"The Noise Monitor" : A Developmental Perspective on Verbal and Nonverbal Meaning-Making in Psychoanalysis
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J Am Psychoanal Assoc 2011 59: 961
DOI: 10.1177/0003065111422539

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“THE NOISE MONITOR”:
A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE ON
VERBAL AND NONVERBAL MEANING-
MAKING IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

This paper discusses a contribution of developmental theory to the
psychoanalytic concept of “the talking cure.” The developmental theory
presented is the dyadic expansion of consciousness model (Tronick 2007),
a model consistent with the principles of nonlinear systems theory. The
concept of “polysemic bundles” as a way of understanding the multiple
simultaneous meaning-making processes occurring in dyadic communication
is introduced. The theoretical discussion—focused primarily on the analysis
of children—is illustrated with descriptions of videotaped sequences from
the first session in the analysis of a five-year-old boy. The relevance of
these insights to the analytic treatment of adults is then considered.

Most would agree that language, particularly its use in interpreting
symbolic meaning, is of essential importance in psychoanalysis. As a technique, interpretation intends to transform the patient’s unconscious
meaning so that it can eventually be integrated into conscious mental life.
From a theoretical perspective, it remains the primary means of linking
overt behavior with the unconscious mind. In child analysis, the meaning
of a child’s play is usually the focus of interpretive activity.

Controversies about the role and the technique of interpretation in
child and adult analysis have generally revolved around the focus of the
interpretation and the centrality of interpretation in the therapeutic effect.
With regard to the latter point, many authors have discussed features of

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Submitted for publication February 8, 2011.

DOI: 10.1177/0003065111422539
the analytic process outside of interpretation that bring about change (Waelder 1936; Jacobs 1994; Levenson 1994; McLaughlin 1992; Tronick 1998; Stern et al. 1998; Mitchell 1988, 2002; Gabbard and Westen 2003; Smith 2007). Most of these noninterpretive features of therapeutic action involve language; all other forms of communication are characterized as nonverbal. Yet these means of communication do not exist solely in contrast to verbal communication, but include meanings actualized in the form of expressed affect, gestures, vocalization, even odors, and they can carry dynamic meaning. Instead of “nonverbal,” let us call these communications “somatic.” These less well-studied somatic communicative exchanges constitute a type of data different from the psychoanalytic data of verbal and other symbolic acts, although, as noted above, others have considered the importance of nonverbal communication in the therapeutic process.

Whereas psychoanalytic data are taken in and made sense of by “the analytic instrument”—explicit processes of the analyst’s mind primarily in highly attentive states—somatic, moment-to-moment data are not “analyzed” in the same way. Though not fully understood, these forms of communication are “analyzed” with implicit affective, cognitive, and physiological processes—what we sometimes refer to as intuition.

This is not to say that the analyst is blind to this kind of data. In fact, the analyst perceives much somatic information—e.g., the patient’s posture, body movements, facial expression, tone of voice—but these important observations are not as readily recalled as verbal communications. They may be difficult to put into words, are usually left out of case reports, and are often never in conscious awareness. Yet these perceptions, though not in awareness, contribute to the analyst’s reverie, to his recognition of unassimilated beta particles, and to other “subjective” analytic experience.

This important form of meaning can be studied in videotapes of analytic sessions, where the analytic interactions can be directly observed, often in multiple viewings and slow motion, in a kind of temporal microscope that allows the identification of tiny elements of dynamic patterns and organization (see, e.g., Harrison 2009). Observing these events on videotape does not constitute introjection or projection, but is an alternative and more systematic way of exploring these data. Videotape analysis allows the inclusion of additional information about the analytic session, the sharing of these observations directly with colleagues, and the integration of radically different perspectives on the analytic experience.

Does our interest in the somatic and moment-to-moment lead us to minimize the importance of verbal communication? Not at all. We agree
with Litowitz (2011) that from the beginning, language is an essential part of development and of the growth that occurs in psychoanalysis. As we will explain, our developmental model holds that multiple meaning-making processes occur simultaneously and that the psychoanalytic—symbolic meaning-making with language and in play—cannot be separated from the nonverbal/somatic meaningful experience. At any one moment, a slice of communication can be examined that represents what we call a “polysemic bundle” of communicative behaviors, a bundle that includes a mix of language and somatic expressions of meaning.

Why choose child analytic cases? One of the benefits of studying child analytic cases with videotape is that the observational data and psychoanalytic data are both readily available. Children routinely use action in their play as well as language, and videotape is an effective means of observing both words and actions. Another advantage to child cases is that they are easier to videotape than adult cases, because young children are less likely than older children and adults to experience videotape as an intrusive factor in the analytic session.

This paper has three parts. The first provides the background of our developmental theory. The second includes a description of the beginning of the analytic treatment of a five-year-old boy that illustrates the theoretical points. The case material is organized around two pivotal events at the beginning of treatment: an interpretation and a transitional moment that also involved verbal communication. The transitional moment illustrates the child’s transition to pretend play and the analyst’s decision to conduct an analysis. The interpretation illustrates how language communication was used together with important nonverbal communication to co-create new meanings about control in a relationship. After the interpretation and the transitional sequence involving verbal communication, we explain how the use of data from videotape analysis interpreted with developmental theory adds to the meaning derived from the symbolic data of psychoanalysis. Finally, we end with a brief discussion of the relevance of developmental theory to the analytic treatment of adults.

DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY: THE DYADIC EXPANSION OF CONSCIOUSNESS MODEL

Background

Both psychoanalysis and infant research study the growth process. Psychoanalysis studies growth at the level of complex relational patterns,
such as transference, and symbolic meaning communicated by language. In child analysis, psychoanalysts focus on the play, primarily the thematic content of the play—again, organized by language. Infant researchers study “local level” nonverbal/somatic interaction, occurring in a second or less (sometimes in a split second) and communicating meaning, affect, and intention. Expanding and elaborating his “mutual regulation model,” Tronick has developed a model derived from infant observational research designed to explain how growth takes place both in normal development and in psychotherapy and analysis (Tronick 1998, 2007; Tronick and Beeghly 2011). This model, the dyadic expansion of consciousness model, can be a useful complement to psychoanalytic theory in that it allows for making sense of a number of features in analytic process, none of which are adequately explained by analytic theory. These features include the actual moment-to-moment interactive “micro-process,” the meaning conveyed in somatic communication, the messiness and unpredictability of analytic change at the local level, and the tendency toward complexity and coherence.

**Dyadic Expansion**

According to this model, growth results from the co-creation of new meaning in a process that includes all the meaning-making capacities of the individual—mind and body. The model also insists that these meaning-making processes are dependent on the developmental capacities of a child of a particular age and culture. Infants and young children make meaning with capacities different from those used by adults. Yet the meanings they make are equally important to their functioning and development. For example, infants make meaning with their bodies, communicating affect and intention to their caregivers with gestures, facial expressions, and vocalizations. As Piaget (1954) puts it, infants understand the world using sensorimotor processes (an object is what the infant can do with it), or, as Stechler and Latz (1966) put it, infants are “sensory affective” (an object or event is what it makes the infant feel). Young children, whose cognitive capacities do not yet include abstract language and symbolic expression in speech, elaborate metaphors about their experience in pretend play. Consistent with observations of infant-caregiver behavior, the co-creative meaning-making process consists of matching and mismatching interactive events that convey intentions toward the other and toward the world, with an emphasis on the repair of the mismatches, that is, the co-creation of new intentional matches (Tronick and Beeghly 2011).
Dyadic expansion is embedded in open systems theory, or dynamic systems theory, and therefore follows the general principles of this meta-theory (von Bertalanffy 1968; Sander 1995, 2008; Galatzer-Levy 2004). In the model, the human being is considered to be a living system, and has the characteristics of (a) self-organization, (b) unpredictability, and (c) increasing complexity and coherence with growth. Open systems theory also states that growth must occur in order for a living system such as a human being to continue to exist (Prigogine and Stengers 1997), and for humans the most important form of growth is the growth of meaning.

Basic Assumptions from Dyadic Expansion Applied to Interpretation

In the discussion of interpretation we will make use of several basic assumptions of the dyadic expansion model. (1) In human beings, growth takes place through making new meanings about oneself and one’s relationship to the world. The meaning-making capacities used by the individual are “age-possible.” (2) Meaning-making is co-creative and interactive. These qualities exist even when the individual is making meaning without the help of another person, in that a multitude of meaning-making processes operate in interaction with one another in the individual’s body and mind, and within different parts of both. However, when another person is a partner in the meaning-making, the process is enriched. (3) The process of meaning-making has the qualities of variability, unpredictability, and the tendency toward a balance of complexity and coherence. (4) Growth takes place through the increase in complexity and coherence of the individual and of the meanings he or she makes. Growth of complexity and coherence is particularly important, because it operates as the selective factor determining which meanings are incorporated into the individual, or whether any are.

From this perspective, interpretation has a number of characteristics at variance with the classical view. The first is that interpretation is one way of co-creating shared meaning. This is different from the idea that the analyst discovers the patient’s hidden meanings, an old-fashioned idea but one still often associated with interpretation, especially in case reports and discussions. The second is that interpretation is age- and culture-dependent, in that children bring meaning and the meaning-making capacities that are possible for them at their age and in their culture. Third, interpretation takes place in a process of matching and mismatching of meanings and intentions, with the co-creative reparation of mismatches leading to the emergence of new meanings. Thus, a coherent interpretation already
represents a co-created shared meaning and still is just one step in the interactive process of meaning-making. Meaning-making is a bootstrapping process of coming to a shared meaning bit by bit, match by mismatch. Fourth, interpretation is messy and unpredictable. There is no one correct or best interpretation but only ones that emerge from the meaning-making processes. The meaning must increase the complexity and coherence of the individual if it is to be “accepted.” Finally, a good interpretation is not fixed and done, but is made with the assumption that it is one step in the constant evolution of meaning for the individual.

**Gains from Focus on “Local Level” Activity**

What is gained from using a model like the dyadic expansion model to help us understand what goes on at the “local level” of analytic process? Whereas speech begins to play a role at the level of seconds, the level of communicative exchange that occurs in single seconds and microseconds precludes speech. The meanings communicated at this level are impossible to note and remember as they occur and are therefore difficult to reconstruct from memory. In the analytic session, a lot of communication is occurring at the local level (Beebe, Jaffe, and Lachmann 1992; Beebe and Lachmann 1994; Tronick 2005).

It is also important to keep in mind that there are various temporal levels (hours, days, years), with their own levels of meanings (e.g., model scenes, RIGs, working models, representations)—that emerge from the moment-to-moment over time, with reiteration and chronicity (Sander 2008; Lewis and Granic 2002; Tronick 2002). These levels of longer duration in turn influence the moment-to-moment meanings. The interplay of temporal levels—real time in the moment-by-moment and increasingly longer time spans—can be illustrated by the analogy of rain and erosion described by Granic and Patterson (2006). Raindrops falling on a flat plain first fall somewhat randomly but over time some begin to cluster into what become rivulets; these rivulets carve depressions into the land that then draw more raindrops into them, creating rivers. In other words, organization or patterns observable in real time have emerged through the repetition of many events occurring in time frames smaller than our ordinary capacities for observation can access. With regard to interpretation, this local level perspective focuses on the interactive, complex, and messy process of communication of meaning that occurs over time, from which an interpretation eventually emerges.
Making Sense of Videotape Data with the Dyadic Expansion Model

Videotape observation demonstrates the contribution of moment-to-moment communications of meaning, via pragmatic speech patterns, pauses and turn-taking patterns, and bodily communications through gaze, facial expression, gestures, and body position, to the verbal exchange. Unlike meanings couched in language, these meanings conveyed via nonlinguistic/somatic means are neither explicit nor even knowable in the usual sense of the word; nonetheless, they are part of the multileveled meaning being made in the moment. This is what Tronick has referred to as a state of consciousness—the largely out-of-awareness sense of oneself in relation to the other and the world, a state of being. The building up of meaning in an interpretation, from split seconds to the multi-second time frame in which speech occurs, can be observed on videotape: the bit-by-bit, back-and-forth interactive process that interpretation entails. In fact, interpretation—even with adults—is not simply an explicit, language-based process. Rather, it is a process in which multiform, multi-level meanings are brought into play to create something we then categorize as an “interpretation.” What is remembered as a coherent formulation made by the analyst, when viewed on videotape, is often a halting, self-correcting exchange that always includes contributions from each party. Thus while the emergence of an interpretation may seem and be felt to be an “aha” moment, it is actually the outcome of the dynamics of communication.

CLINICAL CASE

Background of the Case

Five-year-old Sean came to analysis because of disruptive behavior and severe separation anxiety. It is usual in my practice (AMH) to begin a treatment with a consultation to the parents that includes a family play session and a review of the videotape of the family session with the parents (Harrison 2005). In some cases the parents choose to continue the discussion in subsequent meetings, or even to come for additional family meetings. In such an extended consultation, the goal of the consult is to help parents make changes in family behavior patterns judged to contribute to the child’s symptomatic behavior. This had been the plan for the extended consultation to Sean’s parents. I met with the family—which included Sean’s mother, father, and brother Mattie (two years younger)—six times and then reviewed videotapes of the sessions in additional sessions with the parents.
In the family sessions, Sean demonstrated imaginative capacity, but frequently became so dysregulated that he could not settle down to play in the first place, or that he interrupted the play that had been initiated. When he did play, he and his brother developed themes of “boss” guys who roamed around together in a team, exerting their power over the other characters, all quite hapless. In one play that particularly delighted both boys, the boss guys took the female doll (identified by them as “the girl”) to a graveyard, to be scared by ghosts. Characteristically, this play ended in a wild, dysregulated scene in which the coherence of the narrative was lost and the parents had to set limits on Sean’s physical activity.

Although both parents gained considerably in insight and empathy regarding Sean during the extended consultation, and also developed new skills in limit-setting and pretend play, Sean’s fearfulness and disruptive behavior did not improve with this intervention. The parents accepted my recommendation that I see Sean alone in a session in order to consider an individual treatment. It was against the background of these family play sessions that Sean’s first individual session with me took place. This session convinced me that Sean and I could work together effectively in a play therapy setting, and shortly thereafter we began an analytic treatment.

First Interpretation

I had been looking forward to seeing Sean, hoping that in this meeting with me he would be able to use the imaginative play I had witnessed in the family sessions. I was also impressed with the degree of dysregulation he exhibited in the family meetings, at school, and at home, and worried about whether I would be able to keep him regulated. The account that follows is based on a combination of my subjective experience of the session and my review of the videotape.

The session did not start out on a felicitous note. Sean had been prepared for the fact that this time he would be playing with me alone in the office, but the meaning he took from this preparation did not seem to coincide with the experience of his mother’s leaving him with me at the door of my office and going into the waiting room without him. After a while, he demanded “the girl.” He remarked that she was “gonna be a grown-up girl” and that he wanted to “throw her into the dump,” by which he meant my fireplace. He was distractible, paced about the room, and dropped objects he was trying to hold. Sean was angry and scared. He was angry at girls—such as his mother and me—because they abandoned him (his
mother), bossed him around (me), and tricked him (probably both of us). He was having difficulty using his “age-possible” process—pretend play—to make sense of himself and his place in the world, which further dysregulated him.

My agenda in the session was to connect with him individually (rather than as a family member), to attempt adequate regulation, and to explore his capacity for pretend play in this new setting. In response to his threat to throw the girl doll into the real fireplace, I suggested that we build a pretend fireplace, but Sean maintained his antagonistic stance. I began to feel a little stressed, not only because he was rejecting my invitation to pretend play, but also because I did not feel connected with him. As if to underscore his own feeling of disconnection, he left to go into the adjoining playroom, stating in a defiant tone, “I’m going to get a Matchbox!” Though this explicitly referred to the Matchbox cars he and his brother had used in the family play, the reference to the fireplace is unmistakable.

In spite of his retaliatory abandonment of me in this gesture, he promptly returned, indicating that it was the “tricking” aspect of his ambivalent relationship to his mother that was currently in the foreground, not ultimate abandonment. Back in the room with me, he forcefully dropped one car and then the other on the rug. Then he gazed at the fireplace and ran his hand provocatively along the fireplace screen, glancing briefly over his shoulder at me. I was thinking of his mother’s description of his perseverative behavior, getting locked into a position and being unable to move on. Grateful to recognize a behavior I could frame as a problem from his point of view, and hoping in this way to strengthen our alliance, I said, “Yeah. Once those ideas get into your head, it’s very hard to get them out.” Sean responded forcefully, with impelling certitude, “Once I make up my mind about something, it gets done! Even if it’s something I’m really not supposed to do!” He was pacing.

Appreciative of his direct response and amused by his bravado, I was encouraged about making an alliance and began to formulate an answer. I then gave my first interpretation: “Oh, well, that could be kind of a problem, you know. (pause) Especially if that’s the way you feel it has to be. (pause) Because kids are stronger if they have a lot of different ways of doing things instead of just one.” Sean suggested that he was rejecting my contribution by declining to respond directly, and by walking away, while coughing and clearing his throat.
DISCUSSION
In this intervention, I offered insight primarily through verbal communication. I explicitly linked Sean’s demanding, oppositional behavior to negative consequences, and implicitly to inner meanings about strength and weakness. I also suggested the possibility of a better alternative: “if they have more ways of doing things instead of just one.” In addition to this verbal message, though, nonverbal/somatic communication was key. My tone of voice was serious but positive, conveying the meaning that I saw a problem in what he had said to me, but that I also had ideas about how to help him, and my ideas had to do with making him stronger. My pauses, a conscious technique I often use, created a rhythmic, turn-taking pattern, parsing the information into small enough bits for him to take in. The pauses also conveyed my willingness for him to interrupt me and indicated that I recognized him as agentic, perhaps even communicating that I might not be as controlling as he thought. While I was giving the interpretation, my gaze was averted, and I was moving slowly around the room, making small gestures to set up the toys. These actions were designed to minimize the confrontational nature of my remarks and also to possibly help regulate him; they conveyed the meaning, “This is not a big deal.”

We would call this interpretation a dynamic interpretation, suggesting a conflict between his wish to have his wishes gratified and the negative behavior he was using to make that happen, resulting in his putting himself in a position of weakness instead of the desired position of strength. The timing of the interpretation, though—in the first session and in the context of Sean’s rejecting behavior—also gave the interpretation the quality of a “lob” (G. Rochlin, personal communication). By “lob” we mean an interpretation offered with the implicit understanding that one doesn’t know when or where it will “come down.” In dynamic systems terms a lob can be thought of as a perturbation to the attractor state that Sean is in, and as such its effect is unpredictable. It does not demand an immediate response, though later in the treatment it may be found useful. Interestingly, although Sean might have intended to reject my interpretation, I felt a sense of relief (though that feeling was premature), probably because I had created a coherent meaning in my own mind during the course of trying to communicate something verbally to Sean.

The Transition to Play
In terms of our co-creative process, Sean and I initially had more misses than hits. Sean wanted to throw the doll into the fireplace; I set a
limit. Sean initiated play with a “submarine” (his name for the Matchbox vehicle he had chosen), and I joined him; Sean got up and left. Sean initiated play with a “sunken ship” (a toy barn the brothers had called a sunken ship in the family sessions). I joined him, and Sean left. Sean turned the siren attached to a building in a toy village, and then left that toy also. Sean returned to the sunken ship, discounted its pretend identity, and referred to it as “just a big pile of skeletons,” referring to the “cows and sheep” in the barn. When and if we would make a connection—repair—was unpredictable. We seemed to be on a pathway leading to disengagement on his part or to mutual antagonism, which would reproduce the unfortunate pattern he repeated with his parents and teachers.

However, instead of disengagement, Sean and I entered into an interesting and mutually involving pretend play with a surprising, creative ending. I was unprepared for it, but once it happened I was delighted and felt ready to commit myself to do an analysis with this little boy. After the session I found myself wondering, “What happened? What changed between the two of us that allowed us to begin playing? What shifted from an apparent stalemate into rich collaborative play, and when did it happen? Because I had videotaped the session, I decided to look for the moment when I could recognize a transition. I found it in the sequence just after the remark about the “big pile of skeletons,” when Sean suddenly moved away from the barn and began to turn the siren in the toy village again—this time in sustained, repetitive play that was elaborated.

Further examination of the videotape reveals additional data. At the beginning of the sequence, right after making his devaluing remark about the animals in the barn, Sean closed the barn door and sat upright on his heels. His gaze was averted, but he rolled a plastic car up and down along the carpet and twisted his mouth from side to side, both self-regulatory behaviors. Although I was not explicitly aware of it at the time, the videotape demonstrated that he was working very hard to hold himself together in order to allow me to take a vocal turn. He was interested in what I had to say. At this point, without conscious awareness of Sean’s implicit invitation to me, I leaned forward from the waist and placed a doll on the carpet between us. During my action of sitting forward, I began to speak. In my speech, I brought an element of play from our shared past—the family sessions—that fit Sean’s “skeletons” remark in symbolic content, affect, and arousal state (Sander’s “specific fittedness”). I said, “Skeletons, huh? That reminds me of the place where people go to get lost and scared!” Again, I made pauses in meaningful places to maximize the intelligibility
of my communication: “Skeletons, huh? (pause) That reminds me of the place where people go (pause) to get *lost and scared!*” The pace of my speech was unusually slow, and in my articulation of the italicized words I used a “marked voice” in which I imitated being scared (Fonagy et al. 2002).

After I finished my speech, I indicated nonverbally, and again out of my awareness, that I wanted Sean to take a turn. I did this by first sitting back and then slowly crossing my arms across my chest, as if in added emphasis. The videotape demonstrates an impressive attunement, as while I sat way back, Sean’s body simultaneously moved forward in the space between us. In the videotape it looks like a square dance do-si-do. Sean completed his move by placing the doll I had put on the rug into the car he had been rolling. It’s as if he were saying, “I am now ready to play *together* with you.” As he placed the doll into the car, he spoke: “Where they get tricked!”—adding his bit to the evolving meaning of the graveyard remark. Sean also added nonverbal features to his verbal communication. Linger on the word “where,” he generated emphasis for the most meaningful word, “tricked.”

This transitional sequence in the session presents a series of polysemic bundles. For example, as I moved forward and began to speak, I took an action turn and a vocal turn simultaneously, and the verbal meaning of my vocalization had symbolic value that fit the two actions. It is likely—though my back is to the video camera and it is impossible to view my face—that my facial expression also communicated affect and intention consistent with the content of my speech and my other moves. I recall that I averted my gaze, a powerful communication of the intention not to intrude. The “bundles” are packages of elements of meaning of different types and in different modes of communication. They do not constitute meaning singly, but in a continually evolving process the polysemic bundles accumulate increasingly complex bits of meaning. These bits of meaning hold together but may shift and change according to the differing “take” on what is going on inside each partner’s mind and how that relates to what is going on between them. Infant researchers have characterized configurations that tend to go together in infants that convey meaning, though language is not involved (Weinberg and Tronick 1994).

Sean and I thus collaborated in multiple, simultaneous modes of meaning-making in creating the beginning of a new meaning for “lost and scared.” The new meaning involved “tricking,” and suggested a way out of the weak position (of being “lost and scared”), through turning passive into active, becoming the “tricker” rather than the “trickee” (A. Freud
1936). Within a second or two of his remark about getting tricked, Sean moved to the siren play that later evolved into the rich, imaginative play characterizing the rest of the session. However, it is important to emphasize, and for the reader to take seriously, that there was no necessity for these events to have occurred as they did. The sense of natural consequence we have about events in a session is only retrospective, not prospective. I might have stayed with the sunken ship. Sean might have rejected the “graveyard” remark. Thinking of “what might have happened” is a useful tool for understanding the co-creative and unpredictable nature of exchanges.

**The Complex Meaning of “Tricking”: Building Up to the “Noise Monitor”**

Sean had an old meaning about how to be powerful that included the polarized positions of gaining power through bullying or bossing somebody, or, on the other hand, being weak and helpless, and bossed around and bullied by someone else. When Sean felt weak and helpless, he often could not stop himself from trying to assume the powerful position and turning into a boss and a bully. This was in spite of the fact that he knew such behavior made his parents and teachers angry at him. Indeed, his provocative behavior increased his vulnerability by threatening these important relationships. The tricking play initiated in the family meetings as a way to turn the tables on the powerful mother figure was a creative solution offering more possibilities. For one thing, it had the potential for being playful and fun—especially when two people were playing at “tricking” together. Also, there was more room for creative elaboration and improvisation in tricking than in bossing and bullying.

In the session, Sean moved from the idea of ghosts in the graveyard tricking “the girl” doll in the family meetings, to now “tricking” me by turning the siren in the toy village off and on. Picking up the “the girl” doll, I took the role of “the girl,” who was trying to sleep but was repeatedly subjected to the terrible siren noise. Sean made the noise intermittent, teasing or “tricking” the girl. Whenever he cranked up the siren, I as the girl made her cry out, “Oh no! There goes that terrible noise again!” at which Sean would laugh uproariously. The symbolic meaning of the play is interesting in terms of the transference. “The girl” seemed to represent both his mother (the family meetings and his wish to retaliate against her for leaving him with me) and me in the maternal transference. Yet the girl also appeared to be a self-representation; Sean himself felt tricked, both in the session and in life. Another feature of the self-representation is that high-pitched sounds such as escalators were strongly aversive to Sean. In
effect, the play seemed to symbolize a complex family pattern of interaction in which mother and child exerted aggressive control over each other in an escalating exchange that made each feel helpless and miserable.

The verbal and nonverbal process together expressed the relentlessness of this relational pattern in the repetitive quality of the play. The same basic exchange occurred over and over for about twenty-five minutes. However, the tricking play was also fun, in that Sean and I—in contrast to his experience with his mother—enjoyed the trick. Each time, I would look at Sean, and either he or I would initiate the new episode of the girl’s torture. Sean’s facial expression would communicate happy anticipation as I set the girl up to be tricked. For example, I would say, “Oh good. I don’t hear the noise. I think it’s going to stop.” Then I would wait. Sometimes Sean would wait too. In that case, I would make the girl say, “Oh, I knew I was right! It is going to stop! I am so glad!” Sean would practically burst with pleasure as he vigorously turned the siren again, provoking screams of dismay from “the girl.” As the play continued, I would add small variations on the theme to introduce enough variety to maintain my interest, since the play was exhausting and would have been tedious without it. At one point, for example, I made the girl cry out, “Oh, no! What can I do? Call the police! Call the fire department!” Each time I made the girl speak, I would check it out with Sean by pausing and glancing at his face. He was excited and happy, and intensely involved. His expression was alert, and he was grinning. In fact, his bodily organization improved as we continued, in that he held himself straighter and the moves of his arms, head, and torso were better coordinated, with less extraneous movement. This was not apparent to me in the session, but afterward, looking at the videotape, I could observe the difference.

The “Noise Monitor”: The Transition to Psychoanalysis

After many repetitions of the “tricking the girl” play with the siren, Sean began to speak, using language to elaborate the nonverbal play. As I made the girl complain about the noise, Sean declared gleefully, “It’ll get even worse!” I made the girl exclaim, “Oh, no! What am I going to do?!” This time, in response, Sean became acutely more dysregulated, tossing back his head and opening his mouth wide. He exclaimed, with an expansive sweep of his arms and a rare direct gaze, “I got you a noise monitor! . . . It shows how loud the noise is and how quiet the noise is! . . . You can control it!”
Sean’s increased dysregulation in our view indicated a period of disorganization preparatory to his taking the risk of trying an innovation. He was using the scaffold of our repetitive (and therefore highly predictable) interactions to take this initiative. It is doubtful that he would have been able to make this creative move without this preparatory period of repetitions. I was impressed, though I had no idea what he meant by a “noise monitor.” I made the girl ask, “A noise monitor?” Sean thrust the Matchbox vehicle he had been using for a submarine toward me. “You look at the buttons and it tells you how loud it is!” he explained. The wonderfully irrational idea of having to “look” at something to tell how loud it was is an example of the “age-possible” feature of co-creative meaning-making. Although I knew the idea was literally incorrect, I could appreciate Sean’s meaning; he was offering an *additional* way of “controlling” the noise. He was expressing empathy toward the girl, giving her a tool to protect herself; he was willing to share and co-regulate.

This creative use of pretend play marked another important transition. It suggested to me not only that Sean was capable of pretend play, but that he could make effective use of play therapy. In other words, he could use me as a collaborator in moving the play forward in the direction of greater complexity and coherence. We started at twice a week, and when his behavior became more problematic at school, we increased the frequency to four times a week. I was glad I had decided to recommend analysis for Sean. He grew a great deal in the lengthy analysis. However, it might not have turned out that way. The rhythm of repetition with periodic variations on the theme introduced by Sean, or occasionally by me, might not have moved us forward. We might have gotten stuck in a rigid pattern.

**DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY AND ADULT ANALYSIS**

One approach to the integration of infant research and psychoanalysis is to reference the adult literature that uses developmental models to explain therapeutic change. There are many, but here I will focus on two major contributors to the classical literature—Winnicott and Loewald—in particular to two papers by these authors: Loewald’s major 1960 paper, “On the Therapeutic Action of Psycho-Analysis,” and Winnicott’s early and less well-known but exquisite paper, “The Observation of Infants in a Set Situation” (1941). The approaches these two authors use to developmental concepts are different—Winnicott describes direct observation of infants and mothers, whereas Loewald stays at the level of
theoretical abstraction—but both make important links between what goes on between infant and caregiver and patient and psychoanalyst, and both make central points that correspond with the dyadic expansion model.

In the “Set Situation” paper, Winnicott describes his detailed observations of the behavior of infants in his consulting room when they see a shiny metal spatula placed on a table within easy reach. The placement of the spatula within view and reach of the baby is the “set situation.” He suggests that this situation “can be used as an instrument of research” (p. 229). In his observations, he focuses on a moment of “hesitation” when the baby notices the spatula, just before grasping it. Winnicott postulates that the infant is experiencing conflict about whether to take the attractive spatula. Is the act permissible or not? He notes physiological markers of this internal state of indecision: salivation and a “softening” of the mouth.

Winnicott places the infant’s conflicts about the intention to take the spatula in the context of the caregiving relationship. He says, “You can imagine that mothers show by their ability or relative inability to follow this suggestion something of what they are like at home” (p. 229). In other words, the baby carries expectancies about the mother’s characteristic reactions to his exploratory behavior into this new situation. Although Winnicott frames the baby’s conflicts in traditional Kleinian symbolism, he also states in more general terms that these expectancies derive from earlier experiences with the mother; if the mother has been angry or prohibitive, then the infant will more likely expect a prohibitive response, and this expectancy will contribute to the baby’s hesitation. Here Winnicott is not just describing the baby’s intention to have a pleasurable experience with the spatula. He is talking about the baby’s agency, which he refers to as “self-expression” (p. 230). Taking care to distinguish the various age-possible capacities of babies, he cautions that if the baby is thirteen months old and has begun to develop language, “the situation rapidly becomes complicated and approaches that of the ordinary analytic situation which develops in the analysis of a two-year-old child,” presumably including the creation of primitive symbols (p. 231).

Winnicott then relates the case of a seven-month-old child with asthma. In his consultation, he was able to recognize that two asthmatic reactions occurred during the “period in which the child hesitated about taking the spatula,” elaborating the idea that the hesitation implied mental conflict (p. 235). He then suggests that the asthmatic reaction resulted from anxiety, and that the anxiety was influenced by the expectancies the baby had developed through repeated experiences with the mother (p. 237).
Perhaps the most revolutionary concept in the paper is Winnicott’s description of the small repetitive events that underscore the developmental and, correspondingly, the therapeutic process: “The experience of daring to want and to take the spatula and to make it his own without in fact altering the stability of the immediate environment acts as a kind of object-lesson which has the therapeutic value for the infant. At the age which we are considering and also through childhood such an experience is not merely temporarily reassuring: the cumulative effect of happy experiences and of a stable and friendly atmosphere around a child is to build up his confidence in people in the external world and his general feeling of security. The child’s belief in the good things and relationships inside himself is also strengthened. Such little steps in the solution of the central problems come in the every-day life of the infant and young child, and every time the problem is solved something is added to the child’s general stability, and the foundation of emotional development is strengthened” (p. 245; see also Tronick 2002).

Winnicott continues, making the correspondence of the developmental process he is describing in the child and in psychoanalysis more explicit: “In psycho-analysis proper there is something similar to this. The analyst lets the patient set the pace and he does the next best thing to letting the patient decide when to come and go, in that he fixes the time and the length of the session, and sticks to the time that he has fixed. Psycho-analysis differs from this work with infants in that the analyst is always groping, seeking his way among the mass of material offered and trying to find out what, at the moment, is the shape and form of the thing which he has to offer to the patient, that which he calls the interpretation” (p. 245). It should be obvious that we don’t agree that the processes are all that different; the groping applies to work with infants and children as well.

Winnicott derives important developmental concepts from his direct observations of infant and caregiver, concepts he then relates to the “therapeutic action” of analysis. He describes the presence of early conflict as evidence of the internal world of the child but also emphasizes the relationship with the caregiver in the evolution of this conflict.

Whereas Winnicott begins with observation of the infant and moves to the psychoanalysis of adults, Loewald (1960) begins with the psychoanalysis of adults, and in his discussion of the process of change, continually dips into analogies of the infant-mother relationship. As he does so, he articulates a theory of therapeutic action that is essentially nonlinear. In Loewald’s theory, growth occurs in an important relationship,
through interactive processes. Rather than “act on” the patient, analyst and patient are “co-actors on the analytic stage” (p. 16). In addition, Loewald proclaims that the analyst is a “new object,” allowing the analyst’s unique characteristics—including her or her own meanings—to play an active role in apprehending the patient’s inner life.

According to Loewald, development in psychoanalysis, as in early development, occurs through processes of dedifferentiation, or regression, integration, and disintegration. This is remarkably similar to descriptions of the “self-organizing” activity of a dynamic system in which through interactions with the environment the previous organization gives way, in a disorganizing process, to a new and more complex organization. Loewald speaks in terms of dedifferentiation of “defenses and defensive structures,” but there is nothing in his language to exclude other capacities from this general principle of growth and change.

By privileging the topographic model over the metapsychological, Loewald seems to refer to the extremely useful dynamic systems principle of multiple levels of organization; for Loewald, interpretations allow exchange between different levels of psychic function—between conscious, preconscious, and unconscious levels of the mind. In making an interpretation, Loewald says, “the analyst operates on various levels of understanding” (p. 23).

Along the same lines, Loewald points out that the analyst must attempt to address the patient’s current self-understanding, while at the same time keeping in mind his or her own sense of what capacities the patient might achieve in the future. This seems to correspond to the dyadic expansion model’s emphasis on age-possible capacities, as well as on the contribution of the analyst’s or caregiver’s more sophisticated meanings to the co-creative process of the interacting partners. Like Sander (2008), Loewald emphasizes the mother’s “recognition” exercising an “organizing” function in development.

Yet the integration of knowledge from infant research into psychoanalytic theory and practice continues to present a significant challenge. The two sets of theories are derived from the analysis of different types of data—observational and empirical from infant research and the more subjective data of the practicing analyst. One opportunity for future integrative research is the use of the observational tool of videotape in psychoanalysis, not only in analyses of children, but also in adult cases. Another opportunity is the use of a sophisticated model derived from infant observation and consistent with open systems theory—such as the dyadic expansion of consciousness model—as a complement to psychoanalytic theory.
CONCLUSION

This paper has presented insights obtained from complementing psychoanalytic theory, “the talking cure,” with a contemporary developmental model derived from infant observation research and consistent with nonlinear systems theory. By documenting the microprocess of the analytic session recorded on videotape, and putting it together with the verbal content and also the subjective experience of the analyst, it is possible to explore an approximation of the “polysemic bundles” that make up the continuously evolving meaning-making between the analytic partners. In contrast with psychoanalytic theory that attempts to create meaning through the linear process of linking verbal interpretations (or other spoken insights) to the patient’s thoughts, dreams, or behaviors, this expanded model adds modes of meaning-making that occur simultaneously with verbal meaning. In that way, the dyadic expansion model adds to the psychoanalytic concept of “enactments”; enactments are meaningful behaviors created by the analytic partners, initially out of awareness, that later become analyzable. Polysemic bundles, by contrast, are always present, either recognizable in some form or in the process of creation. Polysemic bundles of meaning are organized not only by their place in time, but also by the “sense” that each contributes to the emerging conscious meaning of the patient’s experience, both external and internal. This denser perspective on psychoanalytic process makes the correspondence between what goes on in typical development and psychoanalysis more intelligible.

We have ended the paper with a reference to two major developmental analytic thinkers and innovators: Winnicott and Loewald. From the perspective of contemporary developmental theory, both are remarkably prescient. Winnicott, who derived his concepts from the direct observation of infants and also from the psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein, describes how analytic change takes place in small steps as the individual exercises initiative in a facilitating interpersonal environment. Loewald begins his conceptualization of the change process by considering his analytic work with adult patients. His descriptions of the patient’s psyche becoming disorganized in the process of reorganizing in an expanded interpersonal and intrapsychic context are remarkably consistent with sophisticated contemporary nonlinear theories of developmental and therapeutic growth. In that sense, these classic analytic writers had begun an effort to think innovatively and developmentally about therapeutic
action. We suggest that the burgeoning of knowledge in infant research taking place over the past several decades, while fertilizing important ideas in psychoanalysis (the importance of the relationship, the ubiquitous nature of “enactments,” the enduring consequences of early trauma and maltreatment), should not lose touch with the brilliant though perhaps more subtle contributions of these authors to our understanding of the developmental aspects of therapeutic growth.

REFERENCES


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