

Unformulated Experience Then and Now

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A beginning note: Much of the following paper has been pieced together from books and articles that have appeared over the last 30-plus years. Some of it is new material. At the end of it, I felt I wanted to offer a clinical illustration of what I'm saying, and so I added to what I had already said a fairly long vignette. But I know that this group likes to have as much time as possible for discussion, and I prefer to proceed in whatever way will seem best to you; and so I am going to leave it up to you to decide about the clinical illustration. We will decide when we get there. Without the illustration, what I have to say takes a minute or two longer than an hour; with the illustration, it's 10 to 15 minutes longer. When I get to the end of that initial hour of material, I'll put to you the question of whether or not to present the illustration.

When we refer to unconscious influence in psychoanalysis, what do we mean? Do we intend to refer to an objective presence in psychic life, a thought, an affect, a memory, or a phantasy that somehow exists as a fact, but outside our ken? Or do we intend to refer to an absence, something missing in experience, an unconsidered or undeveloped implication? Is unconscious material fully formed and merely awaiting uncovering or discovery, or is it potential experience that remains to be spelled out? Let me begin with a few very simple examples.

The patient reports a dream. The analyst responds with an interpretation that carries conviction for the patient. Did the content of the interpretation exist in the patient's unconscious before the analyst spoke?

Or better: The patient reports a dream and the analyst asks a question about one of its elements. The patient exclaims that this question makes him think of something he had not connected to the dream before, and excitedly he puts together his own interpretation of the dream. Did the patient's own interpretation exist prior to the analyst's question? Did it exist prior to the patient's capacity to say it?

Another example, this time of the patient's perception of the analyst: The patient reads an article in the newspaper about the thinking of a particular psychoanalyst, then comes to her session and tells her own analyst that she wishes for "something more" in his response to her. It is not specific content the patient finds wanting, but a certain kind of understanding that the other analyst (according to the patient's reading of the article) seems to be able to convey. The patient's own analyst does not convey this understanding, the patient says. She muses that, prior to reading the article, not only could she not have said what she felt deprived of, she could not even have said that she was missing something. She cannot put into words how she thought about these matters before. In fact, she believes there were no words available to her. She cannot recapture what the "missing" was like then, because she would have to use the words she did not find until later. She recognizes, she says, that this means she can do not more than provide a description in the present.

Was this patient's experience of missing something already present "in" the patient before her reading of the newspaper article? Was that feeling of missing something already "there" prior to her first words for it?

These questions do not have to be answered with a simple yes or no. As a matter of fact, most of us agree that they cannot and should not be answered simply. Unconscious meaning is a slippery idea. We can note all those data we have cited for generations: dreams, parapraxes, symptoms, transference. We are so used to believing that these phenomena are the visible evidence of invisible, nonverbal, and (if we could but see them) clearly defined unconscious structures that we often lose track of the fact that we are making an interpretation when we think this way. The belief that a particular latent content underlies the phenomena we do see, even if in daily clinical work we seldom, if ever, have the confidence that we have really captured that latent content in words, is one of those interpretations that, while it is not taken for granted by clinicians today as it was when I began writing, is still treated by many psychoanalysts as a simple fact. Yet we seldom have the confidence that we have "nailed down" the unconscious meanings our patients present to us in their conduct and experience. We are uncertain; we consider alternatives. We remain prone to understanding the ambiguity of our experience as the joint result of our limitations and the complex distortions of the defenses that intervene between the patient's unconscious meaning and its effects. We do not routinely consider that our difficulty might be, instead, directly related to the nature of that which we are trying to understand, or even to the intrinsic ambiguity of our interpretive task. With the growing awareness among psychoanalysts of the work of Bion, especially, the ambiguity of unconscious process is more widely recognized today than it was in the past. Yet we still often lose touch with the fact that the idea that the content of the unconscious has a particular meaning is a perspective or hypothesis, not a fact; and so very often this hypothesis, having been "normalized" (Foucault) or "objectivized" (Berger and Luckmann) is too frequently taken as the expectable state of affairs, as if it were a feature of the natural world.

I have been developing an alternative point of view about the problem of symbolization in psychoanalysis since the early 1980s. I have been asked to present that approach to you today. I call it "unformulated experience." I am going to review what I have said about this idea up to now, and then move on to tell you about an addition and revision that I am currently in the process of writing.

This is a tall order for one hour, which means that, regrettably, I will be able to offer fewer clinical illustrations than I would like. Also, I will be able to acquaint you with only a bare outline of the intellectual and clinical sources that originally inspired me. Some of those who have influenced me were academic psychologists; and some of those writers were developmentalists, such as Heinz Werner, from whom I took the concept of progressive articulation. Others were cognitive psychologists. Here I think of Frederic Bartlett's classic work on memory; Ulric Neisser, whose conception of the "hidden reality" view of the mind was of great interest to me; David Rumelhart's work on schema theory; and anything Jerome Bruner ever wrote, along with all the rest of the New Look that appeared in the 1960s and early 1970s in the experimental psychology of perception. Other influences came from philosophers, particularly hermeneuticists--and of that group especially Hans-George Gadamer. I also profited from my acquaintance with many other philosophers, too numerous to mention, including Henri Bergson, Nelson Goodman, William James, Thomas Kuhn, Suzanne Langer, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Michael Polanyi. Freud's magisterial conception of an unconscious that is not only dynamic, but generative, was a primary source of inspiration, of course. The ego psychology of

the 1950s to the 1970s was a heavy influence on me at the beginning (here I immediately think of David Rapaport, especially his marvelous edited volume, *The Organization and Pathology of Thought*. And after that era, the hermeneutic critique of the Freudian metapsychology in the 1970s was very important to me--I'm thinking here primarily of Roy Schafer, George Klein, and Merton Gill, and to a lesser extent, Donald Spence. Last but not least: I've been shaped at least as much by the psychoanalytic tradition in which I sought training, interpersonal psychoanalysis, as I have by any other influence; and by the work of the relational psychoanalysts who have followed them. I have found particular inspiration in the work of Harry Stack Sullivan, Ernest Schachtel, Edgar Levenson, and Philip Bromberg.

But I believe what may have most influenced me to conceive unconscious process the way I have, even more than the various academic and clinical literatures—in fact, the factor that was probably responsible for the particular paths I charted through those literatures, was a certain aspect of my own experience—in clinical work, yes, but also in the rest of life. One of the most prominent characteristics that experience has always held for me—in and out of the consulting room—is the quality of *emergence*. I wanted to give voice to that emergent quality, the way that conscious experience seemed to me to grow from from a pre-existing, vaguely organized, primitive, global, non-ideational, affective state. What I set out to do was to grasp with a certain degree of explicitness something that I have felt implicitly all my life.

And so I do not insist that the concept of unformulated experience represents objective or eternal truth. Nor, for that matter, do I believe that any theory in psychoanalysis should be viewed that way. What I have tried to do is to represent a point of view, a way of thinking about mind that is inspired by clinical work and contributes to it.

A beginning

When a patient is finally able to think about a previously unaccepted part of life, seldom are fully formulated thoughts simply waiting to be discovered, ready for exposition. Instead, what is usually experienced is a fresh state of not-knowing, a kind of confusion—a confusion with newly appreciable possibilities, and perhaps an intriguing confusion, but a confusion or a puzzle nevertheless. One is curious. Before, one could not even have said there was anything to learn; now one realizes for the first time that one does not know—and, by implication, that one has not known.

Unconscious clarity rarely underlies defense. On the evidence of our observations of them as they emerge in awareness, the perceptions, ideas, and memories we prefer not to have, the observations we prefer not to make, are often murky and poorly defined, different in kind than they will be when the process of articulation has reached the level of words. The moments of confusion may be quite brief, barely noticeable, or they may be quite lengthy, becoming either deeply intriguing or disturbing. "Unformulated experience" is the label I have chosen to refer to mentation characterized by lack of clarity and differentiation.

The phenomenon is analogous to an experience most people have had at twilight, when the light is dim and unreliable and familiar shapes can be hard to recognize. Once in a while, at a moment like this, or in a dimly lighted room, one sees something, but simply cannot make a coherent visual experience out of it. Whatever one is seeing stubbornly resists coalescing into an identifiable shape, and one hangs in the perceptual lurch. The affective accompaniment ranges from playful interest to a sense of awe, dislocation, and disorientation so severe it can be nauseating. Among children, more rarely adults, fears sometimes shape the ambiguity, so that fright or terror results. For a three-year-old in a dimly lit room, the ambiguous shape of a towel draped over a chair may assume sentience and/or malevolence. But most of the time, in a few

moments the unformulated percept falls together into some familiar shape, and one is relieved. One may be left, however, with an increased awareness of the ubiquity of interpretation in our psychic lives, a suspicion that even the coherent perception, when it emerges, is an interpretation, just one that falls into place more easily.

Just as well-formed percepts do not exist "in," or "behind" the indistinct and unrecognizable experiences of twilight shapes, well-formed cognitions do not exist in or behind the unformulated states that precede them. Rather, the well-formed version remains to be shaped. The unformulated is not yet knowable in the separate and definable terms of language. Unformulated material is composed of vague tendencies which, if allowed to develop to the point at which they could be shaped and articulated, would become the more lucid kind of reflective experience we associate with mutually comprehended verbal symbolization.

But at this point the analogy of the indistinct object fails, because our uncertainty about the identity of such an object can generally be resolved in only one way. With additional illumination, everyone sees the same form. There is very little ambiguity about a cat located directly under a shining streetlamp, for example, even if it can be hard to make visual sense out of the same cat lurking in the shadows; and once the lights go on, that towel draped over the chair, so ambiguous a figure in half-light, immediately becomes the same thing to everyone.

But most of what people talk about in psychoanalytic treatment allows a much wider range of interpretation than well-lighted cats and towels. These other kinds of experience, especially social experiences, are not so inevitably bound to a stimulus. They are much less likely to be divided into perceptual units in just the same way by everyone. The story goes, for instance, that the Polynesians who first saw Captain Cook's ship sail into their harbor could not agree on even the size of the object; its unfamiliar outline made it difficult to judge its distance. Was it a small object relatively close at hand or a larger one farther off? There was simply no cultural preconception for the image.

Once we move on from perception to consider other levels of meaning, the number of different interpretations that can be made multiplies by leaps and bounds. The more a particular kind of experience is the result of an implicit interpretive process, in other words, the more variation we can expect to find among different people's versions of it. Consider the comprehension of gesture, facial expression, or the attribution of intention. These phenomena, despite their complexity, are among the most common experiences of everyday life. There are opportunities at almost every turn, literally from one moment to the next, for interpretive variation.

Most of the material of a psychoanalysis can be experienced in more than one way by the two participants involved. This is so even when the two agree on the basic nature of the people and events under discussion. The way each of us shapes moment-to-moment experience is the outcome of our characteristic patterns of formulation interacting with the exigencies of the moment. Since "exigencies of the moment" almost always refers to happenings with other people, real or imaginary--"illusory," in Harry Stack Sullivan's description--the resolution of the ambiguity of unformulated experience is an interpersonal event. That is, what we think at any particular moment is not only a function of our inner worlds--our histories, our characters, unconscious phantasy, the structured unconscious activities that contribute to the organization and continuity of experience. That view is familiar enough: one person characteristically experiences differently than another. What I want to lay special stress on, though, is the formative influence on all of our experience of the ongoing interpersonal transaction--not only on the feelings and thoughts that we react with, but the very nature of what is possible for us to

formulate. The analyst, like the patient, can know only what the interpersonal field he co-creates with the patient allows him to know.

The meaning in a particular unformulated experience, if it ever is spelled out, may take any one of the more precise forms toward which it moves. It is content without definite shape. In the words of the philosopher Jacques Maritain (1953), it is "a beginning of insight, still unformulated, a kind of many-eyed cloud...a humble and trembling inchoation, yet invaluable, tending toward an intelligible content to be grasped" (p. 99). The poet and essayist Paul Valéry (in Ghiselin, 1952) puts it this way: "The fact is that every act of the mind itself is always somehow accompanied by a certain more or less perceptible atmosphere of indeterminacy" (p. 99). In William James's (1890) metaphor, each of us "sculpts" conscious experience from a block (or a stream, as James would have it) of the unformulated that might have been carved in other ways. And finally, Merleau-Ponty (1962) makes the point this way:

[T]here is in human existence a principle of indeterminacy, and this indeterminacy is not only for us, it does not stem from some imperfection of our knowledge, and we must not imagine that any God could sound our hearts and minds and determine what we owe to nature and what to freedom. Existence is indeterminate in itself, by reason of its fundamental structure, and in so far as it is the very process whereby the hitherto meaningless takes on meaning...[p. 169].

The revelation of meaning is more often creation than the discovery of a pre-existing truth. Yet to be useful, the newly created meaning must be recognizable. It must fit the stimulus, and it must fit better than the meaning that came before. "Insight into an unconscious wish," writes Herbert Fingarette (1963), "is like noticing a well-formed 'ship' in the cloud instead a poorly formed 'rabbit.' On the other hand, insight is not like discovering an animal which has been hiding in the bushes" (p. 20).

Relativism

One cannot say everything about one's ideas every time one writes, but there are some parts of my views that I think I should address today, at least briefly, because they are both crucial and frequently misunderstood. First, the question of relativism. I conceive unformulated experience as potential experience, and I intend by that point to suggest that the shape of the next moment's conscious, formulated meanings is not entirely predetermined, that there is always ambiguity to be resolved, some formulation of the unformulated that remains to take place, some emergent quality in the creation of whatever is to come next. This position about the inevitable ambiguity of the next moment sometimes has been mistakenly interpreted to imply that the process of formulation is unconstrained, as if unformulated experience can become any meaning one pleases to give it. That is not what I believe (D.B. Stern, 1997, pp. 28-32, 203-233). I want to avoid altogether the implication of relativism and unconstrained subjectivism. The idea of unformulated experience is a hermeneutic view well described by Louis Sass (1988) in these words: "For, though it may be impossible to discover a single meaning, this does not mean that anything goes, that listeners can legitimately ascribe any meaning to any discourse. The hermeneutic view is a sort of 'middle way' between objectivism and relativism" (p. 254).

I have taken pains over and over again to describe the formulation of meaning as a dialectical process, and I want to emphasize dialectic today, because another implication I want to avoid is that unformulated experience has no structure and that the process of formulation is therefore unidirectional or one-dimensional, i.e., "nothing but" emergent, uninfluenced by the continuity provided by reality, personal history, and the more structural aspects of personality. That is not the position I take, or have ever taken.

The meanings that can be validly created from any unformulated experience are a joint outcome of current reality, the meanings that have been articulated in the past, and the emergent influence of the present moment. It is therefore assured that present experience is continuous with experience of the past—not entirely *determined* by that conservative influence, but certainly deeply influenced by it. In this perspective, in other words, the role of structured unconscious representations is played by *constraints on what unformulated experience can become*.

From the perspective of ontological hermeneutics (and here I am leaning on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer), reality cannot be directly apprehended; it can be perceived only through the lenses of tradition, history, and culture. But reality is there, and it shows itself in the continuous constraint it exercises on our freedom to create experience. In Gadamer's (2004) view, all experience is interpretation. It is reality that provides the limits within which we are free to create valid experience, and beyond which we recognize experience as lie or distortion.

The degree of constraint on unformulated experience ranges from high to low, and this degree of constraint differs with context, over time, and from one kind of experience to another. In the case of "tight" constraints there is very little "wiggle room," which is to say that in these cases the range of formulated meanings that can validly be made from unformulated experience is narrow. In other cases, constraints are looser, and the range of meanings that can validly be formulated is therefore correspondingly wider. Consider, for example, a painting consisting of two fields of color, one pink and the other orange, the two fields seeming to float on an off-white background. Let us say that I simply attend to the impact the painting has on me, trying to formulate my reaction, or the kind of affective experience I have while looking at it, or the place of this painting in the tradition of art from which it arises. In the cases of experiences and thoughts such as these, the interpretive quality is undeniable, and the range of formulations that can be made without violating the constraints of reality is very wide, indeed. But if I ask myself instead what are the colors of the painting's two fields, the experiences I can formulate without violating reality are so few that the interpretive aspect, while it remains real enough, is constrained enough to seem trivial.

One routine effect of formulating meaning is to provide a constraint on what future meanings can become. The impact of the past, and the presence of continuity in the personality, are thereby assured, because the most significant constraints on what unformulated experience can become in its next incarnation, or in the next moment, are the meanings that have come before. The creation of meaning is once again dialectical: formerly created meanings influence the future to take their shape, while the unique influences of the present and the future encourage the reformulation of past meanings. I made this point in *Unformulated Experience* (D.B. Stern, 1997) in words to which I continue to subscribe:

The given and the made are a dialectic, neither ever excluding the other and both constituting every meaning and moment. Without the opportunity to change previously structured experience, and without that previous structure to feel and think against, new experience would be impossible. We would be trapped in an evanescent subjectivism. But, on the other hand, without our capacity for an imagination that goes beyond experiential regularities, without the animation of spontaneous expression and the continuous reworking that represents our ceaseless effort to understand, we would never be able to redeem our experience from the stasis of dead convention. It is reflection that saves the unconscious from being nothing more than a set of strictures, and makes it a precious resource instead; and it is the unconscious that offers reflection the fecund and ever-changing materials with which to carry out its life-giving mission (p. 30).

Emergence

What most inspired me about Freud's conception of unconsciousness was his powerful and respectful characterization of the emergent quality of conscious experience, which derived from its unconscious sources. But I found equally compelling the emphasis on conscious and unconscious interpersonal relations that I absorbed from my interpersonal psychoanalytic teachers—that is, the events of the interpersonal field. I wanted to be able to think of unconscious process in a way that respected all these currents.

And then there was ontological hermeneutics, which I have also already mentioned, introduced by Heidegger and then developed further by Gadamer (2004) and others. These writers hold that all being comes about through understanding, and all understanding is a matter of interpretation; and they therefore conclude that all being is interpretation. While verbal language is crucial, this “interpretation” is much broader than articulation in words. Language is understood as all our systems of symbols—that is, semiotics, the sum total of culture. All interpretation requires the creative metamorphosis of the traditions into which we are born, and this metamorphosis happens in the very moment of understanding. Understanding, then—and for that matter, experience itself, which in hermeneutic terms is itself an interpretive event—can never be fully predicted; it is always to some degree unexpected, and does not pre-exist its own creation. It comes into being in the same moment that it appears in the conscious mind. As you might imagine, I was delighted to discover in this literature an emphasis on the emergent properties of experience that mirrored my own sense of things.

That was not the only link of ontological hermeneutics with my psychoanalytic interests. In ontological hermeneutic terms, especially emphasized by Gadamer, understanding is always a dialogic event. The one who understands creates what Gadamer (2004) described as “true conversation” with the object of understanding—whether that object is a work of art, a text, a person, or an experience of another kind. Life is the continuous creation of meaning, and meaning is more or less free to develop, depending on the degree to which we can allow language (in its broad meaning) to work freely within us.

It seemed to me, as I began to read ontological hermeneutics, that there was every reason to define the degree of the mind's freedom, as it was defined by Gadamer and others, in psychodynamic terms. This is a familiar thought for psychoanalysts, of course: the degree of our freedom to think and feel is significantly compromised by certain unconscious processes, especially unconscious defensive processes, and significantly augmented by the successful analysis of these processes.

The acceptance of emergent properties of the mind and experience poses a problem for psychoanalytic theories that rest on psychic determinism. Practitioners of these theories believe that, on the basis of a sufficiently thorough knowledge of the unconscious mind, it would be at least hypothetically possible to predict every psychic event. My position, on the other hand, is that much of what is most important about psychic life is unpredictable—and by “unpredictable” I do not intend the colloquial meaning of the word: that such events are hard to imagine in advance. I mean that the processes of mind are nonlinear and emergent. I am not alone in this view; many psychoanalysts today accept some version of it. Some of them come to it from a philosophical perspective, as I do (Mitchell, 1992, 1997; Cushman, 1996; Hoffman, 1997); others come to it from nonlinear dynamic systems theory (Piers, 2000; Galatzer-Levy, 2004; Seligman, 2005; Harris, 2008; Boston Change Process Study Group, 2010; Coburn, in press).

In about 1980, I began to wonder how I could imagine whatever it is that pre-exists conscious experience in a way that respected all the sources and attitudes I have mentioned. My answer to this question was that, if conscious experience is the result of an implicit, interpretive, meaning-making process, then that which pre-exists consciousness, or unconsciousness, must be whatever

precedes interpretation—that is, whatever precedes the establishment of meaning. And so one part of the answer to my question seemed to me to be that whatever precedes meaningful experience is *potential* experience, what conscious experience might become. Another part of the answer seemed to be that what precedes consciousness is *ambiguous*, since it precedes the interpretive process that will articulate it as explicitly meaningful. The unconscious from this perspective is not symbolically represented in some hidden or distorted way. It is not like a stage set behind a curtain, ready to be revealed when the curtain is raised; nor is it unconscious phantasy, that compendium of narratives that are said by many psychoanalysts to lend their meanings, and often their very shapes, to conscious experience. (Among psychoanalysts, this is a controversial position, perhaps the most controversial or radical of the conclusions I have been led to by thinking about unconsciousness as unformulated experience. More about it later.) Because conscious experience is instead *potential*, what conscious experience might become, it has no single, predetermined shape.

In this way, I concluded that the combination of sources I was attempting to respect implied that the unconscious is not fully formed, requiring only discovery or revelation to become conscious. Unconsciousness is instead *unformulated experience*; and perhaps you won't be surprised to notice that the words I use to describe it are the same ones I used a little while ago to describe the emergent quality that was a primary inspiration for me to begin thinking along these lines: that is, unformulated experience is a vaguely organized, global, nonideational, affective state.

Let me pause here for a moment to point out that I am not alone in conceptualizing unconsciousness as something other than structured content. Bion's (1962a, b; 1963) and André Green's (1999) understandings of mind are perhaps the most widely known of such conceptions, although I did not know their work when I began to write. And there are others (Lecours & Bouchard, 1997; Levine, Reed, & Scarfone, 2013). The following passage from Ferro (2005) is a characteristic expression of this point from a Bionian perspective.

Thus the analyst presents him- or herself as a person capable of listening, understanding, grasping and describing the emotions of the field and as a catalyst of further transformations—on the basis that there is not *an unconscious to be revealed*, but a capacity for thinking to be developed...(p. 102; italics in the original).

Elsewhere I have offered comparisons of my ideas with some of these other conceptions of unconsciousness. In my remarks today I won't have the time to take up most of those very interesting parts of the discussion.

Now let me return to the thread I was pursuing.

I have already noted that, in developing this idea of unconsciousness, I wanted to be sure that, like the work of the hermeneutic philosophers, the conception of unformulated experience acknowledged that both current reality and past history are indeed "there," and that they therefore set limits on what we can think, feel, and perceive while remaining sane and truthful. For Gadamer, because reality is multiple and manifold, it leaves a certain degree of indeterminacy or ambiguity, to be resolved by the way we construct conscious experience. Both reality and history provide the kind of constraints I have already described on what experience can become—but both leave enough ambiguity to make the interpretive construction of conscious experience necessary.

It follows from the account I have given that the most crucial events in the construction of experience, inside and outside the consulting room, are those that resolve the ambiguity of unformulated experience into some explicit, conscious shape. From my perspective, factors

responsible for resolving that ambiguity are relational or interpersonal phenomena—that is, the conscious and unconscious events that comprise the interpersonal field. The interpersonal field is composed of the intersections and interactions of the patient's and the analyst's conscious and unconscious experience and conduct. The greater the freedom existing in the relatedness between patient and analyst, therefore, the wider the range of possibilities available for each participant's conscious experience. And conversely, the more the analytic relatedness is characterized by constriction, inhibition, distortion, and other rigidities, especially unconscious rigidities, the fewer the possibilities for conscious experience. The degree of freedom available to consciousness, in other words, is determined by the nature of the interpersonal field. The more the constrictions of the interpersonal field can be relaxed, the greater the freedom available to the minds of both analyst and patient. The contents of consciousness, we can say, are determined by the nature of the field.

Dissociation

If the mind is conceived in terms of unformulated experience, the model for defense must be reconceptualized as dissociation (see especially Stern, 1997, Chapters 5-7). By dissociation I mean the maintenance of experience in its unformulated state for unconscious defensive reasons. Unconscious content is not distorted or hidden, as it is in models emphasizing repression. Rather, the primary defense is not to create the experience in the first place.

One question that immediately arises here is how one can know which experiences to avoid creating without first creating that same experience. The answer is that it is possible, on the basis of glimmers of meaning--what William James (1890) called "signs of direction in thought" and "feelings of tendency"-- to avoid, without awareness of the act, the formulation of particular meanings. See Stern, 1997, Chapters 4-6, for a detailed presentation of this argument. In that book I draw from the work of many artists and writers, and from the work on self-deception of the philosopher Herbert Fingarette (1969), who addresses the key question of how it is that we can manage to avoid the formulation of experience *without awareness* of doing so.

Dissociation is also understood from my perspective as the sequestering of states of being from one another. I will return to this point in a few minutes.

Field theory

You can see that, if phantasy is understood as pre-formed unconscious content, the theory of unformulated experience is inconsistent with the theory of unconscious phantasy. If unconsciousness is a matter of potential experience, not yet assigned a definite shape, then unformulated experience and unconscious phantasy are mutually exclusive. It was a number of years before I began to understand the implication of my own thinking on this point. I did not set out to exclude the idea of phantasy; that theoretical conclusion instead followed as an indirect, but inescapable, consequence of the conception of unconsciousness to which my thinking took me. I want to spend a few minutes now describing some of the ideas and issues that arise as a result of this contradiction, which I have recently also described in an article in IJP.

In Freudian and Kleinian writings, unconscious phantasy is created early in life, and these archaic forms then continue to exist in the unconscious, unchanged through life, participating in the shaping of experience. In modern conceptions of this kind, the phantasies change in certain ways throughout life, often shifting as development proceeds; in Bionian field theory phantasy does not necessarily persevere in its original shapes, but instead ceaselessly changes and develops over time as the result of continuous interchange between participants in the field. In all these conceptions, whatever their other differences, conscious experience is significantly shaped by

unconscious phantasy.

In an interpersonal view, by contrast, the influence of the past is not maintained in archaic relational configurations that have a separate existence from contemporary interpersonal life, but instead in the phenomena of the interpersonal field (e.g., Levenson, 1976, 1983, 1991; Ehrenberg, 1992; Bromberg, 1998, 2006, 2011; Pizer, 1998; Stern, 1997, 2010; Hirsch, 2014), a concept devised by Harry Stack Sullivan, and closely related (in my mind, at least) to the work of Kurt Lewin (1935). Two early commentators, Murphy and Cattell (1952), described the role of the past in field theory as follows:

Strictly speaking, the past as such is not properly used in the formulation of field events; the past has, so to speak, its surrogate, its aftermath, in the present; we cannot mix past events as such in the field forces which are the determination of each individual's conduct (pp. 175-175).

From this point of view, that is, the past cannot be considered separately from the present. Archaic phantasies are therefore not natural to such theories. This doesn't mean, of course, that the past has any less significance in these views; it has, rather, a different *kind* of significance, a significance that is represented in forms of the present. As Murphy and Cattell write, "it is only the present—rich as it is in heirlooms from the past—*only* the teeming present that counts."

We know how to understand the formative influence of phantasy: these phenomena are conceived as unconscious templates that stamp their imprint on conscious experience. Or perhaps that is too restrictive an expression. Perhaps, since phantasy does not simply produce copies of itself, we should use a less restrictive metaphor and say, more generally, that phantasies are *structuring* influences, leaving aside the means by which the influence is exerted.

But how do we understand the articulation of unformulated experience if we cannot, in the terms of the theory, conceptualize something like an unconscious template? How do we understand the structuring influence?

Multiple self theory

Here we arrive at the theory of the multiple self (Bromberg 1998, 2006, 2011; Stern, 2010, in press b). It is the activity of the multiple self that, by comprising the interpersonal field, opens and closes the possibilities for articulating unformulated experience and thereby, for analysts who use these ideas, plays the structuring role in creating the contents of consciousness played by phantasy in the thinking of other analysts.

I define a self-state as a configuration of identity. Each self-state is one of the ways I recognize myself to be, and it is connected to ways I recognize others to be. Self-states are defined, for me, according to the conscious experience that can be formulated or articulated from within them.

Sullivan (1954) described the self as part of the personality. We would capture Sullivan's meaning if we were to say that: 1) the personality is the sum total of subjectivity, unconscious as well as conscious; and 2) the self is that part of the personality that we know, or personify, as "me." "Good-me" is composed of those states of being that we accept and value, developed around experiences with significant others that were characterized by affects of approbation, approval, affection, appreciation, and love. "Bad-me," on the other hand, is the part of self that developed around experiences of disapprobation, disapproval, dislike, shame, humiliation, and so on. Good-me and bad-me are each composed of multiple self-states. "Not-me," on the other hand, is that part of subjectivity that, because we cannot tolerate recognizing it as part of what we are (as part of "me"), has never been symbolized. It came into being as the result of interactions with significant others so suffused with intolerable affect—shame, self-hatred, rage, humiliation, terror, loathing, and so on—that they came to exist only in dissociation, unformulated for unconscious

defensive reasons. The task of psychoanalytic treatment is for not-me to become me, for the self and the personality to become coterminous.

The interpersonal field is in ceaseless flux. One way to represent this flux is by recognizing that each state of the field calls out a state of self in its participants, and each self-state in one participant influences the state of self that comes to the fore for the other participant. Most of these state shifts go on imperceptibly, although a clinician who thinks this way develops a sixth sense for the signs of self-state shifts, both in herself and in her patient. As the field shifts, and in response to the self-state of the other, one is called upon to formulate experience in different ways. Each self-state, remember, is defined by the experience that can be formulated from within it—so as the field shifts, and the other's state changes, one is influenced to shift one's own state in order to be able to respond in an affectively tolerable and appropriate way to the changed circumstances.

Events in the field, while they vary in degree of comfort (it is more comfortable, of course, to be good-me than bad-me) are relatively smooth as long as the states of being called forth are tolerable—as long as they are pre-existing parts of the self, part of what I experience as “me,” good or bad. But when the state of being that is called forth is dissociated—when it is *not-me*—the relational outcome is more difficult. One is called upon to occupy a part of the personality that has never come been recognized as oneself; and therefore, if one were to accept the influence, one would become someone who would not be recognizable to oneself as “me.” At that juncture, what takes place is enactment, a term I reserve for what I call “the interpersonalization of dissociation” (Stern, 2004). That is, one treats the other as the dissociated part of one's own experience. (The links with projective identification will be immediately obvious to readers. For a comparison, see Stern, 2010, pp. 17-18.)

I hope I have conveyed, despite the highly condensed nature of my presentation, that therapeutic enactment—all unconsciously motivated relatedness, of course, but the interpersonalization of dissociation in particular—is crucial. Keep in mind that dissociated experience is unformulated—which means that it is unsymbolized. It therefore cannot be analyzed via interpretation. Because it has never been symbolized, it cannot even be noted, or (metaphorically) pointed at. The only way dissociated experience can enter the treatment—and thus the only route along which not-me can ever become me—is enactment. It is in only via the eventual resolution of enactments (Stern, 2010, in press b) that the self expands.

Conscious experience is always a construction from this point of view, never merely a given; mind does not record experience but creates it. No more than other psychoanalysts do interpersonal and relational analysts limit their consideration to “what actually happened” and how it was registered. The constructivism of this perspective leads to the rejection of objectivism and the idea of veridicality. It's not only that we don't *know* “what actually happened”—rather, the existence of something that could be described that way is called into question.

Self-states are no more “objective” or “veridical” than any other aspect of mind, so that, despite being a very different conception than phantasy, the structuring properties of self-states bear a relation to the structuring properties of phantasy. As a matter of fact, in an effort to translate my thinking into a more traditional psychoanalytic frame of reference, one sympathetic commentator recently described my clinical interest as the interplay between personal participation and internal objects (e.g., Cooper, in press).

I hope that this very brief description indicates how shifting self-states can provide, within the terms of the theory of unformulated experience, the kind of structuring influence on consciousness that is provided by phantasy in other theories. I have very briefly introduced an alternative psychoanalytic account of mind and treatment that does not rest on the concept of

phantasy, but nevertheless remains a theory of psychodynamics with a conception of unconscious process and conscious and unconscious analytic relatedness.

New work

Now let me turn, as promised, to the revision and elaboration of the concept of unformulated experience that I am working on currently.

One of the most vexing problems in psychoanalysis, past and present, is the relation of the verbal and the nonverbal. Psychoanalysis was devised as “the talking cure,” of course; and we are all familiar with the fact that verbal interpretation, verbal reflection, and verbal insight were the guiding lights of theories of technique and therapeutic action for generations. You may have heard a certain privileging of the verbal in what I have said to this point. I have struggled with that kind of privileging since the beginning of my psychoanalytic life, sometimes probably seeming to others to embrace it, sometimes explicitly arguing against it. It is true that what I set out to do in thinking about unformulated experience and its articulation grew from the belief that psychoanalysis is a self-reflective activity, and the conviction that reflection requires verbal language. But it is also true that I have tried to think about verbal language in semiotic terms—that is, as just one variety of symbolization—and that I spent many years wondering whether our attempt to understand in words was merely an excuse for us to sit down with our patients and let the really important things happen by themselves.

What I want to add to what I have said before is essentially this: We generally understand the verbal and the nonverbal as essentially different and therefore in some way conflicting, as if we must choose which form of representation is more basic (and here we are used to the argument that the verbal grows from the nonverbal, an argument that has been effectively disputed by Hans Loewald and, more recently and extensively, by Jeanine Vivona). If we take the stance that verbal and nonverbal experience exist on different levels of sophistication or differentiation, and therefore accept that experience appears first in nonverbal terms and only then sometimes metamorphoses into the verbal, we misconceive the problem in one important respect. If we conceive the problem differently, some of the most significant difficulties in the relation of the verbal and the nonverbal disappear, or are least moderated. The reconceptualization I suggest is to recognize, along with hermeneutic philosophers and semioticians, that verbal language is probably our single most significant symbol system, but it is also only one of a multitude of such systems. None of these is necessarily more basic than the others. The fact that verbal and nonverbal representation are both forms of the symbolic constitutes a common ground of more significance than we have tended to recognize, outweighing the differences between the two forms of representation considered only as coding systems—for example, in information theory. This single primary characteristic held in common, I believe, is more significant to the relationship of the verbal and the nonverbal than their differences.

Acceptance and Use

In *Unformulated Experience*, I defined the difference between unformulated experience and formulated meaning on the basis of verbal language: the dividing line between formulated and unformulated experience was the boundary between explicit reflection (language) and what comes before it. That idea is not wrong; in fact, it remains crucial. But for the reasons I have just mentioned, it is also only half right. In order to preserve and expand the theory of unformulated experience, I have concluded that I need to find a way to think of unformulated experience as both verbal *and* nonverbal. I need to find a single way of defining formulated experience, and unformulated experience, too, that applies to both the verbal realm and the nonverbal one. And so

I must find a new way to understand the dividing line between formulated and unformulated experience, and I must redraw that boundary. The boundary between verbal-reflective meaning and what comes before it does not suffice for my enlarged purpose.

But it seems desirable not to create two different boundaries, one for verbal meanings and the other for nonverbal meanings. It seems desirable, in other words, to think through what it means for experience to be formulated and unformulated in a broader, or at least different, way, that applies to both verbal *and* nonverbal experience.

Our clinical experience often suggests that the meanings that emerge over the course of a treatment were often at least hypothetically available long before they were created. It often seems, in retrospect, that it might very well have been *possible* to create them, but they never came about. We might say that such meanings were within the pragmatic grasp of our minds, but outside our psychodynamic range. They were cognitively feasible, in other words, but emotionally prohibited. For instance, one might for years have had the information at one's disposal that might have added up to the conclusion that one's mother was narcissistic, but one did not formulate this observation until a particular moment in the treatment.

We are used to thinking of these meanings, prior to their formulation, as dynamically unconscious, and we describe their sudden availability as insight, or understanding, or, in the term I use, formulation. I would like to develop a different vocabulary for these events. In fact, perhaps what I will suggest is not just a different vocabulary, but a redefinition of the events themselves. I undertake this change in conception, or vocabulary, or both, in the interest of being able to describe, better than I have before, the dividing line between formulated and unformulated experience, and what creates it. How can we say why a new meaning comes within one's range, and why it happens in one particular moment and not some other? What is the best way to describe how it becomes possible to formulate what could not be formulated before? Another way of asking the question is this: When a shift in the interpersonal field makes it possible for the participants in the field to formulate experience that had been unformulated to that point, how can we understand what mediates the field's influence to the individual mind? What changes in the mind, in response to the field, when formulation becomes possible?

Put this way, there is an obvious and simple answer to this question: when a new meaning emerges in one's mind, a new meaning that one already had the hypothetical ability to formulate, the event takes place because one can tolerate or accept *now* something that one could not tolerate or accept *then*. That is a truism in psychoanalytic work. The field changes in a way that makes it possible to accept experience that had to be dissociated prior to that event. In the terms I have used elsewhere, not-me becomes me. Subjectivity that had been unformulated, unsymbolized, dissociated, not-me, and non-self becomes formulated, symbolized, me, and part of the self. Take the example I used just above. I will have to complicate it a bit for this purpose. For the sake of simplicity in that example, I wrote as if what was dissociated was the patient's observation about his mother—that she was narcissistic. Generally, in my experience, though, one does not dissociate observations of others. To be more true to clinical experience, I would prefer to say that one dissociates a state of one's own self that would be necessary to *occupy* if that observation about one's mother were to become possible to formulate. What one dissociates, in other words, is an aspect of identity (Stern, 2010). In this case, one *cannot, must* not be the person who sees his mother in this light. It is intolerable to be that person; one cannot accept it. (*Why* one must not be that person, of course, is the heart of the matter in the clinical situation, but I will leave it aside for the time being, since the illustration is a fiction.)

This simple idea can be adapted to my purpose. We can use it to redefine the boundary between experience that is maintained in an unformulated state for defensive reasons and

experience that we are dynamically free to formulate if circumstances call for it. The boundary should not be conceived to lie between verbal-reflective meaning and what comes before it, as I drew it in *Unformulated Experience*. Rather, we should understand it to lie between experience that can be accepted or tolerated, and experience that one is afraid, if it were formulated, would be intolerable. If one can accept a certain formulation, what that means is that one can use it in living. If our patient were able to *accept* the self-state in which he grasps his mother's narcissism, he would be able to *use* that observation in living—in this case, in dealing with his mother, or perhaps in understanding and dealing with his own reactions to his mother.

Acceptance and use, in my frame of reference, are not conscious processes; they take place without awareness. Of course, the outcomes of these processes—newly available meanings—may very well enter awareness and thereby become conscious processes. We might say that acceptance and use are processes of decision; but because they take place without awareness, “decision” may be a misleading word to use. Perhaps it would be better to describe them as events that take place when certain tipping points are reached. That is, we accept and use a meaning when the interpersonal field within which the meaning gains relevance feels safe enough to allow it. The feeling of safety is crucial. In any case, once we can accept a meaning that is within our capacity to create, whether that meaning is verbal or nonverbal, we can construct it. That is, we can use it.

This point now allows us to make sense of the apparent fact that unformulated experience is not unitary, but is composed instead of two varieties.

One kind of unformulated experience, when it is accepted and put to use, becomes meaningful by becoming articulated in verbal language. But the other kind of unformulated experience does not. The second kind of unformulated experience becomes meaningful in a different way: it does not assume a verbal shape when it becomes usable, but a nonverbal form. Both varieties of unformulated experience can be accepted and used; and both can be dissociated.

Let me offer this idea in the form of a two-point formula. The first point will be familiar to readers of *Unformulated Experience*, since it is largely a restatement of the thesis of that book.

1. For that portion of unformulated experience that is most amenable to use in verbal language, the meaning that is created in the process of formulation (i.e., the meaning that is accepted and used) is one of the several or many verbal articulations toward which that unformulated experience tends. This variety of unformulated experience, that is, is defined by its amenability to verbal meaningfulness; and so when we formulate it, we articulate it in words and it becomes part of reflective consciousness. The explicit meanings we create on such occasions are not predetermined, but are unconsciously selected from among the available possibilities on the basis of the nature of the current interpersonal field.

With the exception of the addition of acceptance and use as criteria for formulation, the old model of unformulated experience had already taken me most of this way. But it is not far enough. I recognize that a great deal of what transpires between us and the people around us, as well as what transpires within us, goes on in psychic registers that we cannot formulate in verbal language. We are unable to attend to this kind of experience in a way that allows it to enter the realm of explicit reflection. The difficulty is not psychodynamically mediated; that is, our incapacity to formulate this material in words is not motivated, consciously or unconsciously. The difficulty is simply cognitive: such material just cannot be grasped in verbal symbols. I am thinking of certain aspects of affects, sensations and perceptions (visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and kinesthetic), other bodily sensations, small shivers of motives; and I am thinking of imagistic representations, both those that continuously represent experience as it unfolds and those more static, summary images that we construct in memory. But most of all I am thinking of all the fairly nonspecific social activities and

responsiveness that transpire between us and other people in the course of a conversation, or even just in the course of sitting with someone in the same room—i.e., affect, gesture, expression, prosody, and so on; and all the varieties of conduct that go on outside focal awareness, all those procedural meanings that *are* what they *do*, knowing and memory as praxis, as procedural. We take for granted that we use the meanings of all these kinds of experience in the construction of living.

I intend “nonverbal,” then, to refer not only to symbolization in other registers than words, such as the continuous perceptual processing and the chunking of perceptual experience into discrete images; I also mean “nonverbal” to refer to meanings that exist in some other form than the symbolic.

I must now add to thesis #1. That first thesis was basically a restatement of the claims about language and unformulated experience that I made in earlier work. What must now be added to that thesis is another one: the application of the same principles to the *other* kind of unformulated experience—that is, to unformulated experience that, in becoming meaningful, assumes *nonverbal* forms. Here is thesis #2.

2. For that portion of unformulated experience that is most consistent with *nonverbal* use, the meaning that is created in the process of formulation (i.e., the meaning that is accepted and used) is one of the several or many *nonverbal* realizations toward which that unformulated experience tends. This variety of unformulated experience, that is, is defined by its amenability to *nonverbal* meaningfulness; and so when we create meanings from it, those meanings are nonverbal. Just as is the case within the realm of the verbal, the *nonverbal* meanings we create on such occasions are not predetermined, but are unconsciously selected from among the available possibilities on the basis of the nature of the current interpersonal field.

Let me now make some general comments about the two theses taken together.

First, the difference between the two kinds of unformulated experience: the difference lies in the kind of experience results when the unformulated experience is formulated. In the case of the unformulated experience referred to in thesis #1, formulation results in the *articulation* of a meaning that is *verbal* or *verbal-reflective*. In the case of the unformulated experience referred to in thesis #2, formulation results in the *realization* or *actualization* of a meaning that is *nonverbal*.

Now, the similarities between the two kinds of unformulated experience. A) Both kinds of unformulated experience are defined as potential meaning that has not come to fruition. B) In both, the eventual formulated meaning unformulated experience takes on is not predetermined: its potential can be realized or articulated in several, or many, ways. C) Both kinds of unformulated experience are influenced to be formulated, or to remain unformulated, by the events of the interpersonal field. The field influences and interacts with the proclivities brought to it by each of its participants, and determines which meanings are formulated at any particular moment, which other possible meanings are not selected, and which experience remain unformulated.

Now I have reached the clinical example that I mentioned in the beginning, and we must decide whether to use it or to begin our discussion now.

If we use it, I have a few remarks to offer as orientation: I hope the vignette will illustrate much of what I’ve said from the beginning. I believe that what the patient and I learned during this episode was not available in symbolic form anywhere in her mind prior to its appearance in the treatment. I also believe that what made the difference was an alteration in the field between us, not a verbal insight. What was formulated here was not verbal-reflective meaning; it was an affective event. The verbal insight came about, yes, and it was important; but I think it was the outcome of the relaxation of a constriction in the field, the sign that the significant change had come about and not the change itself.

Clinical Illustration

Several years ago, I began working with an unusually attractive, charming, socially adept, intelligent, and well educated woman who, despite always having assumed that she would marry and have children, could not seem to make relationships take that direction. Now approaching the age of 40, she was worried about her future. To begin with, I was baffled at her lack of success, and despite myself, I began to wonder if perhaps her problem was that her positive attributes threatened most of the men she met. (I did not yet understand that she threatened me.) But this explanation did not seem to me to be a very good explanation, because it seemed unlikely that she could have threatened *all* the men she met. And besides, that interpretation would ignore whatever her own contribution might be. At this point, though, I could do no more than refer to “her contribution” in the abstract. Nevertheless, I pointed out to her, somewhat dutifully, that only if she could discover ways in which she was unconsciously creating and maintaining her own distress would there be realistic hope that she could change this part of her life.

Abstract principles hardly motivate people to enter psychoanalysis. That is doubly true for those patients, such as this woman, whose capacity for self-observation is limited. (I was later to find, happily, that this impression needed to be revised.) The analyst needs to be able to cite a concrete example of some way in which the patient unconsciously undermines herself. More than that, the analyst needs to believe the example he cites. With this woman, I could neither cite nor believe. I was struggling with the thoroughly non-rational perception that she was flawless. I knew better, of course. I was even able to refer back to the example of her lack of psychological mindedness as an illustration; but, unsurprisingly, I could not convince myself: the perception that dogged me was a feeling, not a reasonable perception. I did not yet see that her perfection was itself the point: she was like the perfect princess who lived at the top of the glass mountain. Like the suitors who tried to ride their horses up the mountain to reach the princess, I could find no point of purchase, no way to talk to her that would create some kind of sense of relatedness with her. It was easy for me to feel inadequate in her presence.

I was reduced to hashing and rehashing with her the end of the relationship that had finally brought her into treatment. She was in genuine pain about this, and she appreciated my suggestion that her pain was less about the man himself than about her worry that her hopes for the future were dimming fast. But this idea was hardly sufficient to carry the treatment. I could sense that, unless I found a way to help her deepen the work—which is to say, unless I found a way into a discussion of the less than perfect parts of her experience, but without shaming her about them—the treatment was going to end shortly. She would feel better, at least temporarily; and if I had nothing more to offer, she would leave.

I had ceased anticipating this patient’s visits with pleasure soon after we had started meeting, and at this juncture, two or three months in, I was becoming quite familiar with the feeling that I was not a very competent analyst for her. My rehashing of her recent relationship seemed vapid, superficial, and intellectualized to me; and while it was not difficult for me to connect my feelings of inadequacy with her impenetrability, I also imagined, with moderate discomfort, that she agreed with my assessment of my efforts.

Actually, it is not true to say that I could observe nothing beyond this woman’s perfection. I have mentioned being impressed with her impenetrability. I had also noticed the defensive quality of her continuous, brittle good cheer. She could cry about her pain, and she could be angry, but only if some objective situation in the outside world merited it. I had the sense that sadness or anger under any other circumstances would feel unjustifiable to her, and would probably represent a weakness in her eyes. It would shame her. She could not be vulnerable to me,

in other words, and I felt sure that I was not the only one with whom she felt this way. As a matter of fact, I imagined that this might be exactly the problem she was encountering in maintaining a romantic relationship. I could not just offer the patient that observation, though, not unless I had something to say that would help her make use of it in a way that did not potentiate the shame I could sense in the wings.

Time was running out. This was not a person who could discuss her frustration with the treatment or with me in a productive way. To do so would seem unacceptably hostile to her, rather like criticizing her marvelous parents (one of many attitudes that had made it difficult to get the treatment moving). Or rather, even if she *were* able and willing to talk about her frustration, it would do her no good unless I could say something that would give that frustration a different or broader meaning than it had now, something that would bring some life into the work for her. If I could not do that, then talking about her frustration would simply be a prelude to her departure.

And so one day, having failed to come up with the perfect (!) interpretation, and with the time left in the treatment swiftly draining away, I took a deep breath and stumbled into an attempt to say something authentic to this woman about my reaction to her presentation of herself. I did not know where I was going, or exactly what I would say when I got there. I talked to her for a couple of minutes about feeling that there must be parts of her that she was not pleased about, that maybe she didn't even like, because everyone has parts like that. Yet (I told her), I didn't seem to be able to get to know her that way. I told her that I felt she was having a very hard time being vulnerable with me, letting me really know her. I told her that, while vulnerability could be uncomfortable for anyone, I thought it must be particularly uncomfortable for her. I could see, I said, that unless we were able to move what we were doing in the direction of me getting to know her in a way that would no doubt make her feel vulnerable, the treatment was going to end, because she was going to cease seeing any value in it. I told her I knew how frustrated she must be with what we were doing, and, like me, how little she must be able to figure out how to make things different between us.

These thoughts did not come smoothly, nor did I express them that way. I struggled with them. And of course I was watching her reaction. She seemed interested in what I had to say about vulnerability, and she agreed outright with my estimation of her frustration. These things were good; but still I could not see how I was going to identify something in her experience, something that she could see at least as well as I could, that would open what we were doing into a psychoanalytic treatment.

At some moment, as I was talking, she appeared to me to change. It was quite subtle. She seemed softer and more open. That description, though, "softer and more open," was not available to me in the moment, only later on, when I thought back on it. In fact, I was not even aware of the presence of my new perception of her until, in retrospect, I tried to understand what had happened in the moments before I finally found myself able to say what occurred to me next, which was something new about her experience, something that I thought she would recognize and that might just help us into a more analytic kind of relatedness. The thought formed itself as I was speaking. Actually, I am quite sure that its possibility was created by the prior subtle change in my perception of her, which was, in turn, created by some change in her own affective state. As I spoke, I think that my novel perception was also helped along by my patient's facial expressions, through which she expressed a frank, friendly, and inquisitive interest in what I was saying.

But I am describing these moments with more precision than I experienced at the time. The truth is that I surprised myself—I didn't know what was coming until I was in the process of

uttering it. I said, “I think you must be lonely. I think you must always have been lonely.” Seeing her shock and recognition, and the tears welling in her eyes, I was encouraged to continue: “I wonder if you have ever felt really known by anyone.”

She wept, but this was not the hard crying that had accompanied her angry descriptions of the way her boyfriend had treated her. She hid her face in her hands. After a minute or two of silence she looked up at me and said simply and sadly, “I *am* lonely. I’ve always been lonely.” After another silence, she confirmed that, indeed, she had never felt that anyone had known her, not even her parents, who were so very proud of everything she had accomplished, but equally eager not to know more than that about her. Her mother had actually physically turned away from her, she told me, on the few occasions when the patient had tried to talk to her about less than sunny matters. (Over the next months she revealed, unsurprisingly, that there actually had been quite a few unsunny matters).

The session ended. It was obvious to both of us that we had started to do something quite different. As she walked in the door for her next session, she said as she sat down and smiled at me, “Now we have something to talk about.” It was unnecessary to say it.

In later sessions, although she sometimes returned to her previous presentation of herself, my patient also found her way surprisingly often to moments of vulnerability and authenticity. She is one of those people who had no idea that it was even possible to talk in the way that successful psychoanalytic treatment demands. She had more capacity to think about herself than I had seen before. In fact, she had more capacity of that kind than she had known about herself. I began to know her differently, and I have grown quite fond of her.

It is worth noting that at the same moment that I saw her loneliness, I suddenly regained my sense of competence. Immediately, I had the feeling that things were going to be all right in this treatment, and I regained my customary clinical confidence. These were the signs, from within my experience (we already know the signs from within hers), that a mutual unconscious enactment had dissolved, an enactment in which she was perfect and I was badly flawed.

Dissociation and the enactment are both breached when either participant develops a new perception of the other, a new perception that, in coming into being, makes it possible to experience the other (and therefore, herself as well) in more than one way. It’s not insight, but the newly formulated, nonverbal perception—of the other, of oneself, and of other-with-oneself—that, to me, is very often responsible for therapeutic change. In this case, that moment came when I suddenly saw my patient as softer and more open.

The new perception makes it possible to articulate unformulated experience that had never been allowed to percolate and grow. The moment I saw my patient in this new way, I was able to contextualize her pursuit of perfection differently, more poignantly, and of course that changed the nature of our relatedness. I am quite sure that there had been opportunities for me to articulate in my own mind her treatment of me before this, but I had been blind to them. The new perception is evidence that the potential in certain unformulated experience has become available for actualization, often for the first time, and the result is thinkable experience where there was none before. In response to my new perception of her, and the difference that that new perception quite automatically made in my treatment of her (from the moment you see the other differently, you just cannot treat him or her the way you had the moment before), my patient’s experience of shame about her imperfections, which had been *not-me*, frozen in an unchanging world, could begin to be situated in a present context that could be compared to the past, a new context in which imperfection no longer had to mean the same thing.