A Self Psychological Discussion of Mutual Recognition

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I take this opportunity to present a self psychological variation on the theme of mutual recognition, a process central to the relational paradigm. Mutual recognition in my variation focuses more on the patient’s agency and choice in creating the needed analytic relationship than on the developmental achievement of the capacity for intersubjective recognition, whether conceived as originating in infancy or cohering in the analytic process. My contention is that our patients come to us with this fundamental capacity already developed and intact. That we are woven into introjective–projective worlds does not change the fundamental knowledge of our separate subjectivity and implacable difference. As support for the developmental primacy of our perception of another’s subjectivity, I like to cite Dan Stern’s (1985) work on maternal responsiveness and the experience of recognition in which he finds that, in order for the infant to experience the mother’s attunement or affective resonance, the infant needs to “know” that the mother’s response is generated out of her own idiosyncratic subjectivity—that it is not an imitative or mechanical response. A specific characteristic of this responsiveness is that it is cross-modal (i.e.,

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that the mother uses a channel or form of expression different from that used by the infant).

So, what is the form of mutual recognition that I propose? The patient, well-aware that we confront them with a mind of our own, must, of her own accord, take an enormous risk to allow the analyst, with her own unpredictable subjectivity, to become a part of her subjective world. This risk is substantial in that the psychoanalytic undertaking involves the exposure of the patient’s most vulnerable self to another to whom she has given a transitional power. I say transitional in that the patient both creates what she needs (and the analyst is ready to “hold”) and knows that this other is inevitably beyond her control. In other words, the patient who has been able to “surrender,” in Ghent’s (1990) terms, establishes a selfobject relationship with all the meaning of exposing her agentic, self-initiating core in order to undergo a “second chance” with another, all the while knowing that the possibility of violation of this core and re-traumatization are just around the corner.

The risk of retraumatization is tied to the analyst’s “survival” in Winnicott’s (1951) terms—our indestructibility during critical ruptures. The relational version of Winnicott’s developmental progression from object relation to object usage stresses the ongoing dialectical tension between a desire for omnipotence and recognition of the other, including acceptance of difference and a capacity to hold ambivalence. My own reading of Winnicott’s developmental progression contains relatively less of the struggle to reluctantly cede one’s omnipotence and associated negation of the other, and relatively more of a joy in discovering another who “survives,” allowing us a faith in connectedness and a release from the self-encapsulating burden of omnipotence. My hate does not destroy those whom I love and need for nurturance and growth.

The power of the patient’s sense of her destructiveness, whether it be in the form of hate or in the form of other dissociated self-states cannot be underestimated, and gives the analyst’s survival a particular mutative meaning from a self psychological perspective.

The patient develops a faith in the essential meaningfulness of her unique subjectivity while encompassing our failures, limitations, self-interests, and uncompromising differences. Concomitantly, she develops a faith in the resiliency of the bond, from which emerges one’s sense of freedom and humanity.

Finally, I want to remember Kohut’s (1977) description of the dilemma of modern man. From Eugene O’Neill, consider the following: “Man
is born broken, he lives by mending, the grace of God is glue. Alienation, isolation, objectification bring many of our patients to us. They do not take for granted the simple sense of being a "human among humans" (O'Neill, 1941). They have been set apart, objectified, or condemned for various reasons and, now, like the child who well knows that her mother is a separate subject, needs the blessing of her recognition, most especially now in some form of being a "chip off the old block." There is here a mutual mirroring, a mutual recognition of self in the other that ensures an essential "alikeness," and an expansion of self that, in Kohut's (1978) most profound meaning of empathy, includes the whole world.

References


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The Shame Family: An Outline of the Phenomenology of Patterns of Emotional Experience That Have Shame at Their Core

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It is shame … which reveals to me the Other’s look and myself at the end of that look [Sartre, 1943, p. 237].

Shame proper: The emotional experience of having exposed one’s inherent "flawedness" or "defectiveness" (e.g., vulnerabilities and needs) to a viewing, judging other. (We, ourselves, can be our viewing other.)

Moral shame (as distinct from guilt): The experience of having exposed one’s moral flawedness to a viewing other.

Embarrassment: Mild shame.

Self-consciousness: Anticipatory or signal shame.

Shyness: Anticipatory shame + shying away from viewing others to avoid shame proper.

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