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Relations: Introduction to the First IARPP Conferenceⁱ by Emmanuel Ghent, M.D.

Excerpt: The term, relational, was first applied to psychoanalysis by Greenberg and Mitchell back in 1983 when they abstracted the term from Sullivan's theory of interpersonal relations and Fairbairn's object relations theory. Common to these models of psychic development was the notion that psychic structure - at the very least, those aspects of psychic structure that were accessible to psychotherapeutic intervention - derived from the individual's relations with other people. This, of course, was intended as an alternative to the prevailing view that innately organized drives and their developmental vicissitudes were, at root, the basis of psychic structure. There is no such thing as a relational theory, but there is such a thing as a relational point of view, a relational way of thinking, a relational sensibility, and we believe that it is this broad outlook that underpins the sea change that many of us recognize as breathing fresh life into our field.

In their original usage of the terms "interpersonal relations" and object relations," both Sullivan and Fairbairn were focused on the role of human relations in development. They each, in their own way, forged theories of psychic development and the origination of motivational structures that were based essentially on the idea that structure formation arose out of the complexities of interhuman activities. From this point of view what has come to be called the intrapsychic was in fact a dynamic structuralization of the interpersonal. Loewald (1978), too, basically saw the intrapsychic as a condensation of the interpersonal as, for example, when he says, "Thus I conceive instincts . . . and the id as a psychic structure, as originating in interactions of the infantile organism and its human environment (mother). . . ." (p.+495), or again (1972), "Instincts, in other words, are to be seen as relational phenomena from the beginning and not as autochthonous forces seeking discharge (p.+242). In this usage, the term relational was essentially conceptual in meaning, rather than descriptive. It referred insistently, although seldom explicitly, to a conception of psychic structure as being largely constructed - the resultant organization of experience, primarily interhuman experience. This conception allows room for both well integrated organization of experience as well as

for non-integrated or poorly integrated organizations of experience some of which may be inaccessible to ordinary consciousness, as we see in the phenomena of dissociation. Notice again that we are here speaking of "relational" as a conceptual term that underpins a way of thinking about development, about psychic structure, about psychopathology, and ultimately, about psychotherapeutic interventions.

Unfortunately, and confusingly, a much more superficial usage of the term relational has cropped up and has all but co-opted its meaning. In its purely descriptive usage, relational has come to mean anything that refers to activities going on between people, mostly current activities. Thus we hear, "Mr. X has many relational difficulties," meaning not much more than that Mr. X has personal difficulties in relating to other people. If one reads that "a patriarchal culture . . . lauds strict autonomy [and] denies relational needs," or if one comes across phrases like "fantasy elements are often linked to real relational experiences," it becomes clear that the term is being used to signify something like human contact or connection. What concerns me about this superficial usage is that it won't be long before we hear patients saying "You're not responding to my relational needs." But much more important, it completely obscures the far more radical significance of the term, in which usage, for example, fantasy is relational; it is the outgrowth and condensation of relational experience of all sorts. I emphasize "all sorts" to remind you that relational is not confined to interhuman relations, although they play an enormously important part in matters having to do with psychotherapeusis. We must not neglect the role of emergent self-organization. Also troubling to me is that in tending to limit the scope of the term relational, to relations between people, we exclude all manner of other relations from consideration. To my mind, relational psychoanalysis is almost ideally suited to make use of insights from the dynamic systems perspective that in the last decade or two has begun to radically change the way we think in science. PoincarÉ, the father of this outlook once said, "the aim of science is not things themselves, as the dogmatists in their simplicity assume, but the relations among things; outside these relations there is no reality knowable" (Kelso, 1997, p.97). Money, at one level, is merely a thing; at another level it is a complex relational concept, at root an expression of claims on the labor of others. When with cash we buy food at the supermarket we are not aware that we are redeeming claims, sometimes highly exploitative claims, on the labor of many people all along the food chain, often on a global scale. Using the model of dynamic systems we come to appreciate the significance of history, context and ecology - all of which are expressive of relations, and relations among relations - at all levels from the cellular, to the level of organs, to perception, action, cognition and memory, to the

interhuman, and on to the level of societal relations, not to mention the highly complex relations that exist between these different levels. Psychoanalysis until recently has confined itself to the narrow band of the psychopathological, where interhuman relations play an enormous role. In recent years interest has spread down one level to study the relation between brain and mind and up one level to the societal, although we have not yet seriously engaged a concept of a social unconscious.

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ⁱ New York, January, 2001