a relational-model perspective, the dream would be seen as representing the patient's experience of herself, and herself in relation to others, in different sorts of ways: one mediated by the oppressive, compulsive devotion through which she characteristically binds herself to others, the other more spontaneous and yet also risky and dangerous. Can she go after things she spontaneously desires, or will this isolate her from other people, cut her off with no sense of identity, no way to connect with others? From the vantage point of the relational model, this is the central question of the analysis, and change

entails her slowly tolerating enough anxiety to gradually redefine herself in relation to others, the analyst included.

The analysis grew up in a family dominated by a depressed, extremely solicitous mother, who had renounced her own ambitions to devote herself to child rearing and intruded into virtually every area of her children's minds and behavior. The analysis entered adulthood with many talents and resources, but experienced the world as an oppressively dangerous place: there is a "right way" to do everything, and finding, and remaining on the straight and narrow path is the only reasonable, sane way to live. Pleasure and fun were particularly suspect; devotion to others, "responsibility" and complex systems of obligations, were "sensible" and reassuring. In both the personal and professional realms, she had a knack for getting involved with powerful but extremely insecure figures, who handled their anxiety by proclaiming emphatic certainty about everything, and in particular knew exactly what would be best for her. It was her sense of bondage in these relationships and a pervasive depression and worry that brought her into treatment.

Analytic inquiry revealed how unconsciously dedicated she was to her symptoms, how the submission, depression, and worry were knit together in her experience to secure her in a somber yet familiar feeling of safety. She longed to feel free and effectual, yet became aware of how powerfully the sense of ineffectuality and stagnation drew her, "like a powerful magnetic force," away from "stepping out," from living more vibrantly. She felt bogged down in petty worries. Yet, as the analysis proceeded, she became aware of how preferable the bog was to her anticipations of what would happen if she freed herself of her anxious, depressed morass—a fear of the unknown, of total isolation from meaningful relations with others, a diffusion of her sense of self. Her surrender to the will of others and her self-imposed blinders kept her focused on the next steps. Although she struggled against her constraints, she became increasingly aware of how frightened she was to live without them.

She also approached analysis as a new version of the old pattern, a new variation of the same relational matrix. The analyst had his own ideas about what was "best" for her, but the rules of this game prohibited his opinions from being made explicit. She had to figure it out for herself, from clues and hints supplied by the analyst. Thus, directions relative to doing the "right thing" were given in secret code, and dedication to the

analytic path would surely lead to a better life. Failure to follow this path would anger the analyst, whose desires for influence motivate his work, and thereby make continuation of the treatment impossible. Thus, she attempted to replace the mother's "system" with the analyst's "system" in a perpetuation of her characteristic pattern of integrating relationships and maintaining her subjective world. Continued exploration and analysis of these patterns, both within and outside the transference, had begun to yield the beginnings of different sorts of experiences and different kinds of intimacies with others. It was at this point that she reported the recurring dream.

The dream symbolizes the structure of the relational field in which the analysand lives. She is anxious and overburdened, the briefcase representing oppressive obligations and identifications. The events of the dream reflect her anxious clinging to those identifications and obligations, and her fear that neglecting them would isolate and deplete her profoundly.

Self psychologies call our attention here to the self component of the field—the sense of being overburdened, the fear of her own spontaneity, the terror of depletion. The familiar, oppressive briefcase with its obligations and demands represents the self which is seen and mirrored within her family and which, therefore, although distorted, is the only vehicle for self-recognition; the analysand equates losing her briefcase with disintegration, losing her self.

Object-relations theories call our attention to the function of the briefcase as an anchoring internal object, fragmenting and diverting her vitality away from new, richer relationships. The briefcase represents old object ties, and the analysand is reluctant to release her grip on it because to do so would entail an abandonment of her links to her overburdened, depressed parents, provoking an intolerable sense of loss, guilt, and isolation.

Interpersonal psychoanalysis calls our attention to her use of the briefcase—the way she structures situations by creating external demands and obligations to which she devotes herself as a way of diverting attention from more authentic wishes and her terror of ending up alone. The briefcase represents these well-worn ways of operating in the world, and she is reluctant to release her viselike grip on it because she is terrified to be without it. She does not know any other way to be.

These approaches enrich our understanding of the dynamics reflected in the dream, and of the analytic process as well, in which the

analyst, for this analysand, inevitably becomes both a burden and a collaborator in less burdensome, more spontaneous ways of living. Thus, the ritualized, constricted behavior symbolized by the briefcase can be viewed alternatively as a security operation in Sullivan's sense, providing familiarity and an escape from anxiety; as a bad-object tie in Fairbairn's sense, providing her with what she believes are her only reliable connections with other people; and as a self object in Kohut's sense, providing her with the only sense of internal cohesion and continuity she can count on.

This greatly encapsulated understanding of the meaning of this dream in the context of the analysand's life cannot be used to evaluate the relevance or utility of different interpretive models; like all analyses, it is itself partially the product of a model. The analyst's theories and habits of thought inevitably become a powerful factor in the collaborative production of analytic data. The point being made here is that the understandings of this analysand's dream generated by various relational-model theories operate within the same conceptual framework—a framework quite different from the drive model where the analysand's productions are viewed as complex derivatives of a struggle between powerful, body-based impulses and defenses against those impulses.

In the drive model the basic units of analysis are desire and fear of punishment. Relations with other people are important, but not as basic constituents of mind or as contributing meaning of their own; they are vehicles for the expression of drive and defenses. In this dream the anal referent in the underground tunnel, the phallic significance of the train, the castration and vaginal imagery in the *briefcase*, the oedipal significance of following ill-fated impulses—all these would be granted motivational priority. Other people are objects of desire; other people are instruments of punishment. But the form of the conflict, the shape of the drama, is inherent in the desire itself, which will inevitably lead to the fear of punishment. Meaning is provided a priori in the inherent nature of desire.

In the various relational-model approaches, the basic units of analysis are the relational bonds and the relational matrix they form. At stake are different forms of relatedness, one mediated through burden and pain, one mediated through activity and spontaneity. Bodily processes, sexuality, aggression, are all important subjects for inquiry, but the conflicts are formed, the drama is shaped, in the interactions between the analy-

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sand and others. Different relational theories focus on different facets of the relational matrix, reflecting important terminological differences and often leading to quite different analytic interpretations and interventions; nonetheless, they operate within the same common meta-psychological vision.

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