

Why Process is (almost) everything

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Abstract: An exploration of process in contemporary existential therapy drawing from the realist novel, phenomenology and recent developments in affect theory and neurodiversity.

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Space reaches out from us and construes the world

(Rilke, 2011)

Narrative and Content

Whenever Flaubert describes an amorous moment in *Madame Bovary*, he shifts his attention to the description of a painting. At first I thought this had to do with modesty and even prudishness as in movies when the camera politely drifts to clothes scattered on the floor the morning after, on the curtains, or a glimpse of outdoor scenery through the window. The above is a cliché but more alluring than depictions of sweaty, emoting film stars reaching climaxes unknown to mortals. I suspect something more important is at play here, found in Flaubert's writings as in great realist literature.

One way of describing the above is as a shift from the domain of narrative to that of *affect* (Jameson, 2014). When this happens, narrative is interrupted and the writing takes flight. In Flaubert's case, with the storyline lapsing into description, and depiction of paintings taking

over, we almost partake of the intensity and ineffability of what is coming to pass. Tenderness, passion, the ecstatic and bewildering feelings experienced by the fated heroin – all carry her into a different dimension where straightforward narrative is inadequate.

Yet narrative is clearly useful: it takes us from A to B; it relies on cause and effect; it gives us the frame, the subject matter; it provides us with information; it tells us the context, informing us of the functional reference points we need to have in order to follow what is going on. Narrative is important, even though the term itself, ubiquitous in the pronouncements of politicians and commentators, has become a truism.

In therapy, narrative is also known as *content*. It is not a bad idea for a therapist to pay attention to content: at the very least, as a sign of respect towards clients, a way of attending to and taking seriously the presenting issues and concerns they bring. At the same time, do I really have to remember the maiden name of my client's cousin's second wife? When a trainee, I was once asked by a placement supervisor, in response to my consternation in being unable to remember such details: 'What if the client's content is fiction?' He had a point. There is more to human experience than the story; there is a lot more to life than a sequence of facts and events. This 'something more' is commonly known in therapy as *process*.

Content refers to the 'what' of therapy. It tells us what the client and the therapist talk about. It addresses the nature of the 'problem'; it includes valuable information. It is undoubtedly an essential aspect of the whole endeavour. Yet most practitioners would agree that to stop at content would be incomplete – something else needs to be taken into account.

Affect and Process

Going back to Emma Bovary's romantic interludes with her beau Rodolphe, Flaubert's lapse from narrative to description signals the upsurge of *affect*, a domain of experience not adequately represented by narrative and plot. It may well be that affect is beyond

representation; hence one can only evoke, suggest, or, by a leap in style and expression, register a change in perception, the quickening of the heartbeat, a change in body temperature. Recent research and theory (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Massumi, 1995; Bazzano, 2013) suggest that affect may denote a level of intensity that is not measurable until it gets summarily translated (and diluted) as subjective emotion (Massumi, 1995).

The troubadours of the high Middle-Ages knew about this, for their love songs were marked by *tempo rubato*, a music signature literally meaning ‘stolen tempo’ as well as ‘stolen time’, encouraging expressive and rhythmic freedom – speeding up or slowing down according to how the singer was *affected*. The tempo (and time itself) expands or contracts in such moments; the experience of rapture escapes a linear sequence.

Affect is then a realm of experience not readily accessible through discourse, facts and reason but one that may be approached by means of a more diffuse awareness. There is in affect a different logic at play, one that does not rely on cause and effect.

For instance, the *relational* element, intrinsic in any encounter, is certainly *part* of affect. At the beginning, client and therapist co-create the therapy world (Spinelli, 2007) through mutual endeavour and cooperation. But affect also comprises of another element, a more *impersonal* dimension which is then inhabited by the relationship. Marcel (1965) similarly spoke of a given that *precedes* encounter, the mystery of being which for him is blind knowledge, a sort of blindfold knowledge of being inferred in all particular knowledge.

One could say this has to do with the atmosphere, the tonality and texture permeating the therapeutic encounter. Gaining an insight, or at least an inkling of affect, however tentatively, may give us a sense of the general ‘feeling’ of our meeting with another. This in turn may provide us with a deeper understanding of process *beyond the relational*, which in turn can become useful to the therapeutic relationship. Openness to affect – another word for openness could be ‘objectivity’, albeit devoid of positivist claims – assists therapy because when we

are attuned to affect we are not *enmeshed* in the relational – hence can perceive the relationship more openly or objectively.

Symphony in the Market Square

Being attuned to affect and going ‘beyond’ the relational is not as mystical as it may sound at first. A famous passage from realist literature may help illustrate this. At one point in his novel *The Belly of Paris*, Emile Zola describes the Parisian market of Les Halles, the narrative exploding in a multiplicity of smells, sounds, textures that are truly disorienting and take the reader into a different dimension. The vast quantity of vegetables described in the long passage, the meats and blood, the dairy products, the feverish variety of seafood and their strange, even monstrous shapes carry the reader into a space that is also independent of narrative. Rather than being provided with an allegory, or a cluster of symbols placed there just in order to represent and explain something else, the fantastic richness of the description – particularly the bewildering variety of cheeses described, a veritable ‘symphony of cheeses’ their smells and flavours – makes us dizzy and presents us with an opening into affect – a space that is different from the narrative dimension of cause and effect. For a moment, we almost feel what it was really like to be there in the food market at Les Halles in nineteenth century Paris.

When Process is All: Notes on Neurodiversity

The other important component of affect is multiplicity: many factors, many characters assemble to create this moment. The client walking into the room is a complex assemblage of diverse relations and connections, a relational field that would be missed by too narrow a focus on content.

Perhaps if process can be understood as an essential part of affect, we may gain greater insights into ‘what is going on’. Process refers to the *how* of therapy, but it seems to me that this *how* is not entirely covered by sole emphasis the relationship. It *includes* the relationship between therapist and client; it also describes the *flow* of activities and interactions between the two, the full meaning of which is often beyond the reach of conscious thought. What this requires of us therapists is fine attunement and openness – what Diana Voller fittingly calls ‘listening to the music behind the words’ (personal communication, 2015).

By paying attention to process, I attend to the impersonal as well as the personal and relational elements at play – I listen to the general ‘feeling’ of the meeting with another whilst attending to the client’s process and to my own process. A simple and direct way to access process is via the body, as we learned from Merleau-Ponty: direct, uncluttered awareness of our sensations, body posture, feelings, and emotions – a way of being-in-the-world that reminds us of our inescapable limitations (as incarnate beings) as well as of our potential for openness (Merleau-Ponty, 1969; 1983).

The centrality of affect in human experience and beyond was brought to the attention of contemporary philosophy in Massumi’s 1995 groundbreaking *The Autonomy of Affect* (Massumi, 1995), an essay that sealed the advent of *the affective turn* after decades of cognitivist and behaviourist dominance. And Daniel Stern (1985) had emphasised the crucial role of affect in relation to the world of the infant, describing infancy primarily in terms of affect. Infants, Stern wrote, “take sensations, perceptions, actions, cognitions, internal states of motivation, and states of consciousness, and experience them directly in terms of intensities, shapes, temporal patterns, vitality affects, categorical affects, and hedonic tones” (p 65).

There is another important aspect to this, which can only be sketched here, related to working with clients outside the neurotypical spectrum. Recounting her experience of

therapy with people with learning disabilities, Jan Hawkins (in Pearce & Sommerbeck, 2014), wonders whether clients or patients who do not conform to the conventional parameters of the talking therapies effectively challenge us to reconsider our boundaries as practitioners and even whether we need to focus almost exclusively on *process*. A similar case could be made, to take one example, for therapy work with clients labelled as autistic. Real and welcome challenges to contemporary psychotherapy come from the neurodiversity network which, for example sees autism as a “natural human variation” (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012, p. 20). A stimulating theoretical adjunct to this is the work of Brian Massumi (1995) and Erin Manning (Massumi & Manning 2010; 2014). A practitioner working with these clients would have to be open to neurodiversity and acquire a more sophisticated understanding about different “modes of perception” that are not “mutually exclusive” but on a continuum “with polar extremes with autism at the one hand within that continuum” (Massumi & Manning, 2010, Internet file). As often in the history of our profession, inspiration and innovation come from the ‘margins’ or from what are normally perceived as such. At a time when psychology research is becoming disturbingly supine and numbingly complicit to the demands of neo-liberalism, these developments can help refresh our perspective and allow us to reframe the nature of our endeavour in the service of compassion and wisdom.

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