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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Playing With Reality IV: A Theory of External Reality Rooted in Intersubjectivity

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the interpersonal aspects of the early development of an experience of external reality and the roots of this experience in primary intersubjectivity. We suggest some implications this has for psychoanalytic work with the patient's experience of external reality. We argue that the external world is not an independently existing 'given', for the infant to discover, as is sometimes implicitly assumed. Infants acquire knowledge about the world not just through their own explorations of it but by using other minds as teachers. The experience of external reality is invariably shaped through subjectivities. We argue that at first the infant assumes that his knowledge is knowledge held by all, that what he knows is known by others and what is known by others is accessible to him. Only slowly does the uniqueness of his own perspective differentiate so that a sense of mental self can develop. In clinical work we frequently observe the undoing of this process of differentiation, and understanding the underlying mechanisms can be helpful in managing the transference and countertransference consequences when the process has been derailed.

This paper continues the exploration of psychic reality we have undertaken in three previous papers published in this Journal. Whereas the previous papers focused on internal reality and its distortion in severe personality disorder, the present paper asks the question begged by the previous papers concerning the experience of external reality, which psychoanalysts are far less frequently concerned with and often take for granted. As in the previous papers, we link findings from developmental observations with clinical phenomena that we encounter in the consulting room. In this paper we explore the interpersonal aspects of an experience of external reality and the roots of this experience in a primary intersubjectivity.

### **Models of “psychic reality” and the primacy of psychic reality over material reality in psychoanalysis**

Psychoanalysis could be (and perhaps has been) defined as “the most profound exploration of human subjectivity that is consistent with systematic study”. Unfortunately, for historical reasons, this has led to a marginalizing of the external world by some psychoanalysts. Freud (1900) elaborated what became the concept of psychic reality in order to account for the surprising observation that disturbances provoked by

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childhood trauma could be indistinguishable from those in which no such event had taken place. Internal experiences (beliefs, wishes, thoughts, anxieties) could carry the compelling quality of ‘real’ events.

In a panel discussion on psychic reality held at the Mid-winter meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association more than two decades ago, Robert Michels (1985) highlighted a common misapprehension that equated psychic reality with the inner world of subjective, personally constructed representations and perceptions, which was to be contrasted with the 'real' external world of objective things. Michels pointed out that Freud used psychic reality to denote the inner source of subjective experience, rather than subjective experience *per se*. External reality was seen by Freud as another, alternative source. The experiential world for Freud, we learn from Michels, was a combination of sensations from the external world and derivatives of unconscious sources, psychic reality. Both the components, psychic and material, were thought of as real but the subjectivity they gave rise to was not. Of course in this image implicitly both the drives and the physical world are seen as material although Freud only designated the latter with this term.

Michels (1985) identified four models covering contemporary psychoanalytic approaches to psychic reality. (1) In the late Jacob Arlow's (1984) conceptualisation, the role of analysis is to help patients learn to distinguish between reality and the effects of unconscious fantasies and disentangle these. The famous metaphor of external and internal projectors aiming at the translucent screen of subjective experience successfully captures this model. (2) An alternative view sees psychoanalysis as helping the patient correct the distortions in his perception of reality brought about by his unconscious fantasies. (3) In contrast to both these views, Kleinian analysts in particular, suggest that only internal reality is knowable and the role of analysis is the reintegration of aspects of this split off subjectivity into

the fullest possible version of subjective reality. (4) The fourth model of psychic reality, perhaps especially characteristic of French psychoanalysis, sees the task of psychoanalysis as bringing a new special integration to the subjective world out of the psychic realities the patient brings with him to treatment. All these views, addressing the fragmentation of or distortions to a reality, endorse to some extent a positivist view of reality as “out there”, for example able to be tested, and adapted to. In order to define unconscious influence, the external environment had to be considered as relatively fixed, and known. Taking a developmental stance, external reality and internal reality cannot be seen as alternative perspectives, as figure and ground. Both internal and external reality are learned about within the mother-infant relationship. This shared process creates a sense of continuity between the experiences of internal and external.

The aim of this paper is to begin to sketch out the more complex interrelationships that exist between internal and external by tracing the development of the infant’s awareness of external reality in order to aid theory building, address some

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misconceptions, identify a few clinical implications and help towards working psychoanalytically with the external reality of our patients in a less constricted manner.

## ***The discovery of the internal in the external***

### **The dialectic of internal and external**

In many ways following in the footsteps of relational theorists (e.g. Bromberg, 1998; e.g. Mitchell, 1997; Mitchell, 2000; Renik, 1998) we now recognize that the intrapsychic and interpersonal domains of psychoanalysis come together in the intersubjective, in which reality is defined as a relational matrix that incorporates both the internal and the external world. If we look outside ourselves, we do not see simply an external world; what attracts our attention are other minds, even though these are external to us. What concerns us, in both the internal and the external world (for the most part) is subjectivity. Thus it is a mistake to contrast subjectivity (the internal domain of psychoanalysis) with externals and by implication objectivity (the domain of other disciplines). The critical developmental dimension is shared, versus individual, subjectivity. The external comes to be something inherently 'other', not self, but this is a developmental achievement, not accessible to all of us, all of the time.

In this sense the external world is a concept that could never be restricted to physical reality. We will try to show that developmentally the external is inherently subjective, and the self necessarily differentiates itself from this larger subjectivity of 'otherness'. So in agreement with Freud, and somewhat differently from common parlance, we assume both external and internal to be part of psychic reality. However, only the external is 'other' and it is so for good developmental reasons. Being surrounded by subjectivities (the part of the external world that we are concerned with) indirectly generates within the human mind the individuality that gives experience its personal

quality, its meaningfulness. The philosophical bases for this approach are well established (Cavell, 1994; Davidson, 1987; Wittgenstein, 1969) and are shared by a number of psychoanalytic traditions. As Marcia Cavell (1994) wrote: “subjectivity arises along with intersubjectivity and is not the prior state” (p. 40). This paper will try to elucidate the ontogenetic background to this assertion by considering key observations of early child development.<sup>1</sup>

### **The eyes joining minds**

Perhaps it is stating the obvious that to humans the external world is not an independently existing ‘given’ that is there to be discovered. Part of the meaning of being human is that we learn about the world not just through our own

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explorations of it but by using other people as teachers. External reality is invariably transmitted via subjectivities. Infants look at their caregivers to learn about the meaning of their experience (M Tomasello, 1999; M. Tomasello & Haberl, 2003). The classical demonstrations of social referencing<sup>2</sup> in emotionally ambiguous situations (e.g. the crawling infant glancing at the mother before crossing the visual cliff, Hertenstein & Campos, 2004; Klinnert

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1 In no way is this paper intended to add to the confusing set of developmental extrapolations to clinical practice which have sadly at times been made by psychoanalysts exploring the relevance of infant research to the clinical situation. Whilst we consider such research to be vital to our understanding of mind, in no way can this knowledge be considered directly applicable to the understanding of the adult patient in the clinic. The misuse of the developmental metaphor was appropriately delineated in an excellent paper by Mayes and Spence a decade ago (Mayes & Spence, 1994).

2 Social referencing can be defined as the seeking of information from another individual and the use of that information to evaluate a situation.

et al., 1983; Moses et al., 2001) are prototypical of a general stance we have towards gaining knowledge about the world. The fundamental assumption wired into the human infant (but probably not into the progeny of any other species) is that they may learn about the meaning of the universe that surrounds them by interacting with a mature member of the species. As Anna Freud discovered through her observations of young children caught up in war, and many other similar observations (e.g. of terrorist attacks) have confirmed, the traumatic impact of events such as bombing is much more dependent on the reaction of the parent than on the degree of danger, noise, the panic of strangers and so on.

The newborn is immediately sensitive to eye contact and measures of brain activity quickly reflect differences associated with being looked at versus an averted gaze (Farroni et al., 2002). Most recently, studies have shown that young infants will follow an adult's gaze (joint attention) if, and only if, the eye movement was preceded by mutual gaze (Farroni et al., 2003). Establishing a link, *a joining of minds* is then an essential prerequisite for sharing the interest of another. There is an interlocking of subjectivities that is followed by an opening of the mind to gathering information and seeing something new. Eye contact is one evolutionarily prepared mechanism to initiate this. Notwithstanding the obvious absence of eye contact in psychoanalysis, we would like to suggest that an analogous dual process incorporating a joining of minds and then a joining of attention to focus on a reality shared between but going beyond each mind is also at the heart of the analytic process.



## Sharing consciousness

The idea of a shared consciousness in infancy is not new. A number of developmentalists have emphasized the key functions of such sharing (Hobson, 2002; Rochat & Striano, 1999; Tomasello et al., 1993; Trevarthen, 1993; Trevarthen & Aitken, 1994). Infants by 12 months of age do not just participate in joint attention, they also actively attempt to establish it, often apparently simply to share interest in something. For example, a recent study, (Liszkowski et al., in press) observed the impact of an adult reacting to the pointing behavior of 12-month-olds. Infants were not happy when the adult simply followed the infant's pointing and looked to the object, or looked to the infant with positive affect, or did nothing. But they were satisfied when she responded by looking back and forth from the object to the infant and commented positively - implying that this sharing of attention and interest was their goal. Infants of 12 months happily point just to inform an adult of the location of a misplaced object they have no direct interest in (Liszkowski et al., 2004). Such declarative

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and informing motives are apparently "purely social" in their aims. In other words infant research teaches us that human external reality is inherently shared because it is constructed out of shared feelings, shared intentions and shared plans. As adults we may conveniently place the world 'out there', but 'out there' retains its historical connections with the earlier sense of a shared interpersonal reality. This shared reality which is largely built within

attachment relationships may well give knowledge of the external world a lasting sense of significance and pleasure (or more negative qualities such as danger, depending on the quality of the early relationship).

The dialectical relationship between what is external and internal emerges in the child's discovery of his own mind. The model developed by Gergely & Csibra (in preparation), Premack (2002) and others points to the centrality of shared subjectivity in the initial acquisition of information about the world. Ed Tronick (2004) has offered an important explanatory developmental model of such dyadic states of consciousness (see also Gianino & Tronick, 1988) elaborated and created by a regulatory system to make meaning within and between individuals. The successful process of elaboration of shared meanings between individuals leads to a dyadic state of consciousness. Inevitably, shared consciousness models sound abstract and somewhat implausible. We see evidence of this only rarely in maturity, for example in unusual moments of shared understanding and shared meanings with another person, but the compelling appeal of this state may be part of our pleasure in practicing psychoanalysis.

There is accumulating evidence that dyadic interaction of this kind contributes to the achievement of normal brain organisation. When infants cannot create such dyadic states the coherence and complexity of their self-representation is dissipated; they move closer to states of disorganisation in both the emotional and cognitive domains. Phenomenologically, not causally, we believe that this state is an aspect of severe depression. It is the infantile loss of contact with the external world of subjectivities that severe depression

recreates experientially. The loss of the underlying experience of shared consciousness makes the whole world appear flat, meaningless and isolating.

In the recent psychoanalytic literature, the Argentinean family therapist and psychoanalyst, Isidoro Berenstein (2001), came close to describing this in his plenary address to the Nice Congress of the IPA. He argued that the crisis of psychoanalysis was in part due to the inward-turning and self-referential tradition of the theory, and that it could be radically revised by importing clinical understanding that naturally emerges from treating couples and families. Using the word '*link*' in preference to the more traditional words 'relationship' or 'connection', he intended to introduce a novel intersubjective metapsychology to his audience that would take fuller account of new experience and be less exclusively concerned with the repetition of past experiences. He claimed that treating couples and families forces the clinician to recognise that the links observed cannot be reduced to the internal-object world of participants in the system. His attempt, judging by his discussant's response (Doidge, 2001), was largely unsuccessful. We believe that this was partly because he could not back his ideas up with relevant developmental observations that could establish the genetic origins of linked or shared consciousness.

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The basic assumption of modern developmental theory is of a primary intersubjectivity – that *knowledge about the world is shared knowledge*. To paraphrase this, the evolutionary underpinnings of human culture require that

the infant turns to others for essential information about the world. It follows then that the infant assumes that his knowledge is knowledge held by all, that what he knows is known by others and what is known by others is accessible to him. Only slowly does the uniqueness of his own perspective differentiate so that a sense of mental self can develop. It is accepted that infants possess from the earliest days (by three months or so at the latest) a distinct sense of their integrity as physical beings. But in relation to what we know and understand about reality we start with the assumption that knowledge is common and there is nothing unique about our own thoughts or feelings. To use Arlow's metaphor, there is but one projector, and the projection is experienced as coming from the screen, not from within.

Just how deeply rooted our expectation about shared knowledge is, is indicated by what has been called the 'curse of knowledge bias' recently explored in a developmental context by Susan Birch and Paul Bloom (2004). This bias was originally formally described by three economists (Camerer et al., 1989), and refers to the common observation that if one knows something about the world one tends to assume that everyone else knows it too. So, young children report that other children will know facts that they themselves have just learned (Taylor et al., 1994). It seems clear and unsurprising that three-year-olds are more likely than older children to assume this (Birch & Bloom, 2003). The curse of knowledge bias phenomenon accounts for the so-called 'egocentrism' of young children. They cannot appreciate another person's perspective, not because they assume that everyone's perspective is the same as theirs, but rather because everyone knows the same things. Piaget's concept of egocentrism has exactly the opposite emotional valence

to what is actually taking place. It is not the overvaluing of private knowledge but the undifferentiated experience of shared knowledge that hinders perspective taking. Many diverse observations show this (Birch & Bloom, 2003; Fischhoff, 1975; Kelley & Jacoby, 1996; Keysar et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 1994). We assume that everyone has the same knowledge that we do, because most of our beliefs about the world were someone else's before we made them our own.

Young children do not yet know fully that their internal world is private and individual. This developmental configuration shapes unconscious fantasy and primes desire for 'oneness' and 'merger'. They do not know that they can choose whether – for example – to share their thoughts and feelings with their parents, or their therapist. Perhaps one reason that toddlers are so prone to outbursts of rage and frustration is that since the world and individual minds are not yet clearly demarcated, they expect other people to know what they are thinking and feeling, and to see situations in the same way they do. Thus crossing their intentions seems malign or wilfully obtuse, rather than the result of a different point of view, alternative priorities, etc.

### **The interpersonal roots of shared consciousness**

What are the developmental bases for the joining of minds? Why does the infant extend his consciousness beyond his bodily parameters? These questions are closely related to a second set of questions that emerge from the explanation above: What

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triggers the opening of one's mind to new knowledge, to enter a joint domain of common focus and interest? To make use of the other as an extension of self-experience, the other has to enter a dialectic as originally pointed out by Hegel (1807) and emphasised by Winnicott (1956) and Fairbairn (1952), by temporarily abolishing the boundaries of the self in order for the other to find himself within. The importance of mutual gaze has already been considered, but 'self-contingent interaction' with the caregiver is an even more powerful process for marking identity, with a profound role in social development. 'Self-contingent' aspects of the world are things that change in response to the infant's actions, and generate positive feelings by showing that he has an impact on the world

The infant is sensitive from birth to such contingencies and responds to changes in the external world that are contingent with his body movements, his own body representing perfect contingency by matching proprioceptive cues with seeing his limbs move (Watson, 1985; Watson, 1994). At four or five months, around the time that Melanie Klein dated the initial emergence of the depressive position, a switch is thrown and the infant avoids the kind of perfect contingencies that reflect body movements, and turns towards less perfectly contingent aspects of his environment (Watson, 1995; Watson, 2001). In practice this means a preference for the social world, part of the infant's universe which we know to react with at best about 70% contingency to his actions (Rochat & Striano, 2002). This process of contingency-seeking helps babies to know which adults in the environment (attachment figures, if trustworthy) have their mind in mind, and can best teach them about the world.

But why the joining of minds? We believe that the extension of consciousness beyond the child's body perhaps reflects the way infants come to be able to regulate their emotions (Gergely & Watson, 1996, 1999). Mirroring the infant's displays of emotion is an instinctual response for all adults (Meltzoff & Moore, 1997). In the social biofeedback theory of emotion, Gergely and Watson describe how the infant's illusion of control over the caregiver, as she contingently mirrors his distress, serves to soothe him and contributes to the down-regulation of emotion. Further regulatory control is achieved through the creation of a second-order representation for what the infant is experiencing: the representation of the caregiver's contingently mirroring, soothing affect display (Fonagy et al., 2002). Thus the extension of consciousness is required since the infant finds and organises his affect state through mirroring by someone who has the infant in mind. Importantly, part of this process is the creation of the basis of separateness as well as joining. The mirror display must have the Bionian function of containment as well as contingency in order to be effective. The mother achieves this by systematically indicating that the mirrored state is not her own (Target & Fonagy, 1996). Thus, paradoxically, for consciousness to be extended, for minds to be joined, a constraint must be added: what Gergely and Watson call 'markedness'. Markedness makes the reflection of intense affect possible for the infant to take in: it indicates that the mother is not showing the baby her own feelings, but rather her awareness of his state. Lack of markedness, in a sense overly accurate mirroring, prevents the creation of a joint mind; it forces the baby to prematurely experience his own feelings as 'out there' and not in a

shared 'here'. It makes the infant's experience appear contagious and is experienced as dangerous,

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leading potentially to traumatization. We have preliminary evidence to suggest that the maintenance of an 'as if' attitude on the part of the caregiver contributes to the experience of effective self-regulation (Gergely & Fonagy, in preparation).

### **The relational basis of learning about the world**

The well-known experimental 'still face' procedure has systematically explored the importance of contingency. This has shown the devastating effect on a six-month-old infant when the caregiver stops responding contingently to his gestures even for a brief (two minute) period (Bazhenova et al., 2001; Haley & Stansbury, 2003; Rosenblum et al., 2002). A very recent study demonstrated that when a person unknown to the six-month-old infant abruptly stopped interacting, maintained mutual gaze but with an immobile facial expression (for two minutes), the infant remembered that face and avoided it in preference to another face for at least 12 months. The disruption of contingency in the still face is catastrophic not simply because of the loss of the adult, or indeed the loss of the self as created in the adult's mind, but the loss of the entire world that the infant and caregiver were in the process of constructing together.

We have tested this assumption with George Gergely and colleagues using a modified still face procedure where mother and infant were able to



see each other not directly but in a mirror. We found that when the mother stops acting contingently with the infant, infants quite often turn away from the external world and seek perfect contingency either by looking at their own body or looking at their mirror-image. We were surprised to find that the quality of the relationship between mother and infant was reflected in the strategy the child adopted (Gergely, 2004; Gergely & Fonagy, in preparation). Children whose relationship with their mothers was assessed as insecure were far more likely to turn to their own mirror image than infants who had established a secure attachment to their primary caregiver.

Perhaps of even greater interest clinically was our observation that infants whose attachment to their caregiver was disorganised were not able to re-establish contingent interaction with her, but rather continued to explore their own image in the mirror. Disorganised attachment at 12 months is marked by sometimes quite extreme behaviours on the part of the infant during the reunion episode of the Strange Situation. They may freeze, attempt to escape from the mother, head-bang, self-harm or just collapse, feigning dead. In an earlier study, Koós and colleagues (Gergely, Koós et al., 2002; Koos & Gergely, 2001; Koós et al., 2000) demonstrated that the future disorganisation of attachment could be predicted from the pattern of response to loss of contingency. Six month olds who continued to look at themselves in the mirror after the end of the still-face episode were disorganised in their attachment in the strange situation six months later. (These observations are consistent with the findings of another study that did not monitor self-looking but found “gazing away” in the still-face situation to be highly predictive of

behavior problems at 18 months in infants of depressed mothers; Moore et al., 2001)

We believe that the solipsism and lack of openness to new knowledge of the narcissistic stance may be rooted in this kind of behaviour. We presume that the relational experiences associated with disorganised attachment, frightening parenting, helplessness, misattuned affect, dissociative episodes on the part of the caregiver,

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predispose the infant to a desire to find only what he or she expects to find (Hesse & Main, 2001; Lyons-Ruth et al., 1999; Main & Hesse, 2001). Triggered perhaps by the loss of the shared external, the vulnerable infant is forced to find contingency from within. We were surprised to find such strong relationships but perhaps we should not have been. The quality of early relationships does not only predict the capacity for later relationship formation. If anything the association to developing cognitive capacities is even stronger. Securely attached children retain a 5-10 point IQ advantage throughout their childhoods (e.g. Jacobsen et al., 1994; Jacobsen et al., 1997). (The loving background offered to children adopted from abroad may give them a highly significant IQ advantage relative to the children who were not adopted; Bimmel et al., 2003). Bowlby, in all probability, underestimated the importance of attachment for human development. It is not just the foundation of later social relationships, but also the primary path to discovering those

who will be trustworthy informants about the nature of the world, and thus to the world itself.

### **How do we find out about the external world?**

As should be obvious by now our concern here is with the subjectivity of the external. The child finds out about the world through the subjective. We can learn little even about the simplest aspect of the world around us without joining the mind (the subjectivity) of the person teaching us. The extent of penetration of the subjectivity of the other that is necessary as part of the infant learning about the material world is well illustrated by a beautiful series of studies by George Gergely and his colleagues recently published in Nature (Gergely, Bekkering et al., 2002).

The study concerns the acquisition of knowledge by imitation. Imitative learning was defined by Meltzoff (see Meltzoff & Moore, 1989) as the capacity to acquire new ways of acting to achieve some outcome through observing others perform such acts and re-enactment of the novel action when one wants to achieve the same outcome. Apes, Tomasello (1999) showed us, can only emulate, i.e. mostly try and bring about the same outcome but only through trial and error rather than being able to imitate the method that has been seen. Human infants in contrast show imitative learning by 14 months: They imitate the method rather than simply trying to reach the same result. This was demonstrated by Meltzoff in the so-called 'head-on box' study (Meltzoff, 1995). An adult illuminates a magic light box by leaning forward and touching the top panel of the box with his forehead. A week later 67% of the infants who observed this could re-enact it when given the box. No infant

performs this action spontaneously unless they have seen an adult act this way.

This is then what is uniquely human. Identification is lacking in apes, who emulate rather than imitate. Even in this apparently simple case, infants make assumptions about the subjective state of the person that they are learning from. Even in 14 month olds, imitation is not mindless. When the infant observes the adult turning the light box on with his head and can see no reason why he didn't use his hand, he infers that the adult would not perform this action unless the hand action had some intrinsic disadvantage. Gergely and colleagues (2002) replicated the Meltzoff study, visibly constraining the arms and hands of the adult. Under these circumstances, infants do not imitate the adult. When the adult model's hands are free, 14-month olds clearly

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do imitate. It seems the wise infants must have concluded that imitating was not rational if their situation and that of the adult model was different. This simple study shows that what we learn about material objects in the outside world, even at 14 months, is filtered through a model of mind, a model we create harnessing our understanding of why the person we are observing acts the way he does. Learning about the material world is not, even at 14 months, an automatic imitative internalisation of the external but a selective interpretive subjective process. Re-enactment is not a linear

consequence of identification but a rational inferential process that does not necessarily result in a copying of what was observed.

### **Material versus psychological objects**

From the description above, you might have the impression that we believe that the infant learns about a physical object, such as the light box, through the psychological object. There is a critical distinction here that is often missed. To illustrate, the 14-month-old is repeatedly exposed to two adults looking at two objects (Egyed et al., 2004). One adult consistently expresses interest when looking at a yellow object and disgust when looking at a red one. The other adult consistently shows the opposite reaction. The first adult is seen four times as often as the second. The researchers looked at how surprised the infant was by one of the adults choosing either of the objects. More surprise, measured as increased looking time, appeared to be associated with the adult choosing the object that was more frequently the object of disgust. Importantly, this was the case regardless of which of the two adults showed this preference. It seems, then, that the infant adopts the adult's values and registers surprise when the adult's choice is counterintuitive. However, the value is attached to the physical rather than the psychological object. The specific adult's attitudes are not yet observed and connected to that person. Rather, the physical object is thought of as more or less desirable.

Thus, our previous conclusion about the inherent subjectivity of learning about the physical world needs to be qualified in an important way. The infant finds the physical object through the subjectivity of the psychological object, but without taking note of this object as separate,

independent from him and from other psychological objects in his world. This impersonal, non-person specific aspect of early subjectivity is characteristic not just of particular types of deep regression that we occasionally encounter clinically. We make common use of this assumption implicitly as part of routine work when we interpret analytic material in the transference, where the person whose attitude is being referred to appears insignificant or unimportant and interchangeable compared to the attitude itself (allowing the “you mean me” type interpretation that some of us favour). As is so often the case, Freud (1900) noted this and considered it to be a feature of the freely mobile cathexis of the primary process.

### **Moving from shared to separate consciousnesses**

#### **Psychic equivalence**

In previous papers in this series (Fonagy, 1995; Fonagy & Target, 1996, 2000; Target & Fonagy, 1996) we have identified two modes of representing the internal

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world that antedate mentalization: the psychic equivalence and pretend modes. In the pretend mode the child is able to maintain an ‘as if’ private reality which is known to be inconsequential, totally separated from the shared external world. By contrast, with psychic equivalence everything is ‘for real’. We have thought of psychic equivalence as the equation of the internal with the external. There can be no differences in perspective about the external world because it is isomorphic with the internal. For this reason ‘psychic

equivalence', as a mode of experiencing the internal world, can cause great distress because the projection of fantasy to the outside world is felt to be compellingly real.

The development of our thinking outlined in this paper sheds new light on this duality. In previous writings we had conflated two features of psychic equivalence: (a) equation with other minds and (b) equation with the physical. Rooted in the expectation of a shared consciousness is the belief that everyone shares my beliefs and related to that, the view that I know all there is to know about other states of mind and they know everything related to mine. A separate but equally powerful aspect is what psychoanalysts usually refer to as the concreteness of this mode of thought, specifically that children consider their beliefs to be tantamount to reality. "If I think it, then it is both true and real".

That these two aspects are separate is illustrated by the following example. The small child of three, late at night sees a dressing gown hanging on the back of his bedroom door and has the frightening thought that it might be a man in his room. This thought is experienced as part of a physical reality: there is a man in the room. This belief can only be dispelled by a change in material reality: the removal of the dressing gown or the reassuring presence of a protective person, or ideally both. We would all agree that this example illustrates the compelling nature of the psychic equivalence mode of functioning, yet by this stage the first aspect of psychic equivalence, the belief in the shared nature of ideas, is evidently no longer present.

This example helps us to see that in situations of stress or regression, the child or even an adult can experience a private reality with all the

compelling force of the shared, consensual experience that goes with perception of the material world. Yet the child can see that his view is personal, with no implication for others, he does not think that his parents are frightened or at risk. It feels shared because it is real but it is not shared because only the child is in danger. Psychic equivalence is only partial.

We now see such quasi-shared experiences as characteristic of a transitional phase in the evolution of a subjective reality specific to the self. The infant starts with a sense of shared consciousness. This concordance of views is essential in defining material reality, which is after all even for adults only definable through its characteristic of being shared. However, for the infant to function in a social world, the uniqueness of his or her perspective must also be created out of this experience of shared consciousness. The psychological self and consequently the sense of the other differentiates out of shared consciousness as the child becomes increasingly aware of instances where his knowledge and beliefs are not the same as those of the people around him. This is the second way in which people around the child play a critical role in the development of the self, but until the mental world is established

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as separate from the material world, this differentiated phase holds real dangers. *In this intermediate position, particularly in moments of physical isolation, when the need to reinvolve shared consciousness may be greatest,*



*the child inadvertently experiences his private reality as if it was universal, giving this reality its immediacy and force.*

### **The pretend mode**

We notice similar complications of development in relation to the second mode of primitive subjectivity we have described, the pretend mode. This mode emerges in the absence of shared consciousness and is disrupted or undermined if another person draws the child's attention to his knowledge of reality and away from his pretend world. An illustration: when a boy, aged two and a half years, was playing that an upside down chair was a tank with the legs shooting ammunition, his father asked him: "Is this a chair or a tank?" The little boy stopped playing, put the chair the right way up and walked away. He knew that the object was a chair and not a tank, but in the pretend mode bringing external reality into contact with the play, destroys the possibility of imagination. The very young child does generally seem to assume that external events are more powerful than his mental experiences and that they change the reality that he has to share. This is a reason, we think, why playing and especially pretending, best of all pretending with friends who will adopt a joint reality at odds with the commonly shared reality, is both fun and very important for children. In this intermediate phase it is essential that other people play along, so that the child has the compromise of shared and not shared. As well as being pleasurable, it is funny, because for a change the power to make reality lies more in one's own mind, but it also becomes real through being shared. Another two and a half year old boy used to get up early every day aged two to three, having talked to himself and played for an hour or so first in bed, wanting to act out 'plays' to his parents, and

grandparents if available, apparently wanting to make the fantasy become real by sharing it.

In this dissociated world, a private mind can develop. The role of play in delineating the subjective is apparent when we observe the way children use play, to mark out the personal territory of knowledge. We can see this in the child's insistence, especially with more powerful people such as attachment figures, that his play must be done his way, and the extraordinary amount of time preschool children spend in negotiating the terms of pretend play, often not finished by the time they have to leave and the chance to start pretending has gone! Who is who, what they do, what is allowed to happen, are ways of making it safe to play together and share a new reality, a pretend space where a danger of psychic equivalence, the possibility of spoiling, again comes in because of impingement by other minds.<sup>3</sup>

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### **Linking to the private world of others**

The acquisition of mentalisation is a powerful illustration of the intertwining of intrapsychic and external world considerations. The child's discovery of his thoughts and feelings as mental states depends on his discovery of these internal states as different from those held by others. This

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<sup>3</sup> There is an excellent observational paper by Robert Emde and his colleagues (Emde, Kubicek & Oppenheim, 1997) which describes the development of imaginative psychic reality which "appears early, at the dawn of language, and reaches a peak of expressive activity between three and six years of age after which its use declines." (p. 124). Similarly to the present exploration, the development of pretend is seen as key in advancing mature symbolic function.

discovering of one's own mind is a dialectic of exploration and sharing. Feeling safe in mental proximity to the caregiver undoubtedly helps to permit mental exploration of the outside to establish 'otherness'. A secure attachment relationship has been shown by us and by others to facilitate later appreciation that others can have different feelings or beliefs from oneself (Fonagy, Redfern et al., 1997; Fonagy, Steele et al., 1997; Meins, 1997; Meins et al., 1998; Meins & Russell, 1997). Why should this be the case? We believe that the child establishes his state of mind as different from those of his objects through a process of exploration that involves creating set or predictable reactions in the caregiver and others. The closer, the freer and the less distorted that relationship is, the more solidly the picture of the mental state of the person outside (the other) will be acquired (Steele et al., 2002). Bion (1959) was quite specific about the likely mechanism, giving the exploration of other minds through a process of projective identification, the term "normal". The child finds out about other minds through generating "counter-transference" responses from attachment figures, particularly parents and friends: sending probes and waiting for a reaction.

With the arrival of mentalisation, the child suddenly recognises that he cannot be sure what the minds within other bodies think or feel. Physical reality does not specify the other's state of mind, what he knows is not the limit of knowledge of minds, and simply thinking something does not make it true. This recognition entails a sense of loss as well as a loss of control over the external world and grandiosity, but also gives him a precious new tool for understanding the actions of others for which previously only crude interpretations in terms of physical constraints and observable goals could be

given (teleological thinking) (Csibra & Gergely, 1998; Gergely & Csibra, 1996, 1997; Gergely & Csibra, 2003). To discover other minds and how they work, repetition of these exploratory projections is critical. The social 'promiscuity' of most preschool children relative to their more focused bonding at earlier times may be an adaptive strategy to discover more about how minds in the world outside work. It is critical that the child has a clear sense that his knowledge of internal states only extends as far as the physical body he controls. In patients with psychosis where this association breaks down the exploratory projections generate deep confusion and experiences of either controlling or being controlled. Little wonder that hypermentalisation (over-attributing mental states) is normally defended against, and the notion of shared consciousness is troubling even to us psychoanalysts.

These mental acts of projective exploration may well have instinctual roots. A number of theoreticians have suggested that at a deeply unconscious level mental activity may be represented as action (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). The action associated with this kind of normal projective process is likely to be sexual exploration (Fonagy & Target, in press), a probing or penetration that could set up an important instinctual context for the discovery of other minds. At the same time, we continue

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to use our capacity to mentalize to try to get a better knowledge of what is in our own minds. With fear and trauma the probing of other minds is commonly abandoned and self-knowledge is often even more likely to be sacrificed.

This process relates directly to the falling back on a focus on the physical self when there is a loss of social contingency, which we have discussed before. We saw that infants with disorganised attachment, exposed in the first year of life to unpredictable loss of contingent reactions (Goldberg et al., 2003; Lyons-Ruth, 2003), react by creating a highly predictable experience, looking at themselves. We anticipate that these individuals will have grave difficulty in engaging in the kind of normal projective identificatory process described above. The reaction of the other is too unpredictable. The playful exploration, the generating of a response without being able to anticipate what this might be is too frightening. To cope with this and yet engage in such exploration, the projective identificatory process is enhanced, the child engages in massive rather than playful projection. The sequel of disorganized attachment in infancy is indeed highly controlling and manipulative behavior at 3-5 years of age (e.g. Moss et al., 2004) and abnormalities have been noted well into adolescence (e.g. Weinfield et al., 2004).

In this way the reactions are far more predictable but the subtlety of discovering about otherness is also compromised. The person will learn less about how minds outside work and the reactions received will feel consequently less real and at times almost without meaning. This state of affairs is pervasive in a narcissistic personality structure where the wish to discover about the mind of the other conflicts with a fear of otherness and what Berenstein (2001) described as a resistance against linking with the mental world of the external comes to dominate. Clinically working with such individuals is a common experience for psychoanalysts. The hallmarks of the

clinical presentation are: manipulateness, the meaninglessness and valuelessness of what is discovered, the stunning exchangeability of ideas pointing to the persistence of pretend mode functioning with occasional catastrophic shifts into psychic equivalence when failure can be experienced as actual destruction. We will briefly illustrate such a clinical case.

### **A clinical illustration of narcissistic resistance to linking**

#### Miss A

As a child Miss A sought solace from early neglect in endless fantasy play with a pretend farm. She threw herself into her analysis, exclaimed about its value, wept and laughed, thought hard and showed anger, but the analyst gradually began to suspect that her experiences of herself were not genuine. She would speak about the great progress that the analysis was making, or how "good" a session was, but in the counter-transference, the analyst<sup>4</sup> felt an odd sense of disquiet after such remarks. He could not build a picture of her. She would present herself as sentimental and sensitive, but in the next session she would describe herself being cruel. At times she could appear depressed, hopeless and self-hating, at other times, triumphant and grandiose. There was no sense of continuity between her personae.

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Gradually the analyst understood that the pictures she painted were of course projected in order to manipulate his feelings towards her, but not simply to set up role relationships – there was too little consistency for that.

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<sup>4</sup> The analyst was Peter Fonagy.

Her apparent callousness and arrogance was not a reflection of malevolence but a pathological exaggeration of a normal form of self exploration. She was demanding that he should enact a relationship with a malevolent person: be forgiving, critical, frightened or whatever, to allow her to find what her projective probes made of him, she was trying to find herself in her external subjectivity. Her chameleon-like self-representations were like experiments into him that, through his reactions, would show her his mind and through that her own.

The relation of these probes to her actual inner experience was almost arbitrary, as if there were no connections between her inner states and external reality. Thus the analyst learned that her extravagant excitement about each new project actually marked a state of loneliness and worthlessness. By contrast her sadness before breaks was always thinly overlaid by excitement. What helped him understand her was seeing this 'false' excitement as subjectively equivalent to sadness, not a defence against it. She was trying to find her sadness in the outside (in him), because within she could not feel it. The 'excitement probe' was sent to see if he would feel sad about losing her, not to communicate her own feelings. Thus, she could not relate to his suggestion that her hypomanic excitement before the weekend protected her from feeling lonely. It helped much more when he simply said that "she felt so alone with all the excitement", or that "she was sad she could not get other people to join in with her pleasure", and later, that "the coming weekend felt difficult because I would not be there to see how pleased she was about her work". The false emotion was the closest she was able to get to the intangible feelings that so deeply confused her. The

excitement she displayed may have been the mother's attempt to comfort the baby she was leaving, by an exaggerated false brightness, but its current function was to test the analyst's experience of her. Through that, perhaps she could find out what she felt.

Her attempts at creating emotions in the analyst had a desperate quality. She did things that might have felt acceptable for a child under five but appeared grossly manipulative in an adult patient. She missed sessions then rang me late at night, she brought her childhood toy dolls to 'listen' to what he had to say, she covered her head up under the blanket on the couch, she hid from the analyst under his desk, she came to a session with her laptop to make notes on what he said, and so on. Beyond the destructive intent of sabotaging a process and the analyst's ability to think about her, she also needed to create an external reality that she could experience. Because for much of her life nothing felt real, these dramatic histrionic experiences felt real because she felt them to be shared.

The analyst's attempts at interpreting her unconscious intent could not bear fruit because they undermined her fragile sense of what was real. She needed to tell him about her grand achievements, about how others admired her, about the wonderful things that were likely to happen, to make these experiences shared, real and part of an external reality. This was driven in part by her low self-esteem, but more than that, it was also a way of constructing a real external reality because the one that she was

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in felt to her quite unreal, as it was so distorted that it could not be shared by anyone. Feelings she attributed to herself, the analyst or any other object lacked depth, they were experienced in the pretend mode. They could be felt as representational, i.e. known as internal states, but linking them to anything 'real' was impossible so they were without any consequence for her. For something to feel real, Miss A felt she had to force the person she was with to enact that role, which she could then deal with through action. For it to feel real, it had to exist on the outside, the psychic equivalence mode of experiencing the subjective. To achieve this however, she had first to disable the analyst's ability to think for himself and get him to DO things. Sadly, probably all that helps under these circumstances is the analyst's remaining able to think independently under such pressure. With a person like Miss A the task of analysis is of creating an external reality that does not yet exist for the patient, not because the external world is not there but because the fragility of her subjectivity, her internal reality, prevented her from experiencing the external world as real. The analyst restricted himself to describing how she presented the way things were, including the anxieties which drove her to present them that way. Again and again he interpreted her need for control. We might call such interventions "small interpretations" as they were little more than frequent, transference-focused clarifications of his best guess at Miss A's mental state.

## **Conclusions**

Have we advanced our understanding of how psychoanalysis can make a place for the external world? The external world turns out to be a

world of subjectivities. It requires the same combination of intrapsychic and intersubjective awareness as the internal world. Understanding the development of an appreciation of external reality might help us understand specific problems we frequently encounter clinically. Some of these perhaps we are overly keen to interpret as belonging to the domain of the internal and we may be overzealous in placing outside our remit aspects of our patient's difficulties that we perceive as belonging to the outside world. The perspective we advocate in some ways blurs the distinction between the two. In normal development external reality is rooted in and stands for a sense of shared consciousness with the object, an agreement so close about the nature of things that an independent perspective cannot be identified. By contrast, when we assert our personal view of the outside, we are defining that which has individuated from a primarily intersubjective self.

The interplay of these two domains is evident in a range of contexts. For example, the phenomenology of depression may not be readily understandable without considering the involvement in it of an experience of lack of shared consciousness (outside, as well as inside). Narcissism as a phenomenon may be seen as more textured if we take into consideration the desperate fear of these individuals not to locate themselves in 'real' interactions with us. Later papers will attempt to show how these ideas illuminate severe depression and narcissistic personality functioning.

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[Translations of summary]

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