Intersubjectivity, Spirituality, and Disappointment in Group Therapy for Loss

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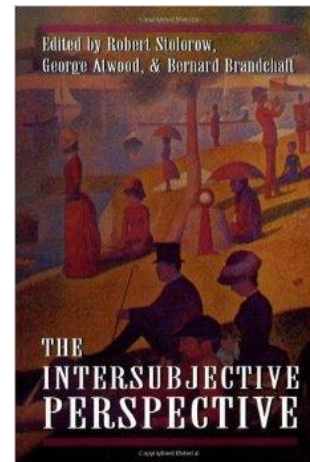Barbod Salimi, PhD

What is intersubjectivity?

▸ The nature of reality as relational and constructed between people (e.g., Stolorow)

▸ A developmental achievement (e.g., Benjamin)

▸ A variable quality of interaction (e.g., Stern)

Intersubjective-Systems Theory: Robert Stolorow

Phenomenological–Contextualist

Trauma as unbearable affect

Therapy as relational *dwelling*

Intersubjectivity, Differentiation, and Mutual Recognition: Jessica Benjamin

Intersubjectivity is a developmental capacity to *recognize* both self and other as subjects (rather than objects) and agents (Benjamin, 1988,1995, 1998).

Complementary dynamics (doer/done to) are involved in breakdowns of intersubjectivity, failures of mutual recognition, "submission to ideals."
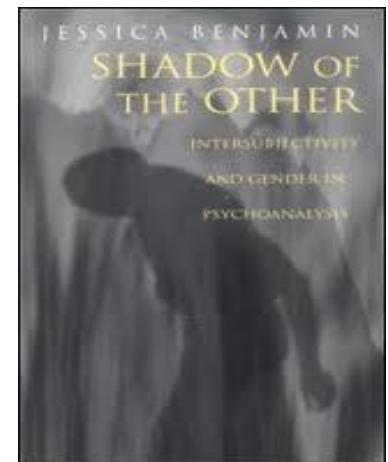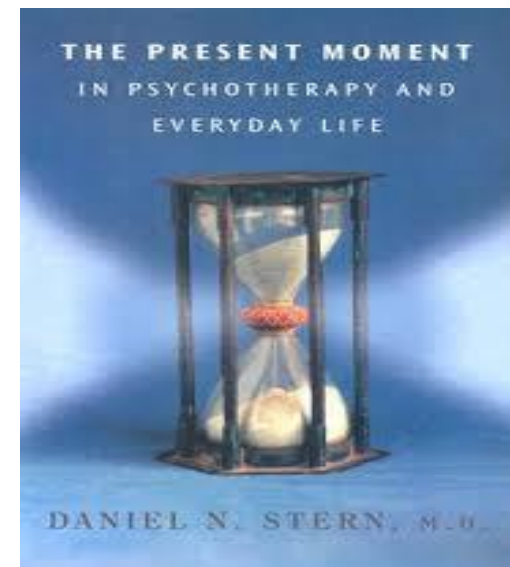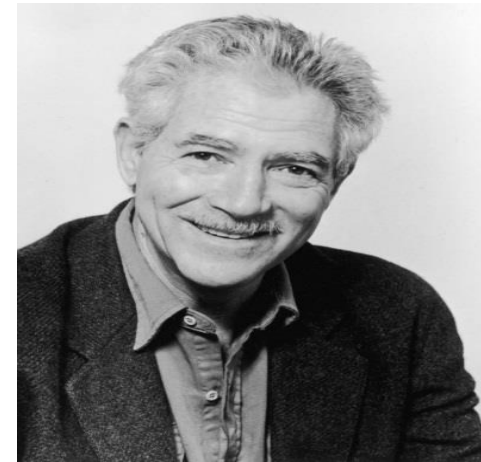
Intersubjectivity as Developmental Process: Daniel Stern

"a differentiated self is a condition of intersubjectivity."

Reading intentions

Intersubjective Anxiety

Searching behaviors – eg "Does that make sense?"

THE PRESENT MOMENT
IN PSYCHOTHERAPY AND
EVERYDAY LIFE

DANIEL N. STERN, M.D.

Big Picture Considerations

Intersubjectivity theory and research

▸ highlight the complex and pervasively relational nature of human subjectivity across the lifespan.

▸ explores interactions, and the impact of interactions, for multiple areas of development, including emotional intimacy, affect regulation and expression, mentalization, and attachment.

▸ explores and provides perspective on clinical interactions
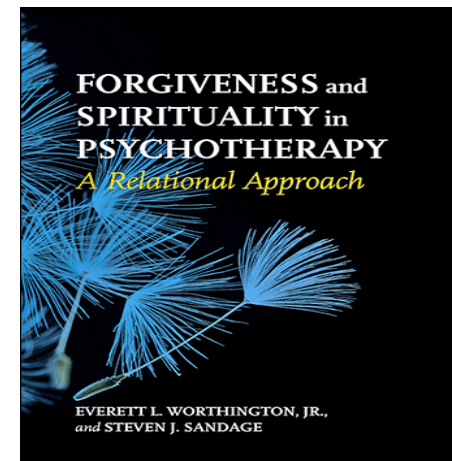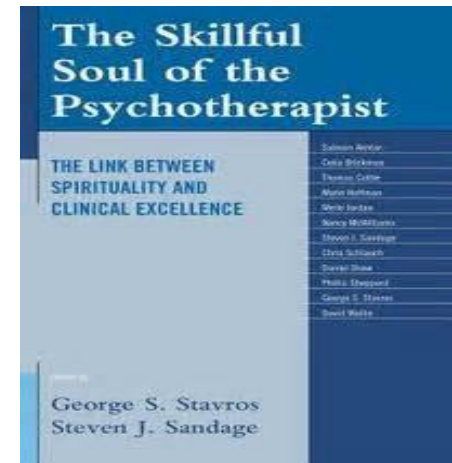
Spiritual and Religious Dynamics in Group Therapy

- Grief and loss often evoke spiritual/religious dynamics
  - Concerns of afterlife, process of forgiveness, involvement of higher power, etc.

- Barriers to incorporating S/R in group therapy (Cornish & Wade)
  - Therapist lack of training
  - Concern of imposing values
  - Conflict around differing beliefs
  - Tendency to intellectualize
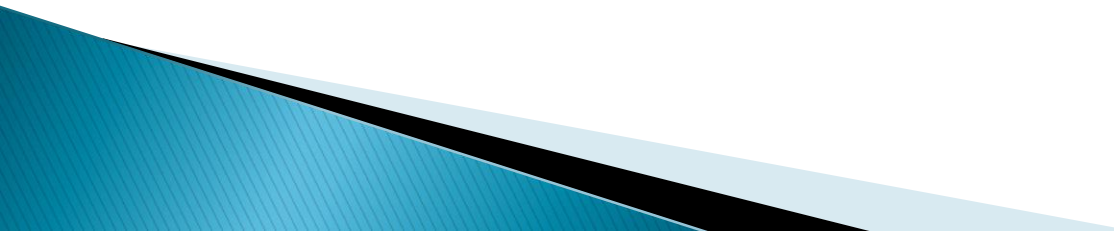
Relational Spirituality Model

- *Relational Spirituality* – ways of relating to the sacred or our ultimate concerns (Shults & Sandage, 2006).

- 19 empirical studies on RS model published to date

- Destabilization as part of healing and growth

- Relational factors as central to therapeutic, existential, and professional change (Stavros & Sandage, 2014; Worthington & Sandage, 2015).

The Skillful Soul of the Psychotherapist

THE LINK BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND CLINICAL EXCELLENCE

George S. Stavros
Steven J. Sandage

FORGIVENESS and SPIRITUALITY in PSYCHOTHERAPY
A Relational Approach

EVERETT L. WORTHINGTON, JR., and STEVEN J. SANDAGE
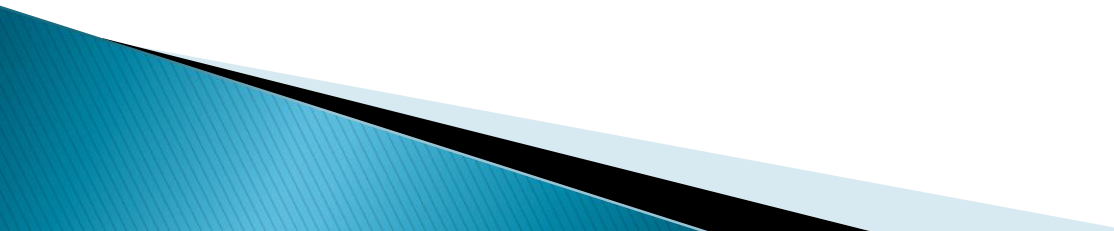
Existential Anxiety & Spiritual Development

- Existential dynamics are "givens" in life but extreme or traumatic levels of existential anxiety may "freeze" processes of meaning-making and arrest healing and development.

- Secure attachment (or limbic security) and intersubjectivity can lead to reactivation of seeking/secure base system and processes of existential and spiritual development, which may potentiate re-constructive meaning-making and relational growth.

Existential cont'd

- Yalom's existential factors in group therapy
  - Accepting the reality of death/loss
  - Learning to be responsible for one's existence

- Rupture/Repair
  - Healthy protest and attachment
  - Normal part of healthy relationships, effective relational therapies, and spiritual development

Defining Disappointment

▶ LaFarge (2015) states "'disappointment' has the meaning of a wish or expectation that is unfulfilled; there is the idea of a story that unfolds over time in an unfortunate way. This kind of narrative holds the idea that it could have come out differently and perhaps, with some dramatic turnaround, it might still" (p. 1226)

Defining Disappointment Cont'd

- Van Dijk & Zeelenberg (2002) differentiate between outcome-related and person-related disappointment

- Harvey & Miller (1998) distinguish between subjective & objective disappointment

- *Intersubjectivity in a group context* can offer a lot in terms of processing subjective & person-related disappointments

Disappointment & Growth

▸ Clancy, Vince, and Gabriel (2011) suggest that disappointment can lead to growth if it is tolerated rather than internalized or deflected

Disappointment & Secure Attachment/Cohesive Self

- Bowlby (1980) asserted that 'repeated disappointment' was central to the process of mourning and a secure attachment is the foundation of this experience

- Kohut (1972) postulated that *occasional* disappointments of the attachment figure created 'optimal frustration,' a process necessary for growth that creates the ability to tolerate disappointment and imperfection in the other

Disappointment & A Narcissistic Structure

- Kohut (1972) postulated that *frequent* disappointments related to lack of mirroring, twinship, and healthy idealization lead to fragile sense of self and one that lacks cohesion/differentiation

- A self with a narcissistic structure, as a result, is more prone to experiencing *narcissistic injury*

- Bowlby's insecure attachment style

Disappointment & Narcissistic Rage

▸ Kohut (1972) coined the term *narcissistic rage* to describe the reaction that occurs to a *narcissistic injury,* often through a disappointment.

▸ This reaction can range from shutting down, agitation or annoyance, to verbal or physical outbursts

▸ *Narcissistic rage*, therefore, can be considered to be antithetical to an *intersubjective* response to a *narcissistic injury*

Narcissistic Structure in Group Process

- In the context of a process group, members with a narcissistic framework may be more prone to react with rage, shutting down, disavowal of feelings, denial, and other defense mechanisms to protect the self from exposure when they receive feedback that does not align with how they need to be perceived
- This structure was the most commonly seen in group members amongst group clinicians at the DI (2014–2015)

Disappointment

▸ Clancy et. al (2011) created a three part paradigm:

Position 1: "I am disappointing. You are disappointed. I do not live up to the expectations of other people."

Disappointment as a failure of the self

Disappointment is internalized

Disappointment

- Position 2: "I am disappointed. You are disappointing. Other people do not live up to my expectations of them."
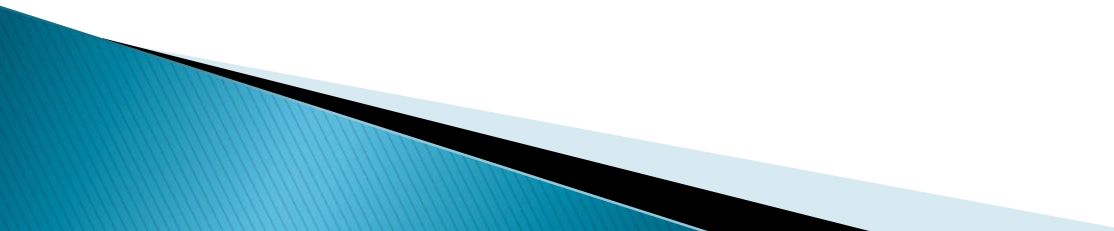
   Disappointment as failure of other
   Disappointment is deflected

- Position 3: "I disappoint. You disappoint. I can tolerate disappointment.

   Disappointment as loss
   *This position is being able to hold an intersubjective perspective on self and other and is most closely connected to grief, forgiveness, and transcending loss

Origins of *Living with Loss* Group

▸ Personal connection

▸ Melanie Klein's idea of loss was first, followed by the concept of forgiveness and Miroslav Volf's writings

▸ Then I became a "groupie," and wanted to combine the two interests

Defining "Loss"

- Psychoanalytically, the "original loss" is the primitive loss of the good object/breast (Klein)
  - Comes with felt loss of safety and security
  - Reactions are paranoid-schizoid position (i.e., all goodness in the world is gone and I am not safe anywhere or with anyone) and/or manic defenses (i.e., "I don't need you anyway," or pining after the lost object)

- Miroslav Volf: Exclusion and Embrace
  - Dealing with relational boundaries and identities
  - Being able to experience difference as enriching, and to stay connected in our differences
  - Introduces spiritual and existential aspect of loss and forgiveness
  - Forgiveness as restoration of identity

The Grief and Forgiveness in Loss

- Relational hurts elicit the loss of the idealized other
  - Sometimes also the loss of trust in the self
- Part of forgiveness is grieving that loss

- Working through loss may require a process of grieving and/or forgiveness
  - We might say it *always* requires grief/forgiveness, and the person's level of resilience will determine how involved or prolonged this process is

Why We Get "Stuck" in Loss

- Marmarosh: impact of one's attachment style
  - Preoccupied: become dysregulated, get "stuck" in the feelings of loss
  - Dismissive/Avoidant: withdraw from others and minimize own needs
  - Secure: feel the pain, able to acknowledge and articulate one's feelings, and able to empathize with others

- Intersubjectivity:
  - Benjamin: complementarity vs. thirdness
  - Do we collapse in the narcissistic injury of loss, or find a way to tolerate tensions and stay connected?

- The task is to find meaning and to stay connected

"Living with Loss" Group

- Developed from idea of group for complicated grief and relational trauma
  - Bringing people out of isolation
  - Using group interactions to examine how grief/loss/unforgiveness has impacted relational dynamics
  - Group provides opportunity to break through relational dynamics that perpetuate being "stuck" in loss, and foster new ways of relating that lead to growth and healing

Case Vignette

- Questions:

  - What positions (I, 2, or 3) do the members currently hold? Where are there breakdowns in intersubjectivity?

  - How are Abigail & Nancy disappointed? What experiences of loss do they both have?

  - How do the group facilitator and other members help both Nancy and Abigail move towards a position 3 stance?

  - How is this encounter an *intersubjective* one?

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