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The Role of "Acknowledgement" in the Resolution of a specific Interpersonal Dilemma.

Working as a psychotherapist and supervisor I have repeatedly been struck by how difficult it is for us as therapists or prospective therapists to develop a clinical attitude. Typically this involves the ability to remain open, listen and grant the client the right to his own experience. In other words, it means being able to empathize, respect and accept the client (7,8,15,19). Observations of partner interaction indicate that clients were struggling with comparable problems. They were rarely able, in a word, to "acknowledge" each other (21).

In the following I shall argue that acknowledgement or recognition is necessary for genuine or transcendental change, not only in therapy relationships, but in relationships in general.¹

To advance this argument acknowledgement will be examined in relation to a specific interpersonal dilemma. I shall describe the processes that go into acknowledgement and show why the acknowledging way of relating is so difficult. Scarcely any phenomenon has received as much attention, and that from authors representing a variety of theoretical pursuits. (Kohut (15), Rogers (18), Schafer (21)).

In order to throw light on acknowledgement I have chosen to focus on a well-known dilemma in interpersonal relations: the conflict between the delineated self on the one hand, and the relationships in which the self finds itself on the other. In an effort to clarify this dilemma and its resolution I shall rely primarily on family theory and the work of the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. I must emphasize that I do not intend to examine specific contributions of theorists, nor disagreements among them. Rather I am interested in a general, overarching or meta-theoretical description of relationships. A short summary from a study of partner interactions will hopefully link the meta-theoretical to an empirical base.

¹ Many authors have advanced similar views, notably Buber M. (7,8) and Rogers C.R. (18,19).

Before examining possible ways of reconciling the contradiction, I shall return briefly to our couples. They did not confirm each other - a pre-condition for individuation according to Hegel. Rather, they defined the partner as though he or she were a static entity rather than a person. They struggled to have the partner accept their fixed or "punctuated" concept of themselves, instead of opening up for possibilities of growth and change. Their inability to change positions corresponds to Hegel's Master-Slave metaphor in which partners get locked into their respective positions due to the fear of death (12). Furthermore, the partners rarely let go of their own perspective and enter into that of their partner; an ability which constitutes a precondition for mutual recognition.

Along with the fusion, we noted the couples' inability to take a metaview of their interaction. They could not extricate themselves from the direct experience, and see themselves from the outside or from above, if you will. The Master-Slave relationship captures both the stuck- togetherness, and the lack of perspective. The partners are entangled in mutual needs. Elsewhere I have called the ability to have a metaview for *reflection*. The ability to individuate I called *differentiation*. These two phenomena hang together, and presuppose each other. They are dialectic. When a child can differentiate his hand as belonging to him, as having a place outside its body, he differentiates. As he sees the hand as an object, e.i. has a metaview of it, he can reflect. Or when a client can distinguish his anxiety from that of his mother, he also gains a relationship to his anxiety as *his*. That acknowledgement is a precondition for differentiation/reflection is inherent in Hegel's notion of no individuation without confirmation, recognition and acceptance.³

The repetition which characterized the interactions can be understood as a way of securing a static or "punctuated" sense of individuation while seeking to maintain the relationship. The dilemma is reflected here: we have a need for a delineated, individuated self, as well as for the relationship. As Hegel suggests, I don't want to be "defective and incomplete", e.i. without a relationship. The relationship however, threatens to negate "this singularity of my self-awareness", while, paradoxically, it is the source of necessary affirmation and recognition. How can we understand why the partners express a need while at the same time conspiring to

³ Conf. Roger's well-known views of the importance of acceptance for the facilitation of growth (op.cit).

undermine its satisfaction?. I suggest that this type of interaction is designed to maintain the possibility of relational gratification while at the same time defending against the threatening fusion associated with both closeness and gratification. Inherent in the repetition is a "solution" to the dilemma because the interactions maintain both the self and the relationship. However, this way of relating never transcends or transmutes the conflict, rather it preserves it.

The Resolution of the Formidable Contradiction

Hegel suggests ways to resolve the formidable contradiction. First he seems to be saying that the contradiction cannot be solved cognitively: "..The most formidable contradiction which the *mind* cannot resolve." (my italics). Our intellect falls short. We cannot think our way out of such a contradiction! It has to be resolved in practice, in an emotional meeting which has meaning to us. Only with affective, experiential involvement is resolution possible. This idea - that transcendental, or in psychoanalytic terms, structured, change in the self and in the relationship can only occur through a live, experiential encounter between client(s) and therapist is favoured by psychoanalytic as well as client-centered therapists. This view disagrees with cognitive approaches to therapy, such as rational therapy, paradoxical intervention or "strategic" intervention. Possible rapprochement between schools may be possible, but this discussion falls outside the scope of this article.

Hegel maintains that love is both the reason for, as well as the resolution of the dilemma: "Love is both the creation and the resolution of this contradiction; as its resolution it is moral communion. Moral communion is translated from the German "sittliches Einigkeit". "Sittlich" refers to meanings, especially ethical ideas and actions shared by those involved. "Einigkeit" refers both to agreement and "oneness" - thus communion.

In summary then, the resolution is seen as real-life interaction, involving at least two people who are at the same time differentiated and "one"! At this point in it seems that the contradiction is recreated at the level of moral communion. It is necessary therefore, to try another approach to the resolution of the contradiction.

The process of differentiation

Above I made the assumption that differentiation is a prerequisite for reflection, and that both function poorly in the repetitive interaction in which the dilemma remains unresolved. Keeping this assumption in mind, we could ask how a child becomes his own object and differentiates from his mother. Or to put it another way - how does the child develop a reflective, differentiated self? Or in the terms developed by systemic therapy: What happens when a relationship promotes co-individuation and co-evolution? (27). Or, in other words, how is the dilemma resolved? To answer this question I shall look at *one* possible way in which differentiation/reflection is strengthened. I have chosen an example involving interaction at a very concrete, non-verbal level between a child and its mother.

John, aged 2 1/2, is visiting a bank with his mother. His perspective or perceptual field consists of the wall of the counter, the legs of other customers, the floor, etc. The mother's field, on the other hand, includes the total area behind the counter. She leans down next to John. She shares his field, his perspective in a concrete way. This sharing is only possible because she has *her* experiential field. She "moves" from her viewpoint to share his. It would be meaningless to say that she shares his, unless she "came from" another perspective. Correspondingly, we cannot speak of *his* experiential field, unless it was in some way different or oppositional to *hers* and vice versa. It is *in relation to each other* they create their own perceptual fields.

The next move is that she lifts him up. He shares her perceptual field. In this interchange they have shared their perspectives. It is in fact because they have their *own*, they can *share*. In the interactional process between them, they can *differentiate* between their phenomenological worlds. At the same time they *preserve the relationship they share*.

John gets his experience in two ways, one because his mother shares *his*, and two, because she lets him share *hers*. In this interactional experience John differentiates from his mother, and becomes his own object. He develops a meta-view of his own position. He can see his mother's perspective and de-center. He can take his mother's viewpoint and see himself from her vantage point, i.e. he "gets himself outside himself".

Because they take the perspective of the other, they create both their own and the other person's point of departure. If the mother had neglected John's perspective,

and simply lifted him up to take hers without sharing his, John would "loose" his perspective. His differentiation process would suffer. The mother would also have problems: she would have no other perspective to give figure to hers. The mother might, for instance, be afraid that she would loose her experiential "hold" once she let go of it and shared John's view-point. Fusion or undifferentiation, with consequent dysfunctional interaction would follow.

According to Hegel the mother creates her perspective through that of her son. To accomplish this she must turn her own her perspective "to its opposite" or negate it. She must let go. In this process, however, she will regain, not only her own, but his perspective. This means that as she shares his perspective, she acknowledges him. Her own perspective is *changed*, and will never be exactly the same. John, of course, lives through a corresponding process.

In sharing experiential fields the relationship between John and his mother develops. They have created their perspective and the delineations through each other. They have "negotiated" their stands and created their unique *and* shared reality. They get their individuation through a need for each other. In the process they have validated their own reality and that of the other. Hegel would say they were both acknowledged. To acknowledge the other person's experiential field, means that you enter into it, share it, affirm it and above all be mindful of *the other person's absolute right to his own experience*. Only then can he change his experiential field and thus his self, and allow his mother to change herself. One way to interpret "sittliches Einigkeit" or "moral communion" is that moral communion is precisely this process of creating, sharing, validating and negotiating a relational reality.⁴

⁴ The reader might be interested in the relationship between Hegelian dialectics with its emphasis on contradiction and reconciliation and the ideas of for instance Kierkegaard, Buber and Rogers. In his dialectics Kierkegaard is closer to the "dialogics" characteristic of Plato's dialogues than to the logic of Hegel. Kierkegaard's "subjectivism" disagrees with the Hegelian logic that fulfills itself in absolute knowledge. He replaces it with an open-ended dialogue which in the end takes leave of dialectics in an existential decision to believe. Buber's I-Thou-philosophy is probably better judged in its relation to Hassidism than to Hegel. In his view of man Buber notes the early "decisive impetus" given him by Feuerbach (7, p.148). In general he seems to have staked out his own course with a certain distance to academic philosophy. Of his academic teachers Georg Simmel and Wilhelm Dilthey he once said, in a letter to a friend, that they had no influence whatsoever on his I-Thou-philosophy. The Romanticism inherent in Roger's idea of human nature does not echo the painful struggle involved in the formation or *Bildung* of the Hegelian man. There are, however, important points of convergence between these authors. Still, in the working out of the fundamentally contradictory in life, Hegel suggests a kind of dialectical thinking that is not repeated in the works of either Kierkegaard, Buber or Rogers.

The "I" that is a "We"

When, as in our example the mother enters into John's experiential field, she empathizes with him. This empathy is a precondition for sharing. And he does the same. But something else happens. They have lived through a process of sharing and individuating, and have a perspective on their perspectives! *In this process they meta-communicate a "we"!* They have created their unique relationship. They move in the space between them, strengthening both their individuation and their relationship, and recreating their relational reality. Hegel calls it love. Certainly warmth, appreciation and a feeling of closeness is generated in this transactional interchange.

Hegel has his own poetic rendition of what happens in this positive interaction:

"With this we already have before us the notion of spirit. What lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what spirit is - this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses - which - in their opposition enjoy perfect freedom and independence: "I" that is "we" and "we" that is "I". (4, p. 110)

In summary, then we may conclude that "moral communion" *can* be interpreted to mean that the selves in the relationship resolve the contradiction through sharing experiential or perceptual fields while creating, again and again, a relational reality which preserves both the individuated selves and the relationship.

Possible Implications of the Dialectic Way of Understanding Relationships.

When trying to identify possible implication of Hegelian thinking, one is forced to discuss the issues at a very general level. The implications are far-reaching, and certainly deserves to be discussed in greater detail. However, that would take us beyond the scope of this article. Therefore I shall merely summarize.

The problem of acknowledgement

We have seen that the notion of acknowledgement or recognition as a "therapeutic tool" is not new (14,17,20). In fact Hegel emphasized its mayor role in relationships some 200 years ago. I have argued that acknowledgement is fundamental to transcendental change. However, to be acknowledging is threatening and demanding. It requires that we maintain our delineation, but are prepared to risk it. In fact, the question could be raised whether our tendency to define, analyze and "explain" each other is a defense against the anxiety involved in relationships. Better to be sure about who the client is and wants rather than embarking on an uncharted and turbulent interpersonal "voyage".

Rogers pointed out long ago that it was risky to be a client-centered therapist. It is a fearful prospect to be called upon to be both differentiated *and* to merge with the other. Hegel has shown us why. The threat of change, and ultimately the threat of annihilation, is devastating. We approach the Freudian life/death issue, catching a glimpse of the basic human condition: ontological loneliness, the desparate need for the other, growth, change, reproduction and death.

Therapy involves much more than acknowledgement. But as I pointed out initially, it is basic to the clinical attitude with which we should meet our clients.

The Importance of the Other

Hegel is radical in his emphasis on the depth of our ties to each other in close relationships. We need one another both to sustain an on-going identity and as

buffers from despair and loneliness.

The reciprocity inherent in Hegel's thinking forces us to change focus. As therapists, f.exam., we can find out about ourselves not only through focusing on our own feelings and activities. We see ourselves through the responses of the clients. Our constant awareness of how we "create" our clients constitutes an ethical imperative in my line of thinking. Correspondingly, feelings we may have reveal the client. We must continuously change perspectives.

If we as researcher study couple, we can not take ourselves out of the context we are investigating. The researcher as a person is inextricably tied to what he observes. From theorists representing the systemic approach we learn that we change what we observe in the process of observing. (Keeney (14), Auerswald (1).

Rogers, among others, have focused on process in therapy. Hegel shows how important it is to exchange fixed positions for movement in relationships. Without accounting for process in therapy as well as in research we may fall into Bateson's epistemological trap: to punctuate a process, and delude ourselves into thinking that we have understood a given phenomenon (2). The consequence of viewing others as static while denying process is to define and label them. Process threatens our self-delineation and our relationships. It is resistant to control and reminds us of our own transience. This same anxiety presents itself to therapists and researchers alike. In both cases we are invited to "let go of our delineation", to question our assumptions and to change.

The Importance of a real-life Relationship

Another implication of Hegel's thinking is that the client needs a real relationship with a genuine other. Although the therapeutic relationship obviously is not symmetrical, it is necessary that the therapist enters into the relationship, using his self as an instrument for therapeutic change. The therapist helps to create a relationship in where the two partners validate and and negotiate a common relational reality. The client(s) is invited to "move about" in internal and external relationships. This "moving about" in the complicated, dim, dangerous and exciting jungle of the psyche, enables the patient to "deconstruct" his false self, connect with his real self, and to accept the

tragic fact that the jungle is never chartered out, under control or predictable. The process is one of creating and re-creating a common relational reality, or "re-writing" a personal biography and resolving the formidable contradiction again and again.

Implications for Epistemology

Hegel anticipated the modern notions of interrelatedness. When you take out a "part" you "punctuate" a whole (2, 22). This idea is easy enough to accept intellectually, but is often overlooked, not only in therapy, but in research. The reason why this is difficult to integrate emotionally, may be because then we would have to accept ourselves as a part of the totality we investigate, not only as an "outside agent". We are involved in the enticing and threatening process of relating.

Hegel suggests that when creating a common relational reality, it is built on socially shared, common "agreements" - thus "sittlich". The agreement aspect is a of communion based on shared experiences, the "meta-communicated we"! This could be interpreted to mean that ethics include moral rules for human cooperation and interaction. We confirm our experiences through mutual validation. Consensus in social science f. exam. is not only governed by communicative rules, but is created in a communion which is based on a lived experience of openness and differentiation. This means that communicative *techniques* are not sufficient. In order to create a common reality we have to enter into relationships involving feelings, and face the threats, and recognize or acknowledge others.

Some Implications for our Conceptual Framework

As we focus on the relationship: on the reciprocity and the interrelatedness, the "both/and" side of the totality, many concepts in our clinical language must be put "afloat" and re-examined. For example, in the light of Hegel's thoughts, the concept of *autonomy* is no longer a state one has reached due to the resolution of stage-determined conflicts, rather it is continuously recreated. *Defenses* cannot be regarded as primarily intrapsychic phenomena, but must be understood within a reciprocal interpersonal framework. The same is true of the *unconscious*, not to mention *reality*

testing. Even *transference* will look different in this framework. How these concepts would appear, re-written in this type interactional language, will have to await future clarification.