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Commentary: The Role of the Theory of Unformulated Experience in Anne Erreich's "The Innate Capacity for the Representation of Subjective Experience: The Infant's Mind Is Neither Primitive nor Prerepresentational"

I thank the editors for the invitation to contribute a commentary on Anne Erreich's use of my work in her article. In these remarks I focus on the errors in Erreich's account of the theory of unformulated experience. I do not engage in a dialogue about the issues of development that are the subject of Erreich's essay, nor do I take up Erreich's use of the work of Howard Levine, the other writer whose work serves as a foil in her argument about the infantile mind.

I actually agree with most of Erreich's portrayal of "the competent infant," a fact that, given Erreich's understanding of my views, probably comes as a surprise to her. She believes that my work contradicts her views, and her argument with what she believes I have said figures prominently in the case she makes for the nature of the infant mind. But her understanding of my work is simply incorrect—and not just in its details. Although I recognize Erreich's presentation of some particular points as restatements of what I have said, the whole is wrong.

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Erreich claims that I take the view that adult psychopathology, especially severe varieties, is anchored in the failure, in the preverbal infant's mind, of the development of the capacity for mental representation of trauma. Erreich goes on to suggest that I eschew the "competent infant" and believe that infancy is a time of "primordial and unrepresented" states of mind.

I have simply never said any of these things. I am not only saying that Erreich has read me incorrectly; I have *never even addressed* either the sources of severe psychopathology or questions of psychic representation in infancy. Because of these basic errors, even those of Erreich's paraphrases of my thinking that I do recognize are so badly miscontextualized that they end up being assigned meanings that fall outside the range of reasonable interpretive freedom. I defend anyone's right to a degree of latitude in interpreting a text. But Erreich's descriptions of my work are not just controversial interpretations. They are unrecognizable; they read as if they are written about some other body of work than mine.

ERREICH'S PRESENTATION OF THE THEORY OF UNFORMULATED EXPERIENCE

The very first sentences of Erreich's abstract announce the major error Erreich makes about my work:

> The author [i.e., Erreich herself] cites the prominence of theories that locate serious adult psychopathology in the preverbal infant's inability to formulate or represent traumatic experience. The work of two such authors, H. Levine and D. B. Stern, is briefly considered.

It is true that because my origins lie in interpersonal psychoanalysis—in the work of Sullivan and, through him, Ferenczi, Levenson, and others—I have been, since I was a candidate, centrally interested in what happened in my patients' lives with significant others and what my patients made of those events—how they interpreted them. In today's North American psychoanalytic world, that is hardly unusual. Because those events occurred as much in the external world as in the mind of the patient (i.e., they were not what is usually meant by "intrapsychic"), events that had untoward effects might be understood to have been traumatic. From Sullivan (1940) I took the position that the primary defensive operation is dissociation, not repression, by which I mean that defense is most

basically an operation that prevents the creation of meaning, not isolation from consciousness of meaning that already exists.

But I have simply never said anything remotely suggesting that I "locate serious adult psychopathology in the preverbal infant's inability to formulate or represent traumatic experience." I have not even once discussed "'primitive' infant mentation" (a phrase linked to my views elsewhere in Erreich's article), the "preverbal infant," or the nature and/or origins of "serious adult psychopathology." I am incredulous at the suggestion, made in more than one place in the article, that "The 'infantile,' that is, the infant's 'unrepresented' or 'unformulated' experience, has come to be viewed as a primary pathogenic factor in Kleinian, French, and relational theories." I will not comment on whether that is a reasonable characterization of Kleinian and French psychoanalysis, but it is certainly not supportable as a characterization of relational psychoanalysis, as written by me or anyone else.

Why might Erreich have concluded that I believe that severely disturbed patients suffer from "the preverbal infant's inability to formulate or represent traumatic experience"? A possible answer to this question arises later in the article, when Erreich quotes from a review I wrote of a book coedited by Levine (Levine, Reed, & Scarfone, 2013). Early in the review, I wrote that the book was largely inspired by certain aspects of the work of André Green. In explaining Green's view, I wrote, "The basic problem of mind became, for Green, the means by which drive becomes connected with representations, thereby becoming usable in the activities of thought (which was always considered to be integrated with, and imbued with, affect)" (Stern, 2015, p. 493). I went on to say this: "In this frame of reference, an important aspect of psychopathology, especially more severe types, becomes the incapacity to create representations and link them with drive, leaving the mind to function somehow with voids and absences" (p. 493). It is quite clear that in the review, in saying this, I was characterizing Green's view. That is why I wrote, "In this frame of reference."

But Erreich attributes this view to *me!* She writes it this way:

> In a review of Levine et al.'s (2013) book, *Stern (2015) proposed that* [italics added] more severely disturbed patients suffer from "the incapacity to create representations and link them with drive, leaving the mind to function somehow with voids and absences."

It is so improbable that I would give the concept of drive this kind of central clinical or theoretical position that anyone at all familiar with my thinking, it seems to me, if they made this error, would immediately suspect that they'd gotten something very mixed up.

If the general impression left by Erreich did not so badly misrepresent my views, I might chalk up this error to carelessness. But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the error is tendentious. The misreading appears to be key to Erreich's mistaken impression that I believe that severe psychopathology is somehow linked to the failure in infancy to develop the capacity for representation. In fact, Erreich's misconstrual of this single passage may be the origin of that mistaken understanding. This possibility is made more likely by the fact that the misattributed passage is the only evidence Erreich cites to support her mistaken way of understanding my thinking on this point and by the fact that I have never taken a view, anywhere in my work, that corresponds to Erreich's understanding of what I have had to say.

I offer one last example of this kind. Erreich observes that the work of Levine and I "lack[s] a coherent developmental perspective." That is correct, at least in my own case, and I have written that way purposefully. The theory of unformulated experience began as an account of the pathway, in daily life and treatment, of what eventually becomes consciously appreciable experience. It is a theory tracing the emergence of formulated experience, as it changes from a relatively undifferentiated, nonconscious state to a more highly differentiated state that can become the object of reflection. This is a theory rooted in the clinical process, not in psychological development. It was devised as a way to think about what we have always called insight: the appearance of new thoughts, feelings, memories, perceptions, and so on. How does novel reflective experience emerge, and why so often does it go uncreated? The theory is a way of grasping the way ordinary knowing takes place.

And yet Erreich writes that "it is not always clear whether the provenance of the unrepresented and unformulated experiences they [i.e., Levine and myself] refer to is the infant's alone, or whether such states can also arise from adult experiences." This sentence reveals once again how poorly Erreich has grasped the theory she is criticizing. Unformulated experience, I say in answer to her question, is *constantly and expectably* being created and then going through the process of formulation: in childhood, in adulthood, anytime in human living at all. The theory of unformulated experience was created in an attempt to characterize both this

continuous flux, this movement of mind, and those other episodes, with other outcomes, when the mind is frozen, inhibited, rigidified, or otherwise drained of spontaneity. For accounts of this process, see almost anything I have written over the years, but most significantly, because the ideas are not just presented but explicated in these sources, *Unformulated Experience* (Stern, 1997) and *The Infinity of the Unsaid* (Stern, 2019), neither of which Erreich cites.

Erreich quite rightly raises the question of how one manages to know what experience *not* to formulate (for defensive reasons) without having formulated it already. How does one recognize the material to be dissociated unless its formulation (and thus the possibility of recognizing it) has already taken place?[1]

This has always been the question most frequently posed to me about unformulated experience. I was enough aware of it early in my thinking to have devoted a section of three chapters—"Reconsidering Self-Deception: Toward a Theory of Dissociation"—to addressing it in my first book, *Unformulated Experience: From Dissociation to Imagination in Psychoanalysis* (Stern, 1997, Chapters 5, 6, and 7), which, as I have said, Erreich does not cite. One of the answers was existential and philosophical in nature, anchored in Fingarette's (1963) thinking about self-deception, and the other is a pragmatic and phenomenological argument derived from a number of sources, most important among them William James's (1890) work on the stream of consciousness. I will forgo the philosophical argument here, for reasons of space. The latter, phenomenological view is that on the basis of James's "feelings of tendency," which is the vague sense of where thought is going before it goes there, the process of formulating experience can be interrupted or prevented altogether. I address this point because readers might not otherwise be aware that I ever made a substantial effort to grapple with the problem.

A BRIEF PRESENTATION OF THE THEORY OF UNFORMULATED EXPERIENCE

I have said what unformulated experience is not. Now let me add a few words about what it is. Please forgive the necessity, imposed by space

[1]As Erreich recognizes, this question also arises, in a slightly different form, in theorizing repression: Who represses? Freud could not logically support the claim that either consciousness or the unconscious was responsible. This was part of the reason for the structural theory, in which executive decisions about defense could be attributed to an unconscious part of the ego.

limitations, of presenting a view from a height. I must be satisfied with the hope that this account, bare bones as it is, provokes the reader's curiosity to learn more.

Erreich writes as if unformulated experience is just one more developmental account of the mind. As I have already said, it is not. It does not have a developmental thrust at all. It is, instead, an attempt to say something about how ordinary knowing and experiencing occurs, moment to moment. The idea is that consciousness is created and recreated continuously and that all conscious experience begins in an unformulated state. I took my cue not only from psychoanalytic sources but also from my study of academic cognitive psychology, as well as from philosophy, especially ontological hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1965/2004) most of all (Stern, 1997, Chapters 9–12). I set out to characterize all conscious experience—the formulation of unformulated experience—as the outcome of an interpretive process and the mind as an interpretive instrument. Sensory and perceptual material are not given but shaped (interpreted) from the raw materials, using the tools of culture to give experience its shape. Memory, thought, fantasy, and so on, are formulated continuously, for present purposes. Those present purposes, of course, are not only conscious but unconscious as well and are created not only by current circumstances but also by conscious and unconscious presences of the past and anticipations of the future.

The formulation of relatively undifferentiated material (unformulated experience) into meaningful, conscious experience takes place ceaselessly. The process can be interrupted by anxiety, though, resulting in the maintenance of some particular unformulated material in its original state. We can call this event the avoidance of formulation. Such defensively motivated avoidance of formulation is *dissociation*. The duration of dissociation ranges from momentary to lifelong. When dissociation of particular meanings happens repetitively, it is not because a static representation has been isolated from consciousness and then languishes there but because the formulation of the psychic material in question is ceaselessly and actively avoided.

A key point is that the eventual explicit, formulated meaning that emerges from any unformulated experience is not completely predetermined. Reality is understood, with Gadamer (1965/2004), as omnipresent but so manifold that several, or even many, interpretations of the same bit of reality (the same unformulated experience), sometimes even contradictory interpretations, may all be viable. (All conscious experience,

remember, is the outcome of an interpretive process.) When experience is unformulated, then, the eventual formulated, conscious experience remains to be selected from among the alternatives. The process of formulation is emergent, and the final meaning taken by any unformulated experience comes into being only as it takes on that final form.

So what is it that determines which of the unformulated possibilities will be selected? This is a decisive point in the process, the point at which the ongoing interaction of the present and past, reality and fantasy, self and object, result in the nature of the conscious experience that actually comes into being. The sum total of these interactions is known as the *interpersonal field*. We can say that the nature of the experience that two (or more) people can have in each other's presence (internal, psychic presence is just as significant an influence, of course, as external, physical presence) depends on the current configuration of the field between them. In creating this model of mind, I was trying to shape a theory of unconscious process and the creation of consciousness that was not only anchored by the intrapsychic but was also sensitive to context, especially the interpersonal context.

This emphasis encourages clinical focus on the nature of analytic relatedness and the analyst's unconscious, personal, inevitable, continuous involvement in it. The capacity for either the analyst or the patient to have new thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and memories depends on identifying and then freeing up, or melting, the rigid or frozen places in the field, rigidities (dissociations) that effectively "lock" the relatedness between the two people into stereotyped forms that may not even be possible to identify for long periods of time. The playing-out of these rigidly structured forms of the field is the interpersonal/relational definition of *enactment* (Stern, 2010, 2015a, in press-a).

I hope it is clear that unformulated experience is not, and could not be, pathological or pathogenic. It is the normal, expectable form of all experience: that which becomes consciously appreciable and that which does not. What *is* pathological or pathogenic (I prefer to use different terms than these; I use them here because Erreich does) is the interpersonal processes, in life and in treatment, that result in the anxiety that leads to the dampening of the interpersonal field's spontaneity—the consideration, that is, of the full range of interpretive possibilities—and therefore to the interruption of the ongoing flow from unformulated experience to formulation. Anxiety compromises the freedom to experience.

Let me say a few words about the relationship between unformulated experience and more traditionally defined unconscious representations. In my initial theory (Stern, 1997), unformulated experience was conceptualized as what the processes of mind "look like" from the perspective of consciousness. Consciousness was understood as *reflective* consciousness, and the vagueness or lack of differentiation of unformulated experience was therefore defined phenomenologically. The way we understand the nature of our own unformulated experience, that is, depends on how it "looks" from within reflective consciousness.

I took the point of view in those days that explicit, reflective consciousness requires language, and so it was from a conscious, linguistic perspective that I imagined how unformulated experience would appear. Unformulated experience, then, from a third-person perspective (i.e., from the perspective of an outside observer, not by the "occupant" of the mind in question) can be understood to be routinely composed of representations; but these are not verbal-linguistic representations but rather nonverbal, imagistic, or procedural ones (see especially Stern, 2019, in press-a).

In the revision of the theory of unformulated experience that I have referred to several times (Stern, 2019), rather than locating the criterion of formulation in linguistic articulation, I have reconceptualized the difference between formulated and unformulated experience as a matter of *meaningfulness*. Unformulated experience is not yet meaningful; the process of formulation is the emergence of meaningfulness. Formulated meanings *feel like me,* allowing one to *accept* and *use* them in the *spontaneous construction of creative living*. Some meanings, when formulated, are *articulated:* they become meaningful in verbal-linguistic forms. Other meanings are *realized* when they are formulated: they become meaningful in nonverbal forms, imagistic or procedural.

THE PROPER ANTITHESIS

Even if Erreich were correct to understand me as she did, my work still would not be the most appropriate foil for her views of the infant mind. The most precise and direct antithesis within psychoanalysis of Erreich's view is instead constituted by all those expressly developmental accounts in which early infancy is portrayed as a relatively undifferentiated, objectless state, and development is conceptualized as the differentiation that

results from the advent of psychic representation, representation itself being created by the emergence of objects and certain key kinds of relatedness between object and infant.[2] Often these accounts, unlike my own, actually do locate severe psychopathology in the failure of symbolization to develop properly in the context of the earliest object relationships. Winnicott, Bion, and Green are prime examples here, but we could also cite the variations of this view found in Freud himself, Aulagnier, Balint, Bion, Laplanche, Loewald, Mahler, Roussillon, and a plethora of others. In the end, I actually do not believe that this kind of developmental account must contradict Erreich's view of the competent infant, but this broad, alternative view, in its explicitly developmental statement that the capacity for psychic representation is either not present in the infant or develops from primitive infantile psychic elements, is the most direct and natural antithesis of Erreich's position. (See Stern, in press-b, for a review of theories of unrepresented states and the relationship of unrepresented states to earlier psychoanalytic theories of representation.) It is these writers, not I, who have supplied the most explicit alternative to Erreich's views, and it is their views, not mine, that deserve Erreich's attention in furthering her project.

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[2]There do exist theories in cognitive science and philosophy that deny the validity of the concept of mental representation altogether, thereby contradicting more explicitly than any psychoanalytic theory the computational theory of mind. Pitt (2022) cited a dozen of the most widely known and discussed of these views.

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