
The Meaning of Mutuality

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About the Author

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Abstract

This paper explores relationships characterized by mutual intersubjectivity, in which individuals relate to one another based on an interest in each other as whole, complex people. Traditional psychoanalytic theory and object relations theory have emphasized a line of development marked by increasing internal structure, boundedness and use of the other as a need-gratifying "object." Today, many women are concerned with growth through relationships founded on mutuality. Imbalances in mutuality both in primary relationships and in work settings lead to significant psychological pain and often motivate people to seek psychotherapy.

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There are few psychological or clinical theories that do not acknowledge in some way the importance of relationships to individual development. Most theories, however, reserve the relational emphasis for the earliest years of life, particularly the mother-infant bond, and view autonomy, separation and independence as hallmarks of maturity. The individual is separated out from context, studied as a self-contained being and internalization of structure which renders the individual more independent is seen as the desired endpoint of development.

As the limitations of this model are being examined (Miller, 1976; Gilligan, 1982), especially as it constrains our understanding of female development, new areas of interest are emerging. Rather than a study of development as movement away from and out of relationship, this approach posits growth through and toward relationship. Delineation of different kinds of relationships becomes important as a way of understanding what people are seeking in relationships and why certain relationships are a source of joy and meaning, while others become deadening and destructive. People often speak of the search for mutuality in relationship as a goal in their lives, particularly in dyadic love relationships. Its absence is a frequent complaint bringing people to therapy. Relational mutuality can provide purpose and meaning in people's lives, while lack of mutuality can adversely affect self-esteem. The traditional therapy model of looking at intrapsychic factors, the "I," the one-person system provides important insights, but acknowledging the importance of the relationship, context, the quality of interaction, and the deeply intersubjective nature of human lives greatly expands our understanding of the people with whom we work.

Mutual intersubjectivity

What does a mutual relationship mean?

Dictionary definitions indicate that mutuality involves being “possessed, entertained, or performed by each toward or with regard to the other; reciprocal” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971) or “having the same feelings one for the other; characterized by intimacy” (Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1984). In a mutual exchange one is both affecting the other and being affected by the other; one extends oneself out to the other and is also receptive to the impact of the other. There is openness to influence, emotional availability, and a constantly changing pattern of responding to and affecting the other’s state. There is both receptivity and active initiative toward the other.

Crucial to a mature sense of mutuality is an appreciation of the wholeness of the other person with a special awareness of the other’s subjective experience. Thus, the other person is not there merely to take care of one’s needs, to become a vessel for one’s projections or transferences, nor to be the object of discharge of instinctual impulses. Through empathy, and an active interest in the other as a different, complex person, one develops the capacity at first to allow the other’s differentness and ultimately to value and encourage those qualities which make that person different and unique.

When empathy and concern flow both ways, there is an intense affirmation of the self and paradoxically a transcendence of the self, a sense of the self as part of a larger relational unit. The interaction allows for a relaxation of the sense of separateness; the other’s well-being becomes as important as one’s own. This does not imply merging which suggests a blurring or a loss of distinctness of self.

In the broadest sense, this topic might be called mutual intersubjectivity; by that I mean an interest in, attunement to and responsiveness to the subjective, inner experience of the other, both at a cognitive and affective level. The primary channel for this kind of mutuality is empathic attunement, the capacity to share in and comprehend the momentary psychological state of another person (Schafer, 1959). It is a process during which one’s self-boundaries undergo momentary alteration, which in itself allows the possibility for change in the self. Empathy, in this sense then, always contains the opportunity for mutual growth and impact.

While relying on mutual empathy (Surrey, 1984), in the sense that one finds knowledge of the inner state of the other through empathy, mutual

intersubjectivity encompasses other aspects of relationship. Empathy is the affective-cognitive experience of understanding another person. Intersubjectivity carries with it some notion of motivation to understand another’s meaning system from his/her frame of reference and ongoing and sustained interest in the inner world of the other. Intersubjectivity could be thought of as a relational frame of reference within which empathy is most likely to occur. It is a “holding” of the other’s subjectivity as central to the interaction with that individual. Surrey (1984) has pointed to the centrality of mutual empathy in psychological development and of intersubjectivity in relationship. The concept of intersubjectivity stresses understanding the other from her/his subjective frame of reference. What is developed here is the notion of the importance of an “intersubjective attitude” on the part of each member of the relationship (hence “mutual intersubjectivity”).

A model of mutual intersubjectivity, then, suggests the following for each person in a relationship: 1) an interest in and cognitive-emotional awareness of and responsiveness to the subjectivity of the other person through empathy (Surrey, 1984; Atwood and Stolorow, 1984); 2) a willingness and ability to reveal one’s own inner states to the other person, to make one’s needs known, to share one’s thoughts and feelings, giving the other access to one’s subjective world (self-disclosure, “opening” to the other); 3) the capacity to acknowledge one’s needs without consciously or unconsciously manipulating the other to gain gratification while overlooking the other’s experience; 4) valuing the process of knowing, respecting, and enhancing the growth of the other; 5) establishing an interacting pattern in which both people are open to change in the interaction. It is not merely a balancing, an “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine,” but a kind of matching of intensity of involvement and interest, an investment in the exchange that is for both the self and the other. The process of relating is seen as having intrinsic value.

Existing theory

Few psychological theories have explicitly addressed mutuality, likely in part because there has been a bias toward viewing development as a progression away from initial dependence toward greater autonomy. Emphasis on innate instinctual forces, increasing internal structure, separation and individuation have characterized most Western psychological theory. Mutuality suggests an ongoing interdependence that many theorists disregard or