

What is a transformation by relational contact.

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In front of me was an inmate who was doing a significant stretch of prison time. He had just recently smashed a plastic container in the kitchen and reported that he was doing his time 'hard' at the moment and hence ended up in front of me.



I am in intellectual Adult and suspicious Little Professor. The majority of inmates I see have some kind of secondary gain by coming to see me usually it is something like trying to get a day off work, seeking prescription medication or wanting to change cells and so on.

After a bit of time I discover that in this case there is no secondary gain and this man is genuinely distressed about an outside relationship problem. After a bit of time I begin to feel a connection and liking for him. So there is a change in me from thinking and suspicion to a more Parent compassion and perhaps a Child ego state empathy or connection with him.

As he discussed his life particularly how he lived much of it with his father and how he was wanting approval from the father and did not get it. I felt emotionally moved as I could see the little boy who had tried so hard to get his fathers attention. His father told him that to survive you had to be a 'hard man' and that you don't trust anyone. My client was physically strong and used to carry large buckets of water to the horses and other very strenuous work. But by and large father ignored him and his efforts

Indeed the father openly broke the law in front of him with various fraudulent activities. This man had been a 'successful criminal' for some time before his arrest and he had been trying to get fathers approval in that way also.

Emotional transformations in me
Adult intellectualism & suspiciousness
To
Empathy and connection

I certainly felt connected and a closeness to him as he had a very gentle and fragile side.

This also transformed my view of life, myself and human relationships in general. I was seeing right in front of me a little boy who wanted his father to show love and approval and he didn't get it. I saw the direct emotional consequences of that right before my eyes. So it altered my longer term view or perhaps reminded me better of the significance of family relationships in human development, which has impacted on me personally with my family relationships.

Concurrent with this was the following:

He had the muscle strength, body mass and quickness of action to inflict serious pain on someone. He was rarely physically challenged by other inmates.



There was an anger in this man at times, one could almost say a rage. He never personally threatened me and I never felt significantly physically threatened

However I am sitting in a room with this man who has used his physical strength in the past to get what he wants, if he attacked me he probably would have 30 seconds to a minute until the room would full of prison officers. That would not be a pleasant 30 seconds.

At times there was a rapid almost shock transformation in me when this rage was addressed or he became a bit angry. When I saw the very first signs of it I would automatically become aware of my physical position and orientation in the room and thus withdraw almost all my psychic or emotional investment in him. I

took note of the duress button on the wall and would casually shift myself sitting in the chair so I was closer to it. I could almost feel the psychic energy rapidly drain out of my NP and connected Child into a state of alert such as Adult and LP observing for any signs of movement on his behalf

I certainly felt this transformation or change in me at such times.

So I had a duality of emotions in our relational contact, a strong empathy for him and a fear of him.

There were the shifts or transformations in me during the sessions to the here and now events but also a longer one in this case. And these are rarer at least from my own personal experience. I do have the here and now transformations with every client I have, but a longer (and perhaps deeper) change or transformation in me from my contact with a client is much rarer, but they do occur as this case shows.

The intersubjective space

In a recent discussion with a client the following occurred that was most interesting from a relational perspective. This 30 year old woman who had been caring for her husband who had cancer for a number of years is of a schizoid type which means she shied away from social contact. It was just too anxiety producing for her. Sometimes such people are said to have a social phobia. A fear of social contact.

In exploring the relational aspect of therapy the following occurred:

Me: What is your connection to me? Describe it?

Q: um ah. (Looking quizzical)

I don't think I would have survived the death of my husband if I hadn't had you

Me: I'm touched

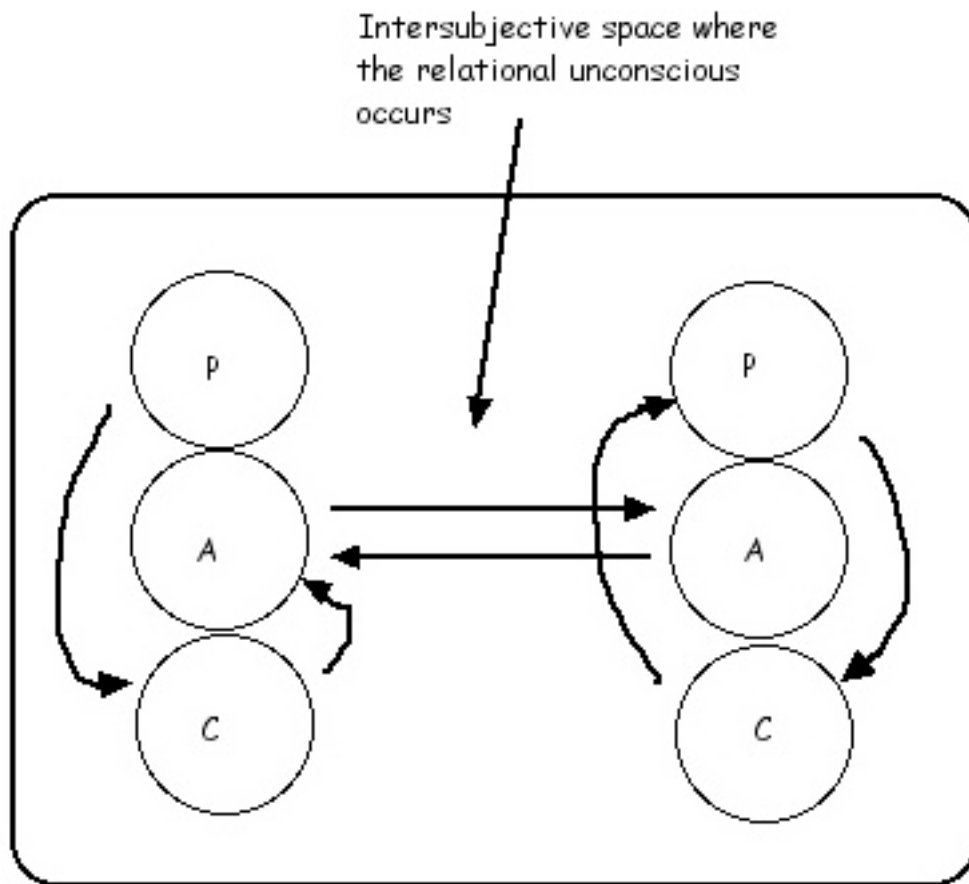
A few more comments either way until

Q: Don't you come over here (physically)

This left me a bit confused. I had known her for well over 5 years and have never moved from my chair when in discussion with her. A bit later she mentioned the same. So why was she making such a demand now?

In looking at it from a relational perspective perhaps the intersubjective space had been filled with what Helena Hargaden refers to as the relational

unconscious. The space between us had been filled if you look at the two person psychology diagram.



The two person psychology diagram showing the intersubjective space

Perhaps Q had sensed this and due to her fear of contact she then said don't come near. But she had to put it in a physical framework - "Don't you come over here" - because she did not understand it in a relational way. Put in a relational way it would have been something like, "Don't you fill the intersubjective space".

Relational TA talks about working "in" the transference not "with" the transference. A subtle but potent distinction. I thought the above would be working "in" the transference but now I don't think it is. It does not have a transferential quality about it, it is something different. What that is I don't know yet. So that leaves us with three possibilities

Working with the transference

Working in the transference

Working with the relational - at this point I find this hard to define. It is a very sensitive, one could almost say hypersensitive approach to human communication between client and therapist. But it does seem to have an impact

and that's what it is all about

At a later point in the session Q stated:

Q: Fuck off

Me: I feel connected

This was my immediate response and it was true. I felt that way.

Again a period of confusion resulted between us as it seemed an odd response on my behalf. But in the two person psychology diagram it makes sense. She had filled the intersubjective space. She had made a connection with a rejecting hit. I had felt the connection and simply reported that I had.

It is very easy to discount this approach as being too 'off with the fairies' and using too many big words. That is unfortunate as it does have something to it and I ask those to have a more detailed look before discarding it. I find it does present an understanding of human communication that has a unique quality about it.

Changing by relationship

How can a relationship transform you?

Relational TA says you can also transform by being in a relationship. That is by interacting and being in contact with another person emotionally can have an impact on you such that you are transformed. The question is how. Below is an answer.

Imitation

Well there is the obvious such as - people imitate each other. Carl Jung has stated that:

the feminine side in a man is called the anima

the masculine side in a female is called the animus

How we get this is by being in relationship. A woman married to a man becomes masculinized by him because she will automatically and instinctually imitate him and his characteristics. The same applies for the man becoming 'feminized' by his wife. Indeed this allows a man to understand his wife better because he can understand his own animus and it allows a wife to understand her husband better because she can understand her own anima.



This of course happens in every relationship including therapist and client. However it seems reasonable to say that it is not necessarily always equal. Children copy and imitate parents more than the other way around. The more psychologically important a person is for you the more imitation is likely to occur. The more psychologically potent you view someone the more you will tend to copy their characteristics.

Indeed this is one aspect of the Stockholm Syndrome. It has been noted that sometimes when a person is taken hostage or kept in prison for a long period of time, they can begin to take on features and the ideology of their captors. When you are a captive your captor is very psychologically important for you and thus you will imitate him to some degree. However the captor will imitate the captive less so because he is of less emotional importance.

So the therapist can be transformed by the client due to imitation but it will be less so than the other way around.

Emotional

By being in the relational the therapist will have here and now emotional

reactions to what the client does and says. So in this way the client 'messes' with the therapist's emotions as well. That would undoubtedly have a transforming impact as well. For instance when working in a prison I had to deal with men who had histories of violence and were quite willing to be threatening and intimidating towards me. Indeed they would often try it on so as to get the upper hand in the relationship. I have been transformed by this. My view of anger, threats and intimidation has transformed. I have personally transformed in how I think and feel about such emotions in others right in front of me.

System

There is also the systems theory. If we are using a two person psychology as we are when one is relational then there is a system between two people, client and therapist. What does this mean? When ever one part of a system changes then all the other parts of a system must also alter. This is the basis of family therapy.



Family therapy

All families are a system. So if one person changes in that family (system) then all other people in the family change (are transformed). For instance, if the 14 year old girl of a family starts using drugs that can significantly alter all people in the family. The parents attention is all of a sudden focused on this girl. The parents are transformed due to a significant increase in their anxiety for the girls safety. The other siblings are transformed because they get fewer strokes from the parents and they also emotionally have to deal with the girls new delinquent behaviour.

However the big one these days where the system of a family can be completely shattered is when one member publicly states that he/she has been sexually abused by another family member. That completely turns upside down the family

system and each individual member is significantly transformed from that day on. Their emotional reactions and understanding of many of the other family members is significantly transformed for ever. This is why some families will 'expel' the complainant or in some way try to silence or ignore him/her because it results in too much of a devastating transformation for the family system to cope with.

Of course the client and therapist quickly develop a system between them selves in their relationship. When the client changes the therapist must transform as well. For example, some therapists like power, indeed that is why some get into the business of psychotherapy as it can be a power trip. There is not necessarily anything wrong with this and the person can do good therapy but it can create problems when the client transforms and becomes more 'cured'. This means that the client does not need the therapist so much. This means the therapist's power is reduced and he/she must transform to deal with the new relationship (system). Some therapists struggle with this and will seek ways to hang onto the client and finally they may create some dispute so the final separation is abrupt and "justifiable".

Intersubjective space

Finally there is the intersubjective space that exists between two people in the relational. That very subtle connection between two people, those very sensitive communications that occur, the unconscious observations, thoughts and emotions that go on all the time in human relations. All the body language reading that occurs that we are not even aware of or even realise we are doing. All this occurs in the intersubjective space and has a significant transforming effect on each of us. We are communicating with others unconsciously all the time in this way and of course that has a transforming effect. For instance all of a sudden you may find your self feeling angry at someone and not even know why. This means there has been unconscious communication in the intersubjective space. It is this aspect of the relational that requires further study because much of the research says that this is in some ways the most important and most influential aspect of human communication. That communication that goes on in the intersubjective space. Unfortunately it is the hardest to understand.