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THE FLOW OF ENACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Abstract. In this article, I offer a concept of therapeutic action that I call “the flow of enactive engagement.” I advance the idea that this flow of enactive engagement is the fulcrum of a contemporary psychoanalytic treatment, just as free association was once to classical psychoanalysis. Analyst and analysand live within the field of the treatment that is created by the two participants but is greater than the sum of its parts. Just as Freud saw free association as the road to psychoanalytic cure and advised the analyst to not intrude on the analysand’s associations, I suggest that an unobtrusive Relational analyst can allow the process of the field to emerge and tell its own story. This approach is distinguished from the traditional Relational/Interpersonal approach that sees the constant examination of the therapeutic interaction as the key to therapeutic action. I offer a brief vignette that captures the analytic benefits that accrue when the analyst allows the flow of enactive engagement to unfold.

Keywords: Enactment, therapeutic action, free association, unobtrusive Relational analyst, the field, flow

“The enactment is the interpretation”

—Clifford Geertz (1972)

THIS ARTICLE WILL ADVANCE THE IDEA that enactment can be regarded as a contemporary form of free association. Freud (1959b/1913) regarded free association as the key to a successful psychoanalytic process. Likewise, I conceptualize enactment as the key to the therapeutic action of a contemporary psychoanalysis. Freud recommended that the analysand say “everything that occurs to him without criticism or selection” (Freud, 1959a/1912, p. 112) and that the psychoanalyst should maintain a neutral position that allows these associations to flow freely without obstruction. Although we, as Relational psychoanalysts, have travelled far from Freud’s original suggestion of the abstinent psychoanalyst, I suggest that enactment, like free association, is a process that can

be allowed to unfold freely by an unobtrusive yet deeply engaged psychoanalyst. It is this process that I term the “flow of enactive engagement.”

I will recast free association as enactment that *happens* in psychoanalysis and fully involves both analyst and patient. The emphasis here is on things that happen in the course of a psychoanalytic treatment. I will draw on the ideas of the field of the analytic dyad from the River Plate group in South America, primarily Willy and Madeleine Baranger (2009) and their contemporary followers, such as Antonio Ferro (2002, 2009) and Claudio Neri (2009). I will suggest that enactments may be fruitfully conceptualized as the emergence of happenings or events in the treatment that narrate what is occurring in the field of the analysis. (I will elaborate on the conception of the field of the analysis below.) In short, both analysand and analyst participate in the field. They coconstruct and are constituted by this emergent field. The field emerges as an entity in itself that is more than the sum of the two participants, rather like the “group-as-a-whole” (see below). The field can be thought of as the entity of the analytic relationship, which takes on a life and qualities of its own. The analytic pair comes to live inside this relationship or field. I will suggest that the advancement of the treatment process is best helped when the analyst recognizes the power of this emergent field or relationship and his or her role in it, and maintains an unobtrusive position in regard to that field’s development. In other words, the analyst can allow the enactive field (Reis, 2010a), the “force field” if you will, of the analysis to unfold as its own narrative, without diverting it with interpretations or hurried explorations of “what’s going on around here” (Levenson, 1989, p. 538). This approach can be regarded as addressing a register of treatment that is distinguished from that addressed by a more traditional Relational approach, which regards therapeutic process as the result of the continued analytic questioning of the nature of the therapeutic interaction.

Enactments are conceptualized as the emergence of regressed, unformulated (Stern, 1997), unconscious, and proto-mental (Bion, 1961) states of consciousness and states of being in the enactive field of the treatment. The flow of enactive engagement involves the surrender to (Ghent, 1990), and allowing of, states of mutual regression (Aron & Bushra, 1998) that involve both analyst and analysand. Often, these mutual regressions involve the emergence of self states, worlds of feeling and sensation outside of awareness and inchoate. The work of the treatment is to allow the enactment to tell its story, to emerge in a fully felt way. This is the flow of enactive engagement and is, in essence, a mutual and creative act.

The analyst's participation in the flow of enactive engagement asks the analyst to carefully hold and contain the process as it unfolds, to be with the analysand, and to be mindful of not obtruding into this process. I borrow from the work of British independents such as Winnicott and Enid and Michael Balint in describing the stance of the "unobtrusive Relational analyst" (Grossmark, in press) to flesh out this position. The analyst accompanies, even shares in, the journey that both participants take as the field unfolds and "tells its story."¹ Both participants look in the same direction, as it were. This expands the choreography of Relational psychoanalysis. Visually rendered, as well as facing and affecting each other, the members of this analytic couple sit side by side, facing the same direction, as the journey they create together carries them into new and heretofore unknown emotional and psychological territory.

From Free Association to the Flow of Enactive Engagement

Freud regarded free association as the key mechanism by which the psychoanalytic cure proceeded (Freud, 1923a, 1923b) and he recommended that the analyst in no way interfere with this process. Echoing these sentiments, Christopher Bollas (2008) counsels us to not get in the way of the patient's free associations, to "not prevent free association from emerging" by being "overly active" (p. 19).

My suggestion here is that, likewise, the analyst not impede or obstruct the emergence of the flow of enactive engagement. In the classical tradition, free association was a mental activity that characterized the means by which the patient's unconscious was revealed in the analysis. I propose that the flow of enactive engagement with the patient's world allows the emergence of the most fragmented and inarticulate registers of the patient's psychic life in the analytic relationship.

I use the term "flow of enactive engagement," first, to evoke the independent tradition in which the analyst does not obtrude into the unfolding of the unconscious life of the patient, as captured by Balint's (1968) description of the unobtrusive analyst; second, to shift the therapeutic action away from the mental, one-person connotation of free association;²

¹ We are accustomed to speak of "narrative" or the "telling of a story" as a product of language and interpretation in psychoanalysis. The idea here is that a story is told in the events, interactions, affects, and states that emerge in the analytic couple. These may or may not be given form via subsequent interpretative reflection.

² See Hoffman (2006) for a recent critique of the classical concept of free association.

and, finally, to foreground the enacted and enactive process in which the analyst must accompany the patient, i.e., to be fully engaged while being unobtrusive. For patients who have no words for their inner life or who are inhabited by self states that defy verbal description, classical verbal free association may not provide access to these inchoate inner worlds and states. Words may be regarded as acts among other acts that emerge in the analysis. For many patients, such as I will describe below, words and associations function as things to be experienced by the analyst rather than associations to be followed for their denotative meaning. They can “tell” their lives, however, and their pain and psychological make-up in their own idioms of *action* and *engagement*, idioms that are joined by the analyst, who is ready and available to live with and through (Joseph, 1989) these self states and mutual regressions.

The flow of enactive engagement evokes the involvement of both analyst and analysand. Bollas (2009) reconsidered free association and suggested a “free talking” patient in the presence of an analyst who employs “evenly hovering attention” (Freud, 1923a) or “free talking” (Bollas, 2009). In addition to these images, I see a patient who, unable to verbally narrate his or her experience, engages in a “free being” or “free becoming” within the environment provided by the analyst. The analyst listens with his or her full experience, emotional, physical, intellectual; always partly conscious and always unconscious, always both present and partly dissociated. It is an enactive engaged experience, a process that the analyst simultaneously gets out of the way of and with which he or she is completely engaged.

A brief etymological investigation of the term “free association” would seem to evoke some of these ideas. Bruno Bettelheim (1982) changed our understanding of Freud with his careful analysis of James Strachey’s translation of Freud in the *Standard Edition*. Bettelheim offers us fresh insight into the meaning of some of Freud’s key concepts. Among the concepts that came under his scrutiny is free association (p. 94). He points out that, on occasion, Freud used the word “einfall” (e.g., Freud, 1925) and that Strachey always uses the term “free association” as a translation. Bettelheim notes that “einfall” means allowing something to spontaneously come to one’s mind, as in “it happens to occur to me” (p. 96). He suggests that this word contains a more fully psychological meaning than the purely mental meaning of the “incorrect” term, free association (Bettelheim, 1982, p. 94). Free association, according to Bettelheim, invokes a more conscious and “logical” (p. 95) process, whereas “einfall”

suggests a more spontaneous occurrence. Bettelheim suggests that this spontaneous process is more closely connected to the “unconscious from where this idea suddenly emanates” (p. 95),

In fact the word “*einfall*” has more to offer us. It also contains the word “*falle*” (to fall). To have a thought, then, evokes a thought *falling* into one’s mind. And, the sense of mutual enactive engagement evokes a hidden sense that has lain like a sequestered self state, tucked away inside the concept of free association: a mutual state of falling or a falling together. This sense of falling—into something with a patient as both patient and analyst regress together in the emergent field, and the more disturbed and damaged parts of the self emerge in the treatment—is a common experience.

“*Einfall*,” therefore, evokes many images of mutual falling: into altered and deeply regressed states of being: the Freudian fall from secondary to primary process; from ego to id; the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer’s concept of falling into a conversation together (Gadamer, 1965, quoted in Stern, 2010); and the fall into the altered state of sleep. Jean-Luc Nancy (2009) observes that “by falling asleep, I fall inside myself” (p. 5) into deep solipsism. And to sleep is to dream. Ogden (2009) suggests a process of “talking-as-dreaming” (pp. 14–30) as “the place where analysis occurs” (p. 14). This is an area of overlap where the patient’s and the analyst’s dreaming occur together. Talking-as-dreaming is talk in analysis that is infused with primary process thinking, the thinking that goes on with no “understanding work” (Sandler, 1976, p. 40). The patient free associates and the analyst accompanies with his or her own “waking dreaming” or reverie, which involves a surrender to one’s own primary process experience. These are the analytic conversations, which often do not seem to comprise analytic work, yet move in the direction of helping the patient become more alive and more human (Ogden, 2005).

The concept of the flow of enactive engagement, then, includes the experience of falling together into the dream-like primary process of the patient’s free talking, along with the analyst’s reverie, and adds a dimension of engagement in enacted experience. The sediment of cumulative relational trauma may not come into the analytic space via free talking and associations, but via the actual happenings and doings of the analytic relationship; it can only come through unmentalized and “undreamable” (Ogden, 2009, p. 16) occurrences that involve patient, analyst, and the dyad’s unity, the field.

I must note, however, that the flow of enactive engagement does not imply that the analyst enters the patient's world and the emergent field of the analysis, and takes leave of his or her own abilities to think and process the experience. Like the analyst's reverie or evenly hovering attention, it suggests an altered state that exists simultaneously with other states. It also asks that the analyst be clear and firm around boundaries while allowing for the inevitable ambiguities and challenges that, when one connects with these areas of functioning, occur as part of the treatment.

The "Field" of a Psychoanalysis

There has been renewed interest in the work of the River Plate Group (e.g., Brown, 2010; Stern, in press; Zimmer, 2010). In a series of prescient articles, Madeleine and the late Willy Baranger (2009)—French analysts who settled in Uruguay after time in Buenos Aires—outlined the theory of the "field" of an analysis. Suggesting that the field is comprised of the conscious and unconscious realms of both analysand and analyst, they proposed that in every analytic relationship both participants develop powerful unconscious fantasies of the nature of the dyad as it unfolds and the nature of the cure that is wished for and feared. At any given moment, the analyst can understand what is happening in the treatment according to the current state of fantasies about the relationship. These ideas have been adapted and expanded by many contemporary writers, most notably Ferro (1992, 2002, 2009), who provides numerous examples of how he understands the treatment process in terms of a constant message from the unconscious of the dyad as to the state of the relationship. The message comes from the field, rather than from either participant.

The piece of the Barangers' contribution that is most relevant to the suggestion I am advancing here is that the field—constituted by both participants' conscious and unconscious fantasies and fears, their worlds of internal object relations and the transferences that ensue—develops and takes on a transformative and generative quality of its own. Narratives and worlds are generated that are more than the sum of their parts—i.e., the internal and intersubjective worlds of the patient and analyst.

On the face of it, this is a phenomenon with considerable validity. Who has not registered that a relationship can develop a quality or color that is more than the contribution of the two members? It is commonplace to experience oneself as living *inside* a relationship that pulls and

pushes one into a particular self state or way of being as if it has a mind of its own. From my own perspective, as a psychoanalyst who practices group psychoanalysis as well as individual treatment, the theory of the field is organic and coherent. The group therapy community has, for many years, paid attention to the idea of the phenomenon of the group-as-a-whole (Agazarian, 2006; Anzieu, 1984; Bion, 1961). The group-as-a-whole has its own presence and is more than the sum of the interpersonal and intersubjective relationships in the room. Indeed, anyone who has been a part of a large crowd or mob will attest to this phenomenon. Some group therapists, such as Agazarian (2006), confine their interventions to talking to the group-as-a-whole and only address individuals as a container or “role” for a piece of the group-as-a-whole’s dynamic.

I believe that these ideas find much coherence in the Relational literature, particularly in the work that Steven Mitchell was advancing (Mitchell, 1988, 2003): that is, we do not find the unconscious inside the mind of one individual even as he or she interacts with another, but rather the unconscious emerges in the field that is generated in the interaction and unfolding of the treatment. The ideas of the field or the dyad-as-a-whole can be said to expand these ideas. Certainly there is much resonance here with recent theorizing about the “analytic third” (Aron, 2006; Benjamin, 2004; Ogden, 1994). Space does not allow for a more thorough discussion of these concepts.

The Unobtrusive Relational Analyst, the Field, and the Flow of Enactive Engagement

In a recent article (Grossmark, in press), I outlined the position of the “unobtrusive relational analyst.” I suggested that the silent or quiet accompanying of a patient has erroneously been conflated with classical ideas of “abstinence” and “neutrality.” I argued that for patients whose subjectivity and internal object worlds are damaged and distorted as a result of developmental trauma, failure, and pathological identifications, engagement by the analyst as an independent subject may be premature. Such patients may seek—and need—to relate from a more regressed self state, dominated by more primitive states of merger, dependence, and lack of self/other definition and object constancy. The analysis may be best served by an analyst who remains unobtrusive and allows the patient’s internal worlds to dominate the scene. The analyst must accept that words are empty and “abandon any attempt at organizing the mate-

rial” (Balint, 1968, p. 177). The analyst creates “an environment, a climate, in which he and his patient can tolerate the regression in a *mutual* experience” (Balint, 1968, p. 177; emphasis added). The regression is mutual but not symmetrical (Aron, 1996). This mutuality is governed by the analyst’s sensitivities to the patient’s most intimate and complex needs, and, like a parent’s attunement to the needs and tolerances of a young child, is deeply intimate. In this “environment” the patient can come to his or her own sensations and mind in the connected presence of the analyst. Hence, unobtrusive is not neutral, but deeply intimate and engaged.

The unobtrusive analyst may wait quietly and patiently, or be engaged and lively. The key is that the analyst is joining the idiom and rhythm of the patient and, therefore, allows the patient to inscribe the treatment with his or her own psychological signature. The analyst accompanies the patient in this process, much like a child analyst will accompany the patient who brings in a toy and wishes to engage in play together. The emphasis here is on the quality of “withness” (Reis, 2011). Many of our most troubled patients had parents who simply could never be with them in any meaningful manner as their lives and experiences developed. When we are *with* these patients but do not try to do anything *to* them, we create the possibility of a “new beginning” (Balint, 1968), and provide the ballast that the ensuing journey may require.

Thus, the unobtrusive relational analyst allows for the emergence of the patient’s inner world, but not simply as a solitary phenomenon. In an unobtrusive manner, the analyst participates in the field of the analysis—indeed cannot *not* participate in it—and allows the field to unfold and tell its own story: a story that cannot be known until it emerges. The analyst is unobtrusive yet deeply involved in the flow of enactive engagement that takes the analysis on its revelatory journey.

The following is a brief description of my work with Ruben, which I hope illustrates these concepts in action.

The Case of Ruben

Ruben is an American man whose father was a Brazilian immigrant. He is a big, handsome, South American man who speaks in a strong, resonant voice, and who carries himself with an air of familiarity and confidence. The patients whom I see before and after him have remarked on his regular salutations: “Hey! How are you?” and so on. One supervisee won-

dered if he was a friend of mine due to this air of ownership and comfort in the waiting room. He dresses in beautiful clothes that often leave me envious, and more important, he wears them with ease. He will often enter carrying a half-smoked cigar—he will stub it out before entering the building—and on one occasion, proclaimed with beautiful timing: “Doctor: Sometimes a Cigar is Just a Cigar!!” From the get-go, there has been so much to potentially comment on, interpret, and consider with him. I have done little of this: the overriding message from Ruben is that he needs to dominate the treatment space and me; he quickly let me know that he is not interested in taking much from me. He seems, however, to deeply need me to join with him, to enjoy, admire, and accept him.

Here we go! This is the beginning of the flow. The flow and the field of ongoing enactive engagement. To ask him to consider the nature of our engagement—“what’s going on around here?”—would, I believe, damage the potential for this flow to take us somewhere new.

From the beginning, Ruben has enjoyed engaging with me outside the confines of therapy talk. Quickly gathering that I am British, he has shared his great love of soccer and his devotion to one of the teams from the English league. Of course, as luck would have it, his team is the deadly enemy and rival of the team I have followed with boyish enthusiasm since my youth, and we’ve made no secret of our rivalry, often engaging in playful jousting and ribbing each other. Unfortunately, my team is in a 30-year slump whereas his team is in the ascendancy; thus, much of this humor is at my expense. But, it really is a hoot, and I look forward to these moments of fun during the bleak and trying times with him.

Of course, Ruben’s bigness and dominance might be regarded as an exemplar of a phallic narcissistic structure—i.e., his big voice and big presence. He drives a white Hummer for goodness sake! He told me exactly why he needed a BIG CAR when he made the purchase: “Because I’m BIG; that’s why!” And there’s the massive snake-dragon tattooed across his back that he removed his shirt to show me. Of course, he has a huge and powerful physique—he works out regularly and intensely—that he displays by the way he dresses.

Nonetheless, my experience of Ruben and of these big and potentially intrusive qualities is not one of menace, avoidance, or aggression. Rather, it seems to me that he is engaging, seeking, “probing” as Emmanuel Ghent (1990) would have said. Neither interpretation nor exploration of our relationship would have been acceptable to him; it would have created a distance between us that would have left him wanting in ways that

he may not have been able to articulate. My interest was in being *with* him and finding out where we were going.

Ruben grew up with his father. The story was that his mother died when he was an infant. She was Caucasian American and his father, recently emigrated from Brazil, only had a short time with her before her death. Ruben has few memories of his first decade—just a sense of deep longing and shame, and the perceptual, hallucinatory image of ragged, rusty iron and steel: old, rusty, hard, unfriendly, and toxic. Having finished high school, he worked in his father's construction business. The proximity to his father was poisonous for him. He was continually verbally and emotionally assaulted by his father, called a "good-for-nothing" and far worse. His father was particularly adept at assaulting his manhood, always insulting him as weak, stupid, and ineffective—using the kind of language we can easily imagine, e.g., "you'll never amount to anything."

Ruben was, unsurprisingly, shy and withdrawn as a child, living in constant anxiety and with a continuous sense of self-loathing and worthlessness. He found it impossible to make friends at school and in the neighborhood. His father had no sense or connection to who his boy might be beyond some kind of extension of his own narcissistic self. Thus, Ruben found no connection to others and none to himself. He had no clue what he might want to do, who he might want to be. To stick his head up, to be his own person and have his own desires, was too dangerous.

After his father died, Ruben took over the business and, shortly thereafter, received an unannounced visit from . . . his mother. She told a long, shocking, and confusing story. His mother said she had a short affair with Ruben's father in New York and had lived with him beyond Ruben's birth. When their relationship became strained—both were young, overwhelmed, and not very responsible—Ruben's father threatened her so violently that she ceded custody of her boy to the father and left New York to live a carefree beach and bar-oriented life far away. Only now, with a heavy heart and much regret, she was looking for Ruben. She also had some undefined hope to reconstitute a family that now included a grown brother and sister, fathered by different men, for Ruben to get to know.

So, on the advice of his girlfriend, Ruben came to treatment, as he struggled with a roller-coaster of feelings and moods. He was confused, angry, and resentful with the world: with a mother who had abandoned

him to an abusive father and with a father who had withheld from him the only thing he had ever wanted but could not articulate. Not only that: He was angry and resentful with himself for not having listened to his own sense, time and again, that his mother was somewhere, close at hand, and not dead as he was told.

Rage. Of course, it was coming. Over time I heard more and more about altercations in stores, arguments with friends and rumbles in clubs. He took up boxing and described some vicious and painful bouts. And then *we* are in it. Five years into treatment, clean from years of domination by addictions to cocaine, alcohol, and sex, and gradually establishing a sense of continuity and trust in others, including working on relations with women, he goes into father-assault mode. It is 2010. “Obama is the worst president in the history of this nation. . . . We need another Bush. Now there was a great man. . . .” And on he spews. I simply can’t take it. As an argument I quote the Nobel Prize-winning economist who supports Obama. Things get worse. It feels all kinds of ugly. He sneers at my suggestion that there is racism behind the Republicans’ all-out attacks on Obama (like his father, Ruben is a Black man). Eventually, we look at each other, squared-off, full of rage: boxing. “You don’t fight fair!” he cries. And, I realize that I have hurt him. I could not have believed such a thing was possible. We talk more. Not about what all this means psychologically, but just talk. He tells me how shamed he felt when I quoted Nobel Prize winners, etc. “Where d’you learn that?” he asks. I talk. Bullied by a bigger and stronger older brother who could pin me down, I learned to use my mind, be a wiseass. Outsmart him. I tell him this, and how I tried so desperately to cover my hurt. He tells me about experiences, primarily with his father. It is all about domination and submission, being done to or doing to another. This is how he was taught to know and feel another’s presence and came to feel alive himself. And, now, we feel more alive. If the lie that he had grown up with was that his mother was dead, the lie that had infused the treatment was that the treatment was totally alive. Alongside the great improvements in the course of treatment was a deadened self state, a not-dead and not-alive internalized mother. The only way to aliveness was this: beating each other, and surviving.

The fantasy of the field, of the nature of our relationship—that aliveness comes through this kind of emotional pugilism—could only come through our living through it together. No examination of our relationship, no interpretation of his aggressive altercations, could have taken us

to the anguish of trying to find life in pain, abrasion, and poison. I came to *share* this with him, to accompany him in this prison, and I do believe he felt it. The fight had to come. The field took us there, and somehow we were in it. Both of us were regressed, both conscious and unconscious, and both were trying to stay afloat, hoping the ballast of years of productive work together would be strong enough to hold us.

Thankfully, our ship does not sink. New winds now blow us into the territory of love. He does not know what that is. He hangs his head and grieves. He just doesn't know what that feels like. Never has before and feared he never would. And, I try to be with him and let it be. I know that he is a tender man trying to be alive. I don't say much and he keeps coming and we keep working. He sends me a postcard from his vacation, to the effect that the ocean never lets you down, it goes on and on. When we resume after the summer I do not interpret this or offer a suggestion about how this relates to our relationship: I do not suggest that he is discovering object constancy in the form of the "primary substance" of the ocean (Balint, 1968, p.70). Instead, I respect and allow the field and the flow of this engagement to continue to tell our story. Indeed, it is the flow of enactive engagement.

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