

PROBING TO KNOW AND BE KNOWN*

Existential and Evolutionary Perspectives on the “Disorganized” Patient’s Relationship with the Analyst

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Re-narrating the “D” Attachment Scenario in Development and Treatment

Our comments focus on broadening the picture of what is at stake in Dr. Beebe’s exquisitely detailed picture of very early, disorganized attachment interactions between mother and infant and then, by extension, between therapist and patient.

First, we re-narrate the generic attachment scenario—from its secure to its disorganized versions—using a vantage point rooted in both existential and evolutionary-adaptive perspectives. This perspective recognizes what is aberrant and pathogenic in disorganized attachment interactions. Yet, at the same time, it keeps us focused on what may be the *universal* dimensions of *relational conflict, multiplicity, deception, and self-deception* that, while often painfully heightened in disorganized interactions, are also part of *all human relating*.

We focus on the “disorganized” patient’s desperate effort to *know* the therapist’s capacity to bear the patient’s, as well as the therapist’s own, experience of *existential terror and conflict*. Thus we hope to bring into even greater clinical relevance Beebe and Lachman’s depiction of the crucial processes of “knowing and being known” in the earliest human interactions.

Existential Dread, Multiplicity, and Probing for Realness and Reciprocity

We’ll start with a developmental narrative from a highly articulate mother–child pair. Not because they represent a disorganized style interaction—they don’t—but because, in their capacity to articulate certain crucial issues, they illustrate what we see as the larger universal human issues at stake in all developmental negotiations (Slavin, 2011).

Noah, the 6-year-old son of a patient named Sarah, had become terrified to go to sleep. During the day he seemed obsessed with all the dangerous and violent things he would see in the news. At night, Noah worried that people, creatures, might come into his room, maybe steal him away. Maybe he will die. We knew of no particular identifiable, significant trauma in his history.

Sarah listens as Noah expresses his mortal fears. She tries to show him she understands his fear of somehow losing his connection with her and his dad. She tries to reassure him that his world is *not* such a dangerous place. He listens to her, and his fears continue.

In analysis, we start to realize that maybe, in part, Noah is seeing an aspect of our world and its dangers that is barely tolerable to us all: to Sarah, to her husband, to her analyst. Yes, of course he wants and needs some reassurance about his relative safety. But also, perhaps, more acknowledgment of what he too clearly sees.

Sarah goes back and shares with him her sense that maybe he wants her and his dad to admit just how much scariness there is in the stuff he sees and hears on TV, Internet, and newspapers. That maybe he is aware of this scary stuff in ways that she and his dad have gotten so used to they don't have to feel it, or see it any more. Yet he does. Noah then seems a little bit calmer. Still scared, but much more interested in talking to her and in what she has to say.

Soon, in fact, the following conversation emerges at another bedtime:

Mom: I know it can be scary going to sleep. But you can count on us being here and we'll protect you.

Noah: But, mom, I think . . . maybe you're not strong enough to protect me.

Mom: We're, ah, pretty strong grown-ups. You're safe in here with us and we love you very much.

Noah: But, mom, you love *yourself* more than me.

Mom: Well, ah, not really . . . I, ah, parents . . . love their children just as much as themselves.

Noah: But, mom, I think I love *myself* more than you.

Mom: Well, that's probably how it should be for kids. You need to love yourself a whole lot, probably *should* love yourself *best*.

Noah continues to be very frightened of going to sleep.

During our next several analytic hours, Sarah continues to talk about how she handled Noah's fears—feeling pushed beyond the limits of her understanding by his assertiveness, unable to think, overwhelmingly emotionally challenged. The analyst felt some of this, too—though greatly appreciating Noah's verbally disarming candor.

Sarah and his dad's more open recognition that there was some very real basis to Noah's perception of the scariness in the world seemed to begin to open up his ability to bear what we'll call his basic *existential anxiety*. Now he was broaching highly related, even thornier, *relational-existential-moral questions*: How we navigate the tensions between our love for ourselves and our connections with loved

others; the self–other tensions that intertwine with our whole sense of meaning, faith, and love, in the face of *everyone’s multiple agendas*, as well as shared, background existential terror. He candidly confronts the everyday, taken for granted, *deceptions and self-deceptions* that inevitably intertwine with these realms of experience.

Sarah slowly came to feel that, maybe, she could somehow acknowledge that while she loved Noah very much, she was also very involved in things in her own life, including her work. Yes, sometimes this might pull her thoughts away from him, pull her to things and people apart from him. She contemplated the possibility of acknowledging, in words he might grasp, that such a tension—such multiplicity, actually—existed inside her. It seemed unquestionably to be a tension that Noah intuitively sensed.

A few nights later, Sarah told Noah: “You were probably seeing something more clearly about me and you than I had realized . . . you saw that I love you as much as I can imagine loving anyone. And there are also other things I love, and love to do—things that sometimes take me into my own mind, sometimes away from you.”

Noah looks at her for a while. He nods his head, seeming to signal that he hears her. He seems much calmer, nestles in, body relaxing, and soon falls asleep. Things settle down.

Sources of Danger and Safety in the Family: Shared Existential Anxiety, Differing Agendas, Multiplicity, Deception, and Self-Deception

So what is Sarah and Noah’s interaction about? A narrative of Noah’s struggle for attachment security in face of darkness, aloneness, dangers in fantasy and in the larger, outside world. Yes. But there are many other dimensions to this story. Listen to several that we hear.

We hear the story of Noah and Sarah as illustrating the larger relational context in which all meaning is made: how we create a sense of living with hope in a secure-enough, knowable, trustable, meaningful world. Each time that secure existential envelope emerges, it will often be lost—tested in face of all life events, including aberrant, traumatic ones, to be sure. As we see in the frame-by-frame illustrations, these early negotiations between the mother–infant pairs, the future disorganized infants’ internal working models, for example, are “characterized by expectancies of emotional distress and emotional incoherence” (Beebe et al, 2010, p. 7), challenging the capacity to create a meaningful, trustable world.

In the face of this haunting, existential abyss, the crucial, sustaining power of human interaction (such as simply a mother’s animated face) is apparent. As seen in the Tronick (1989) still face demonstration, deprived for even 2 minutes of any response (even a mis-cued, unrecognizing, intrusive response) infants seem immediately, innately, desperately, to miss the sense of connection to, and impact on, the world that mother’s facial animation and vocalizations represent.

Yet, for a *human* infant this overt need may not be all there is to it. It may, in fact, be only half the story. The human infant's response may also signal the nascent emergence of that ever-present, ready to appear, sense of absence—the empty void, the nothingness—that undergirds human annihilation anxiety. An anxiety in face of which mother's responsive presence can, indeed must, serve not only as an innate, interactional need, but, as such, as a vital, innate *antidote*. Not simply because the infant innately needs her presence as a protector from *outside* dangers—the core evolutionary insight of Bowlby's (1969) whole paradigm. But, also (as Bowlby and even contemporary evolutionists tend to ignore) because her presence imbues him with something he must potentially experience in his gut: that there is something between him and the abyss—the inner/outer abyss that does *not derive* from her absence, but is overwhelmingly terrifying without her *presence* (Slavin, 2011). In this sense, we see Noah's attachment to his mother, beneath and beyond any observable interactions, as an attachment to a meaning-making *semi-deity*. To, as Hoffman (1998) says, one of the parental “gods of infancy and childhood.”

Note the emphasis here on the way this experience is partly magical, essentially *sacred*—far beyond the rational (or even affective)—dimensions of parenting. “Semi-deity” parents provide the intimate yet authoritative experiences, idealizations, and recognitions needed by the child to create a subjective foundation on which to build a fundamental experience of hope—a basic trust in the very existence of a meaningful, trustable world that is safe enough to live in, and inevitably, to die in.

Most importantly, Beebe notes, “maternal withdrawal *from distressed infants* compromises infant interactive agency and emotional coherence in future disorganized (vs. secure) infants. We characterized these infants as ‘frantic,’ not sensed or ‘known’ in their distress, and relatively helpless to influence mothers with their distress” (Beebe et al., 2010, p. 109).

These patently damaging interactions will certainly shape and distort the disorganized infant's experience of the world—and often impede the creation of a good-enough transitional space in which the buffering, parental semi-deity function operates. Yet we should not let this environmentally induced damage obscure the fact that disorganized interactions themselves do not generate the universal human proclivity to experience a haunting, existential dread. A dread to which we, like Noah, are all exposed by our basic human capacity for an awareness of the existential realities of transience, loss, and the Otherness of even the most intimate loving relationships.

Indeed, the awareness of these universal realities may in fact be painfully heightened for those who have been disorganized infants. Heightened in a way that, while skewing and “distorting” their experience in the narrow, normative sense, actually attunes them painfully and powerfully to an arena of human experience with which we must all grapple. Disorganized children, in our terms, have lost the reliable, vital, god-like parental function—the near-miraculous creation of a sense of meaning in face of its inevitable transience and loss. Their trauma

saddles them with a raw, direct awareness of aspects of life and relating that cries out for our recognition—not only as aberrant and non-normative. But, in addition, as with Noah and Sarah, evokes sometimes deeply dissociated levels of our own anxiety as well as the often painfully uncomfortable multiplicity of our needs and motives.

Providing the antidote, as we called it, to that ultimate aloneness, the parental semi-deity functions entail a parent's revisiting her version of that same human existential anxiety that is in the process of taking form in the child. Illuminated through Noah's words and Sarah's analytic conversations, but present in maternal gestures from the beginning, parents are always facing their own versions of their child's anxieties. And they are doing this in the very complex matrix of differing, potentially conflicting, agendas in the human family. With the disorganized infants, Beebe and Lachmann repeatedly note that the traumas in the mothers' histories greatly affect their ability to empathically respond to their infants.

Negotiating the Otherness of a Semi-Deity

Noah's verbal challenges demand that Sarah open her own struggle to sustain a working, good-enough illusion of security in a potentially insecure world. It turned out that Sarah (and her husband) needed to peel away a layer of self-deception about the existence of violence in the world and to re-open an older, taken-for-granted edge of illusory certainty about her familiar, subjectively safe world. She needed to re-open and revisit—and in an important sense re-create—her subjective sense of her own strength and power to protect.

Like every mother who, as Winnicott (1965) says, "hates her baby from the word go"—meaning not the affect of hate but the inevitable clash between her subjective experience and that of her child—Sarah struggled with re-opening herself to Noah's challenges—especially some of her reflexive, established notions about how she valued and balanced her own needs as they differed and conflicted with his.

Beebe's data (Beebe et al., 2010) often show us more extreme versions of what she calls the "dyadic affective conflicts" that occur when whatever mother's needs and agendas move in ways that are particularly at variance with an infant's distressed affect state. Mothers of disorganized infants often seem to be trying to hold tenaciously onto their own state, and perhaps induce an alteration in the child's state, by simply displaying their own contradictory affect—such as showing surprise or smiling as the child is distressed. Perhaps followed by verbalizations such as "don't be that way," or "no fussing, you should be happy." The mother may communicate her need state by excessively looking away and/or swooping down and looming in.

Such poorly matched behavior seems likely to be pathogenic. Yet in other extraordinarily interesting research Jaffe, Beebe, and colleagues show that overly close behavioral matching (of vocal rhythms) predict insecure attachment (Beebe et al., 2000; Jaffe et al., 2001). For us the idea that there is a normative mid-range

between a close matching of states and their relative lack of coordination fits our expectation that conflict (internal and intersubjective) is a universal relational challenge. Disorganized attachment interactions certainly do not reflect normative (in the sense of average, expectable) ways of communicating conflicts entailed in our human otherness. However, the underlying existential-relational conflicts—to which they represent aberrant responses—the background sense of transience and the constructed sense of all our meanings) are, in our view, a universal, indeed essential, part of even the most intimate, human relating.

Thus, in Sarah's inner dividedness around attunement to herself and her beloved son we see a mother's natural multiplicity, her complex subjectivity—even, at times, utterly normal state of dissociation, if you will, between competing, hard-to-reconcile aspects of her being (Benjamin, 1995). Her multiplicity is thus a critical background dimension of the ordinary, good-enough devoted environment (Slavin, 2010; Slavin & Kriegman, 1992). Combined with her natural struggle to sustain meaning in the face of existential anxiety, these “moral” (my needs versus yours) conflicts and a mother's inevitably somewhat deceptive and self-deceptive strategies for dealing with them set the larger stage on which all mothers and children, including the disorganized infant and her mother, encounter each other. However, for the disorganized mother–infant pair, the experience may be even more extreme, more complex than the so-called normative range of conflict. Given the mother's earlier unresolved losses, her experience of the existential realities may be too fraught and may make it even more difficult to negotiate the inherit conflicts of interest with her child.

The Capacity to Probe the Other: The Child's Agency in the Attachment Process

From a contemporary evolutionary perspective, human children have unquestionably evolved a highly complex inner capacity: the ability to both anticipate and navigate the multiple existential challenges of making and sustaining meaning in relationship to others who are simultaneously regulating their own annihilation anxiety, and their existential awareness of their own multiplicity and often complex competing agendas (Hrды, 2010; Slavin, 2010; Slavin and Kriegman, 1992).

Noah is actively working to build his transitional space—the space where, in these moments, a personally meaningful connection to the world is made: largely, mom's divided heart as well as her need for illusion. He pushes for a kind of spontaneous, “personally expressive deviation” (Hoffman, 1998) from what will usually be hidden from the child in the language, rituals and roles, values, and worldview of the ordinary adult environment: “Oh, parents love children more than themselves . . .” Noah seemed to probe actively, trying, in our view, to know through interaction—as this book teaches us over and over—the less accessible sides of his mother. He probes for *her capacity* to know the less accessible sides of *herself*.

This testing, evaluating, seeing, and knowing the nature of parental otherness, parental multiplicity, and self-deceptiveness is what we're calling "probing." It is a capacity that will be strained to its limits when parents are struggling, like the disorganized mothers, to maintain self-deceptively fixed (yet highly brittle) perceptions of themselves and their child.

Probing the Therapist's Existential Anxieties, Multiplicity and Self-Deception

So, what is the basic *clinical* value of laying out the complex existential and adaptive backdrop of attachments in these broad, universal terms? The value lies ultimately in one basic observation. In our experience, patients who have had to grapple with the challenges of trying to probe for the elusive grains of trustworthiness in a disorganized attachment parent have often become extremely attuned to precisely the most challenging universal dimensions of human experience—the dilemmas that, in some fashion, we all suffer and share. Our disorganized attachment (perhaps, so-called borderline) patients have not simply suffered the distorting and dis-regulating effects of adapting to the disordered behavior of a dissociated, highly self-deceptive parent. They have. They have also experienced—up close, directly—*the undisguised underside, the existentially precarious and conflictual context of all attachments*. They have seen and known the existential void, the precarious and illusory dimension of all meaning, the potential loss of self that is always a background feature in human experience.

The former disorganized attachment child, however, often knows this facet of life in a far more raw, direct, unmediated way. They have known, usually in some inchoate sense, the dangers that originate in the existential realities we all share, yet that we are often able to keep adaptively dissociated—self-protectively at bay. For the disorganized attachment patient, the trauma they have experienced has, in its way, laid these truths bare. Mother's behavior represents a trauma that will not substantially abate before the messages it carries are heard—the messages about *both* one's unique, painfully aberrant experience *and* the larger redeeming message about the universal truths and haunting dangers to which a disorganized childhood may uniquely equip one to see.

Which is, for one thing, the resonances of both themselves and their disorganized mother in the therapist. Not in the simple sense of repeating the traumatic disorganized mother-child experience in the transference. The "dread to repeat" here (Ornstein, 1974) is, in our view, a far larger, stronger aim than any "compulsion to repeat."

To allow the traumatic past to speak, as it were, the disorganized child must invite and open up the therapist's own struggles with annihilation terrors (around loss and mortality) and moral conflicts (over self vs. other love) by, first of all, usually challenging the therapist's inevitable self-deceptions. Will she begin to get to see, to know, who this analyst really is? Will she come to know, viscerally, the therapist in comparison to the mother who—struggling with her own version

of these existential dilemmas—became too overwhelmed to provide the kind of semi-deity strength and genuine recognition of her child’s needs, despite what may have been the years of probing mother to engage in precisely this same way?

Yes, much of what, defensively, we’re often tempted to see and call manipulative, such as asking for changes in the therapeutic frame, asking for personal information, testing the analyst’s limits in other ways is, indeed, a search in all the hardest places for a more secure attachment. A search for another whose inner narrative, if you will, is somehow secure enough to not repeat the behavior of the disorganized mother.

The illusion of an idealized self-object, or a consistently mirroring therapist, who transcends these struggles may, for a time, serve as useful demi-god. But, in the face of the probing of the disorganized patient, if the mirroring, twinning, and idealization do not open in a far more vulnerable, reciprocal fashion, the patient is apt to feel once again very alone. The therapist may be felt as hiding herself—the ultimate form of mis-recognition and emotional withdrawal.

Is there a single stance or analytic perspective that is broad enough to embrace this larger existential dialectic? Not as far as we know. Yet, thinking about the larger existential context helps to frame some of the potential strengths and pitfalls in all analytic perspectives.

A *classical, neutral stance* will ultimately represent a confirmation of one’s badness in face of an absent, withdrawing other. The neutral “still face” and opacity can be devastating. Yet, sometimes disorganized patients turn out to be deeply grateful for the authoritativeness, the *seeming* invulnerability, toughness, stalwart consistency of the classical analyst who, in this way, becomes the needed, missing semi-deity. In our experience, this idealization usually changes in face of what the disorganized patient comes to feel is the increasingly apparent fear and defensiveness in the classical therapist wearing the mask of so-called analytic authority. Especially in the face of what often becomes an increasingly angry, perhaps desperate, probing by the—now often increasingly pathologized—patient.

An *empathic stance*, informed by self-psychological and intersubjective systems perspectives, serves as a crucial antidote to the earlier, badly mis-attuned, failing disorganized attachment environment. Yet, in our view, a true empathic connectedness must be understood as a stance that is *relationally achieved* (versus applied as a technique). In our experience, vital as it is, a consistent and carefully practiced empathic immersion can, in itself, begin to represent a relational retreat, a hiding, a backing off from what the patient senses is at stake for the therapist: namely, the therapist’s fuller, personal, emotional participation in grappling with what is essentially *her own version* of the patient’s issues.

While *relational analysts* aim to address and incorporate a sense of the analyst’s subjectivity, we find that, unfortunately this emphasis on the analyst’s experience often comes at the cost of a deeply grasped understanding of the centrality of empathy. Sometimes relational analysts tend to experience an empathic immersion in the patient’s experience as inherently incompatible with the analyst’s own realness and presence (Slavin, 2010). Sometimes, too it is as if, in this perspec-

tive, the analyst is assumed to be far more capable of an awareness of her own multiplicity and struggle to create meaning than is likely to be the case. As if a profoundly mutual, reciprocal process of change can be achieved simply through a technical emphasis on the analyst's openness to being known. The openness is very useful, but it must not fall short of the analyst's gradual re-opening and re-encountering her own (often dissociated) existential struggle.

Dr. Beebe's beautifully detailed descriptions attune us powerfully to the disorganized attachment infant's (and then the adult patient's) relentless striving to evoke, provoke, and compel a fuller and more recognizing responsiveness in any potentially caretaking relationship. Our commentary represents perhaps a starker version of what Lyons-Ruth (1999, 2008) proposes as "the process of coming to know and be known by another's mind" that depends upon "whether the partner is capable of a collaborative dialogue." Aware of this universal existential background, we hope to allow our especially challenging, probing patients to evoke our own deeper annihilation fears and conflicts around the inevitably clashing needs and agendas that also pervade our relationships with them. Failing this we intensify what is the worst aspect of their trauma: The way it separates them continuously from the world, because very few, if any of us, can bear the existential truths of what they've seen.