

## THE FUNDAMENTAL IMPORTANCE OF SIMPLE OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS OF INTROSPECTION AND EMPATHY

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*Instead of asking why psychoanalysis has lost its central position in mental health, one might marvel at its longevity when considering that psychoanalysts have not attained agreement about basic methods for observing unconscious mentation, either their own or that of others. Ambiguity abounds regarding the operations involved in, and the usefulness of, introspection, and even more so of empathy. Simple operational definitions of introspection and empathy are proposed in this article, definitions that are sufficiently abstract to transcend particular theories of mental organization (e.g., ego psychology, object relations, and self psychology) and concrete enough to be practicable.*

All physical theories . . . ought to lend themselves to so simple a description that even a child could understand them.  
—Albert Einstein [Hayden 2003, p. 48]

I remember one of my college professors—a man very much admired as a teacher of medieval history—confessing that the more he learned about the period the less he was prepared to say: the epoch was so complex, so diversified that no general statement could safely be made about it. The same thing can surely be said about the theory of mental illness . . . . Today we need simple-mindedness in order to be able to say anything at all . . . . The reason is precisely the advance of specialization, the impossibility of making safe general statements, which has led to a general “imbecility.”

—Ernest Becker [1973, p. 208]

I believe that psychoanalysis is threatened with being deemed anachronistic because we have not come to agreement about basic methods of observing our subject matter. Some of us may agree with Freud (1914) that the foundation of psychoanalytic science is observation alone, but many of us have not taken seriously the rest of his statement, that theoretical ideas “are not the bottom but the top of the whole structure, and that they can be replaced and discarded without damaging it” (p. 77). Indeed, psychoanalysts appear so anchored to their favored theories of mental organization that they readily accuse proponents of other theories of being nonanalytic. The folly of such disputes becomes obvious when we realize that we have no generally accepted set of operations specifying *how we observe* our subject matter. We do not even have a generally accepted *name* for our basic subject matter that would facilitate direct communication about psychoanalytic observations.

Given such lack of agreement about basics, it is surprising that psychoanalysis has survived as an organized discipline. Some attribute its longevity to the idealization of Freud (e.g., Kohut 1976), some to the therapeutic efficacy of particular psychoanalysts (e.g., Renik 2003), and some to the scientific nature of psychoanalytic inquiry (e.g., Brenner 1980). The latter position, especially, seems difficult to justify if my assertion is accurate—that is, that we have no general agreement about how we observe our subject matter. I believe that psychoanalysis has survived because our subject matter, albeit elusive, is one of the most important aspects of being human, and because analysts have found ways to utilize unconscious mental activity while being unable to agree about how they do it.

What I have written so far could be described as audacious given the literature on analytic listening, technique, and metapsychology. The topic has received considerable attention, and I make no claim of presenting solely original ideas in this paper. Instead, I shall attempt to reconfigure and reemphasize some central ideas that appear to be lost in webs of complexity. Hopefully, my reworking of ideas will highlight the importance of clarifying how we make observations that we call *psychoanalytic*.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

I propose the following conceptual framework as preparation for considering the main thesis of this paper.

*First*, I propose that we use the word *mentation* to signify mental activity, the basic subject matter of analysis. My reason for doing so is to include in standard analytic nomenclature a basic term that refers to what we observe. Although not found in most dictionaries, including *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (1973) by Laplanche and Pontalis, *mentation* is defined as “mental action” in *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (1971, p. 1770), with the first cited usage occurring in 1850. Interestingly, the *OED* gives the following usage as having occurred in 1900: “Successive mental images, successive ‘mentations’ if I may be allowed to introduce a most useful word, made in America.”

I am curious about why *mentation* has not been granted central status in analytic nomenclature. A search for the word *mentation* on Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing’s Archive 1, Version 4 (archiving analytic materials from 1920-2000), yields 935 hits, relatively low usage given that a search for *behavior* yields 34,861 hits.<sup>1</sup> As comparative markers, consider the number of hits for other PEP searches: *ego*—92,999; *superego*—23,714; *id*—14,279; *unconscious*—65,652; and *brain*—6,457. The usages of *behavior* and *brain* far exceeding that of *mentation* is interesting, given that PEP catalogues *psychoanalytic* writings. *Mentation*, in fact, seems an apropos word to signify mental activity, the basic subject matter of psychoanalytic investigation.

*Second*, I propose that we accept forthrightly the problems imposed by mentation existing in a dimensional system that has no identified space or locality, and that is not restricted to conventional ordering of time (Brenner 1994; Freud 1915). The impossibility of locating *mentation* within the grid of coordinates usually

<sup>1</sup> In PEP Archive 1, Version 4, *word hits* represent the number of records (blocks of text approximately corresponding to paragraphs) in the archived literature that contain the word.

used for observations of material objects and events (e.g., verticality, horizontality, depth, and time) can generate anxiety, a perceived need to find "solid ground" and an "itch toward objectivism" (Klugman 1999, p. 438). Presenters of analytic cases often cite behavioral or physiological change as evidence of a successful treatment (e.g., the analysand was able to marry and have children, and to advance in his or her professional work, after symptoms of a mental disorder diminished). Behavioral and physiological changes are presumed to occur secondary to, and as manifestations of, changes in mentation that require adequate description (e.g., the analysand was able to modulate excessive degrees of affective tension, to experience and explore the impact of repressed memories of feeling belittled that had been obscured by a contemptuous attitude toward others, and thereby become more receptive to what others tried to communicate in intimate and professional relationships).

The words *affective tension*, *experience*, *explore*, *repressed memories*, *feeling*, *attitude*, and *receptivity* refer to mental activity. Changes in mentation described in the example would be expected to affect behavioral and physiological functioning. However, presenting behavioral and physiological data as evidence of changes in mentation is to present circumstantial evidence at best, and bypasses the required task of describing changes in mental activity occurring as a function of psychoanalytic treatment (cf. Schaffer 1981; Schlessinger and Robbins 1983).

*Third*, I propose that behavior, language, experience, and mentation are best conceptualized as separate entities, each having unique organizing principles. I believe that behavior, language, experience, and mentation may be rank-ordered from lower to higher complexity of organization and processing capacity (cf. Polkinghorne 1988). I can speak, read, and write (i.e., symbolize linguistically) about activities I cannot do behaviorally. What I experience in any moment exceeds what I can describe. And my experience in any moment is determined by mental activity that I cannot observe directly. Maintaining firmer boundaries to separate the conceptual fields of behavior, language, experience, and

mentation may help clear up muddles created by indiscriminate usage, such as Skinner's (1957) conflation of behavior and mentation in referring to thinking as *covert behavior*. This conceptual conflation obscures the understanding of *thinking* by imposing upon it the lower capacity and organizational complexity of *behavior*.

Of course, activity in one entity can affect activity in other entities. Unconscious mentation may organize experience (Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood 1987) and affect language and behavior, just as behaving in particular ways may affect language, experience, and mentation (Renik 1993). However, it would be a mistake to assume isomorphic covariance among these entities. Keeping in mind that behavior and mentation are separate entities, we know that modifying behavior does not guarantee an isomorphic change in mentation, and that a change in mentation may affect behavior in complex and unanticipated ways.

Simple examples suffice to illustrate the differences. If I want to modify a person's destructive behavior, I might arrange to punish hitting and positively reinforce socially appropriate, alternative behaviors. The person whose destructive behavior is modified might appreciate the experiences of new mentation evoked by more harmonious social relations and become philanthropic, or the person might feel increasingly resentful toward authority and employ the newly acquired social skills to disguise further harmful aims. Conversely, helping an analysand understand that his or her resentful attitude toward authority is motivated in part by a history of feeling unjustly treated by his or her father carries no guarantee that the analysand will become more cooperative with an employer or anyone else.

*Fourth*, I propose that we maintain firmer boundaries separating the concepts of *me*, *myself*, and *I*. Failing to do so creates confusing statements in the psychoanalytic literature, such as:

It is the self of the child that, in consequence of the severely disturbed empathic response of the parents, has not been securely established, and it is the enfeebled and fragmentation-prone self that (in the attempt to reassure

itself that it is alive, even that it exists at all) turns defensively toward pleasure aims through stimulation of erogenic zones, and then, secondarily, brings about the oral (and anal) drive orientation and the ego's enslavement to the drive aims correlated to the stimulated body zones. [Kohut 1977, p. 74]

Although I am inclined to agree with the basic ideas conveyed in this sentence I find it difficult to decipher. The usual Kohutian grammatical complexity is not the problem. What I find disconcerting is the semantic looseness. Kohut (1979) defended his taking semantic liberties in the interest of theoretical creativity, warning that the meanings of psychoanalytic terms should not be overly restricted by a priori definitions. Although I appreciate his position, I wonder if the importance of his ideas might have received broader acceptance among analysts if he had adhered to the conventional semantic usage of *me*, *myself*, and *I*.

I try to keep the meanings of these words separate by recalling a simple phrase attributed to William James: "The I observes the me" (cited in Reik 1948, p. 5). I combine James's statement with some playful mentation, imagining that I am looking into a mirror: I look at a mirror that reflects a visual image of *me* and appraise *myself*. In this mental image: (1) *I* denotes a subjective experience of agency, initiation of action, and observation; (2) *me* denotes an objective representation, the reflection that can be seen by others; and (3) *myself* denotes subjective judging of qualities I possess, qualities that may be physical or mental.<sup>2</sup>

Returning to Kohut's sentence cited above, we see that he begins by referring to something a child possesses, a *self* that is feeble and prone to fragmentation. So far, so good. But the meaning of the sentence becomes obscure when he refers to the "enfeebled . . . self" reassuring "itself that it is alive, even that it exists at all," turning "defensively toward pleasure aims." Here, a mental posses-

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to some of the philosophical and psychological complexities inherent in differentiating *me*, *myself*, and *I*, see James (1890), Kilborne (2002), Ogden (1994), Mearns (2000), and Rizzuto (1993, 2003).

sion of the child is imbued with powers of agency resulting in conflation of the meanings of *I* and *self*. I can appraise myself when I look into a mirror, but *myself* cannot appraise *I*. Also, *myself* cannot convince me that I am alive. I am—or I am not. It appears that Kohut attempted to correct this conflation when he referred to “the ego’s enslavement to the drive aims.”<sup>3</sup>

Some qualities of *self* described by Kohut (1979), such as a sense of continuity (extending from the past to the present and into the future) and cohesion (varying from fragmentation of parts to parts working together harmoniously), may be consistent with defining *self* as a mental possession. Other attributes of *self*, such as being an active recipient of impressions and an initiator of action, fall within the definitional territory of *I* as a sense of subjective agency.

Attempting to maintain the conceptual distinctions among *me*, *myself*, and *I* is difficult when referring to other persons. We have no equivalent word for *I* to use when referring to the subjective agency of other persons. Although I will not address this in further detail here, for the interested reader, I recommend Buber (1958), Fromm (1998), and Orange (1995).

## TOWARD OPERATIONALIZING INTROSPECTION AND EMPATHY

The time seems to have come when psychology must discard all references to consciousness; when it need no longer delude itself into thinking that it is making mental states the object of observation . . . . Psychology as the behaviorist views it is a purely objective, experimental branch of natural science, which needs introspection as little as do the sciences of chemistry and physics. [Watson 1913, p. 163, p. 176]

The inner world cannot be observed with the aid of our sensory organs. Our thoughts, wishes, feelings, and fantasies cannot be seen, smelled, heard, or touched. They

<sup>3</sup> Freud’s *I* was translated as *ego* by Strachey (Bettelheim 1982).

have no existence in physical space, and yet they are real, and we can observe them as they occur in time: through introspection in ourselves, and through empathy (i.e., vicarious introspection) in others . . . . The only fruitful definition is operational. We speak of physical phenomena when the essential ingredient of our observational methods includes our senses; we speak of psychological phenomena when the essential ingredient of our observation is introspection and empathy. [Kohut 1959, pp. 459-460]

Although espousing diametrically opposing views about the proper subject matter of psychology, Watson and Kohut were wedded by their steadfast adherence to unalloyed epistemological positions, positions that I consider prototypes of behaviorism and mentalism. The crucial difference between Watsonian and Kohutian epistemological realms of psychology lies in the methods proposed for observing subject matter.

Watson eschewed the introspective methods characterizing the advent of experimental psychology at around the beginning of the twentieth century. Wundt (e.g., 1894) and Titchner (e.g., 1909) launched scientific psychology with experimental investigations of attributes of experience as reported by trained introspective observers when exposed to discrete physical stimuli. They argued that conscious mental contents per se differ from physical objects, as the former are “processes, fleeting occurrences, in continual flux and change” (Wundt 1910, p. 4), and therefore not amenable to scientific investigation. They addressed this problem by standardizing specific properties of simple physical stimuli that were presented to trained introspective observers, who reported attributes of their experience while attending to the stimuli in controlled laboratory settings. The ultimate goal of the research was to develop a taxonomy of basic attributes of experience, analogous to the periodic table of the elements used by the natural sciences. This approach was referred to as *structural psychology*.

Watson (1913) highlighted a shortcoming of structural psychology: disagreement among introspective observers about basic attributes of experience evoked by simple physical stimuli.

There is no longer any guarantee that we all mean the same thing when we use the terms now current in psychology. Take the case of sensation. A sensation is defined in terms of its attributes. One psychologist will state with readiness that the attributes of a visual sensation are *quality*, *extension*, *duration*, and *intensity*. Another will add *clearness*. Still another that of *order*. [pp. 163-164.]

Watson pointed out that attempts to account for such discrepancies often took the form of ad hominem attacks on the skills of introspective observers, rather than examining experimental conditions as a possible source of variability (as was done in physics and chemistry). His solution to the problem of variability in the data was to jettison introspection and consciousness from psychology and to proclaim it a "purely objective experimental branch of natural science" (1913, p. 176). As will become clear later in this paper, Watson was correct in refuting introspection as a method to observe sensory data.

The epistemological work of Skinner (e.g., 1953), an ardent admirer of Watson, so firmly secured psychology's allegiance to the methods of the natural sciences that mentation is now being attacked in "mental" health by fundamentalist appeal to so-called experimentally validated treatments (e.g., Nathan and Gorman 1998). I use the term *fundamentalist* because, again, this approach carries the threat of jettisoning forms of mental health treatment that are not amenable to the objective methodology of the natural sciences. Although this view may be considered polemic, a current threat to the professional status of mentation exists in proposals to designate as unethical any mental health treatment that is not experimentally validated. Fox (2003) offers a cogent critique of this myopic movement.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Of historical interest, Waelder's (1962) summary of a symposium on "Psychoanalysis, Scientific Method, and Philosophy" includes mention of one contributor who advocated "legal or other action against the practice of psychoanalysis" (p. 623), because experimental evidence of the effectiveness of its methods had not been produced. Waelder aptly pointed out that requests for experimental evidence with "adequate statistics undertaken on the material of sense perceptions" made "no allowance . . . for the data of introspection or empathy" (p. 623).

Being drawn into attempts to illustrate the efficacy or effectiveness of analytic treatment by focusing on “objective” behavioral and physiological indices will only add to the confusion created by avoiding the necessary work of specifying how we observe the phenomena we assume to be fundamental: unconscious mentation and psychic determinism (Brenner 1973). I believe that a necessary task for psychoanalysis to ensure its survival as a professional and scientific discipline is to legitimize our subject matter and therapeutic approach by operationally defining our methods of observation in ways that attain general agreement among analysts. Fortunately, the requisite epistemological framework exists in the analytic literature (e.g., Agosta 1984; Arlow 1979; Basch 1983; Beres and Arlow 1974; Bucci 1997, 2001; Goldberg 1987; Kohut 1959, 1971, 1977, 1981, 1982, 1984; Ogden 1994; Orange 1995; and Reik 1948—among numerous others). Unfortunately, much of the literature pertinent to introspection—and, especially, to empathy—has become obtuse and laden by terminological preferences and disputes stemming from separate psychoanalytic theoretical camps.<sup>5</sup>

Apparently, the word *empathy* is now so readily associated with self psychology that analysts affiliated with competing theories avoid using it. At least, this has been my personal experience. An analyst who uses the word *empathy* in conversation with other analysts will often be met with an emotionally charged rejection of the word and a disclaiming of the work of Kohut and his followers. I believe this is an unfortunate state of affairs for psychoanalysis, a case of throwing out the baby with the bath water, of turning against the word that best describes the method of observing our subject matter, the observational method that distinguishes our work from that of other disciplines. Doing so undermines the foundation of psychoanalysis, leaving the enterprise vulnerable to collapse.

<sup>5</sup> Smith (2001) addressed this communalism through a wider lexical lens: “Certain key words become catch phrases to establish affiliations. Like secret handshakes, the passing reference to such concepts as intersubjectivity, on the one hand, or conflict, on the other, not to mention the time-honored face-off between interpersonal and intrapsychic, demonstrate loyalties and outline territories” (p. 487).

The epistemological writing of Kohut can be separated from the rest of his theoretical work on self psychology. During a public presentation in 1981, while suffering from an illness that would end his life a few days later (see Strozier 2001), Kohut lamented that his most important contribution to analysis was misunderstood. He was referring to "Introspection, Empathy, and Psychoanalysis: An Examination of the Relationship between Mode of Observation and Theory," published in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* in 1959. In this paper, he proposed that the subject matter of the physical sciences is defined by observations made via sensory organs, whereas the subject matter of a psychology of complex mental states is defined by observations made via introspection and empathy.

Some time after writing his 1959 paper, Kohut (1981) introduced the word *extrospection* to signify observations made via our sensory organs. This operational differentiation of the epistemological realms of the physical and mental sciences was clear to Kohut, and he expressed puzzlement as to why his readers had misinterpreted his main thesis. In his 1981 presentation, and in a book published posthumously in 1984, Kohut addressed some of the reasons why readers had misunderstood his ideas (e.g., confusing empathy as a mode of observation with sympathy and acts of kindness, and with the beneficial personal impact of being empathically understood—which he considered orthogonal to the observational role of empathy). Although he insisted that the psychoanalytic use of empathy entailed both the analyst's understanding and explaining (i.e., interpreting) mentation of and to an analysand, his other comments about empathy seemed to be more the reflections of a man struggling with the developmental task of dying than clarifications of the epistemological roles of introspection and empathy (Horowitz 2003).

Kohut ended his last public presentation with a vignette from an analysis that had occurred fifteen years previously, in which he extended two fingers to the analysand, who was gravely depressed, and silently observed that her clutching was like "the toothless gums of a very young child clamping down on an empty nipple."

He did not state this observation to the analysand, but concluded that his understanding helped overcome “a very, very difficult impasse at a given dangerous moment” and led to “a reasonably substantial success” (1981, p. 535).

I believe that Kohut’s work on introspection and empathy was not as influential as he had hoped because he did not provide adequately specified operational definitions. He preferred to conceptualize introspection and empathy as “attitudes,” rather than as specific operations employed by observers. The closest he came to operationally defining empathy was in his posthumously published book:

The best definition of empathy—the analogue to my terse scientific definition of empathy as “vicarious introspection”. . . is that it is the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person. It is our lifelong ability to experience what another person experiences, though usually, and appropriately, to an attenuated degree. [Kohut 1984, p. 82]

But before I address the inadequacy and inaccuracy of this definition, I want to call attention to Kohut’s (1981) illustration of his working knowledge of empathy in the clinical example at the conclusion of his final public presentation:

I gave her my two fingers. She took hold of them, and I immediately made a genetic interpretation to myself. It was the toothless gums of a very young child clamping down on an empty nipple. That is the way it felt. I didn’t say anything. I don’t know whether it was right. But I reacted to it even there, to myself as an analyst. [p. 535]

Experiencing his analysand as a toothless child nursing an empty breast occurred *spontaneously* to Kohut. The poignancy of this story being told among the final public words of a dying man may overshadow Kohut’s striving to clarify what he meant by the word *empathy* and the fact that he did so allegorically in lieu of an accurate definition. A spontaneous mental occurrence informed his understanding of the mentation of his patient.

Reik's *Listening with the Third Ear: The Inner Experience of a Psychoanalyst* (1948) may be the most underutilized and informative work on introspection and empathy in the psychoanalytic literature. Interestingly, Reik shared with Kohut the dubious distinction of being influential and controversial to the point of being dismissed by many psychoanalysts. Reik championed the unconscious mentation of both the analyst and analysand as the fundamental determinant of analysis: "The employment of the unconscious as a vital organ of apprehension constitutes a *peculiarity of the analytic method, which differs in that particular from other scientific methods*" (p. 389, italics in original). *Introspection* was defined as an individual's receptivity to manifest derivatives of unconscious mentation, the depth and breadth of which could never be fully observed.

Like Kohut (1984), Reik viewed exclusive adherence to particular theories of mental organization as misguided impositions on the psychoanalytic task of understanding the unconscious mentation of our patients. He preferred not to use the word *empathy* to describe his analytic observations because including it in schemas of observation like extrospection, introspection, and empathy ran the risk of equating the mechanics of empathy with those of sensory receptors. His equivalent to empathy required the following operations in the analyst: suspending the voluntary search for meanings in an analysand's presentation, and being receptive to manifestations of derivatives of unconscious mentation (cf. Freud 1912). In other words, while listening to the analysand, the analyst uses her or his own introspection as the method for observing the unconscious mentation of the analysand. This is quite different than thinking or feeling oneself into the life of another person, since "thinking or feeling into" denotes an active, guided, cognitive effort by the analyst while relying on secondary process (Freud 1911)—conscious mentation.

For Reik (1948), the mechanics of empathy consisted of introjecting what was projected by the analysand and reprojecting the introject in interpretive efforts (see p. 471). The projective, introjective, reprojective process was considered to be resonant

and attenuated. In other words, the analyst does not develop an isomorphic representation of the mentation of the analysand, but rather uses an unconsciously driven approximation via unconscious resonance to inform inquiry and interpretation. Reik used the words *conjecture* and *comprehension* to refer to two stages of working empathically in analysis. *Conjecture* denotes the manifestations of derivatives of the analyst's unconscious mentation that occur while he or she listens to the analysand, spontaneous occurrences that are often subtle and usually not isomorphic to what the analysand is saying at a given moment. *Comprehension* is the interpretive exploration of the potential significance of what has occurred to the analyst, in terms of the analysand's quest for understanding unconscious determinants of his or her experience. Comprehension involves the secondary-process mentation of making logical sense of the unconscious data gleaned by conjecture. Reik warns, however, of the dangers of trying to comprehend before conjecturing: "There is less danger that analysts will be too little logical than that they will be too little psychological in their thought" (1948, p. 392).

Holding firmly to secondary-process, intellectual use of theoretical concepts to explain an analysand's unconscious mentation "amounts to a misapplication of reason" and throws a "wet blanket" on psychoanalytic inquiry (Reik 1948, p. 392). Reik attributed many psychoanalytic impasses to the analyst's working in a so-called card-index fashion of categorizing the analysand's productions to fit theoretical concepts, while avoiding the surprises that often accompany analytic insights, moments during which derivatives of unconscious mentation become conscious and illuminate new material and novel configurations of previously comprehended material.

It may be important to reemphasize an idea about unconscious mentation inherent in Kohut's and Reik's schemas of empathy. Both believed that unconscious mentation is ultimately unknowable in its entirety, and that unconscious mental contents transcend repressed memory. Theoretical divisions of mentation, such as ego, id, and superego, and grandiose and idealizing poles

of the self, are guidelines with which to organize thinking about unconscious mentation, not definitive maps of a domain. In psychoanalysis, unconscious mentation is usually portrayed as problematic and in need of “taming” or “mastery” by conscious mentation. That analysis is a clinical endeavor as well as a scientific one influences our caricature of the unconscious. People enter analysis because they want to solve problems; we look into unconscious determinants of these problems. However, the influence of a therapeutic focus may hinder our appreciation of unique resources inherent in the organization of unconscious mentation, which provide powerful alternatives to conscious logic and reason as systems of informing and knowing.

Bucci's (2001) metapsychological schema offers an enlightened perspective regarding both the resources inherent in various organizations of mentation and operations involved in introspection and empathy. She approaches mentation from the dual perspectives of psychoanalysis and cognitive science, dividing it into categories of *verbal symbolic*, *nonverbal symbolic*, and *subsymbolic* modes of organization and processing. *Verbal symbolic* mentation is organized, experienced, and expressed via language, whereas imagery is the organizing and experiential medium of *nonverbal symbolic* mentation. *Subsymbolic* mentation underlies symbolic modes and has powerful processing capacities by virtue of “connectionist or Parallel Distributed Processing” organization that is described as “formally analogic and holistic, [and] computed as variation on continuous dimensions, rather than generated from discrete elements” (p. 48).

There are interesting parallels between Bucci's subsymbolic mentation and Freud's (1911) depiction of primary-process dynamic organization of unconscious mentation. However, Bucci's (2001) subsymbolic mode is not restricted to repressed mentation, as it is derived from cognitive science that considers it “experientially immediate and familiar to us in the actions and decisions of everyday life” and “accounts for highly developed skills in athletics and the arts and sciences, and is central to the knowledge of one's body and to emotional experience” (p. 48.) Here we have a

view of mentation that is not symbolized, but that can inform symbolic knowing via derivative transformations to imagery and words. Imagery, nonverbal symbolic mentation, occupies an intermediate, pivotal position between subsymbolic and verbal symbolic mentation. In other words, imagery may be derived from subsymbolic mentation and converted to verbal symbolic mentation via descriptive language. Bucci refers to the "connecting of subsymbolic experience to words" as "the referential process" (p. 51). Psychopathology is attributed to disconnections among the three systems of mental organization, a dissociative model.

Although Bucci did not use the terms *introspection* and *empathy* in her writing referenced above, I believe she has described mental operations involved in these methods of observation as I am presenting them for consideration in this paper. *Introspection* corresponds approximately to the referential process, attending to spontaneously occurring imagery considered to derive from underlying subsymbolic mentation, imagery that can be described with words. *Empathy* corresponds approximately to what Bucci calls "the circle of emotional communication" (p. 53), in which an analyst attends to his or her experience of subsymbolic and symbolic mentation evoked while listening to an analysand whose subsymbolic and symbolic mentation is disconnected, thereby producing affective tension that cannot be symbolized. The analyst uses a resonant "referential process" as a guide to interpretations that aim to evoke imagery in the analysand, thereby helping the analysand develop connections among symbolic and subsymbolic mentation, with formation of these connections being the therapeutic action.

I refer to the conceptual relatedness of Bucci's work to introspection and empathy as approximate correspondences because my clinical experience suggests that the progression from subsymbolic, to nonverbal symbolic, to verbal symbolic may represent one but not all possible routes of connection among various modes of mental organization. At this time, I think it prudent to remain open to other possible routes of connection among the modes. Bucci's integration of psychoanalytic and cognitive con-

ceptualizations of mentation carries much promise for bolstering the science of psychoanalysis and for reciprocal illumination between the disciplines of psychoanalysis and cognitive science.

Among the writings on introspection and empathy with which I am familiar, "Empathy and Intersubjectivity" (Agosta 1984) describes most clearly the operational definitions that I want to clarify and simplify. Agosta distinguishes among various linguistic usages of empathy, such as a "particular, concrete occasion" of observation, a "general interhuman competence," "a form of receptivity," and "a form of understanding" (p. 46). For the sake of brevity, I will focus on his deciphering of Kohut's definition of empathy as *vicarious introspection*. Agosta proposes that two representations are necessary in a "concrete occasion" of empathic observation:

- (1) a "representation of another's feeling," evoked in a resonant manner and manifesting as a derivative of the empathic observer's own unconscious mentation, and
- (2) a "representation of the other as such as the source of the first representation" (p. 55).

Both representations are required for empathic receptivity to occur. In other words, when I observe empathically, I experience a feeling or thought or image or some other mentation that comes from within me, which I identify as a resonant representation of the mentation of the other. This explanation helps clear up some of the confusion of other attempts to define empathy. For example, merely experiencing a feeling while listening to another person, and not identifying the feeling as a resonance to the mentation of the other, is referred to as *emotional contagion* by Agosta. Conversely, trying to feel or think oneself into the experience of another is an intellectual exercise devoid of the resonant mentation evoked by the other.

In Agosta's (1984) words, "a representation of the other by itself is a mere empty concept, whereas a vicarious experience in itself is a blind sensation without relational significance" (p. 59).

Agosta describes two operations that should not be confused with empathy, but that analysts may use to “institute or reestablish an empathic connection” when “empathic receptivity has gone astray” (p. 58). These are *analogical recollection* and *analogical apperception*, and refer to the analyst’s recall of personal experiences similar to those described by the analysand, and the analyst’s imagining him- or herself as *like* or *together with* the analysand, respectively. Agosta considers these operations supplements to, not substitutes for, the primary task of empathic observation, which entails the analyst’s concrete experience of representations of the analysand’s mentation, experiences evoked by the analysand’s mentation and manifesting as derivatives of the analyst’s unconscious resonance to the analysand’s mentation.

If I correctly understand Agosta’s writing, he considers *empathic receptivity*, as described above, as distinct from *empathic understanding*, which evolves from intersubjective dialogue between analyst and analysand, dialogue that Agosta conceptualizes as occurring in a hermeneutic circle.

The circularity—which is arguably not a vicious but rather a productive kind—occurs because the expressions of human life in question are composites consisting of many aspects that take their meaning from the whole of which they are a part and, in turn, lend meaning to that whole.  
[1984, p. 45]

I believe that Agosta’s empathic receptivity corresponds approximately to Reik’s *conjecture*, and Agosta’s empathic understanding to Reik’s *comprehension*. Also, Agosta’s empathic receptivity is similar to Bucci’s *referential process* when engaged with the intention of grasping the mentation of another, the so-called circle of emotional communication. The inaccuracy of Kohut’s proposed two stages of empathy, *understanding* and *explaining*, is clarified, since he bypassed the task of operationalizing empathy as a mode of observation. His definition of empathy as vicarious introspection is too vague to be usable.

## PROPOSED SIMPLE OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS OF INTROSPECTION, EXTROSPECTION, AND EMPATHY

Even a cursory survey of the philosophical complexities entailed in distinguishing extrospection, introspection, and empathy is beyond the scope of this paper. In the midst of such complexity, however, a simplified set of operations for defining introspection and empathy may be gleaned from the work of Agosta, Bucci, Kohut, and Reik, among others.<sup>6</sup> I propose a reconfiguration and re-statement of these authors' ideas in terms that are sufficiently abstract to transcend particular theories of mental organization (e.g., those of ego psychology, object relations, self psychology, and so forth), and concrete enough to be practicable.

Specifying mental operations involved in making observations requires some general schemas of functional mental organization. Kohut and Rubovits-Seitz's (1963) revision of Freud's structural model of mind will suffice, though I will make some further modifications. Let us assume the usual distinctions between conscious and unconscious mentation, with availability to experience roughly delimiting these distinctly organized processes. Like Kohut and Rubovits-Seitz, let us posit a gradient of repression instead of a discrete repression barrier. In other words, derivatives of various levels and areas of unconscious mentation are available to experi-

<sup>6</sup> The authors included in this small sample from the literature reflect my idiosyncratic selection of readings while developing the proposed operational definitions. Many other authors' writings with which I am familiar could be presented in detail to substantiate these definitions (e.g., Arlow 1979, 1981; Beres and Arlow 1974). Also, the literature on Isakower's concept of "the analyzing instrument" is directly applicable. The entire second issue of the 1992 *Journal of Clinical Psychoanalysis* was devoted to Isakower's previously unpublished writing on the topic and commentaries by others. Especially, see Spencer, Balter, and Lothane (1992) in that issue and in earlier papers (Balter, Lothane, and Spencer 1980; Balter and Spencer 1991; Spencer and Balter 1990). These authors approach observation in psychoanalysis in a manner strikingly similar to my proposal, but arrive at very different conclusions.

ence.<sup>7</sup> Kohut and Rubovits-Seitz called this the *area of progressive neutralization*, which is contrasted with an *area of transference*. The latter refers to traditional conceptualizations of repressed unconscious mentation (e.g., traumatic memories), firmly separated from experience because of unpleasant affect, but *components* of which can breach repression and interfere with conscious mental functioning. This is a metapsychological representation of transference that is manifested functionally in idiosyncratic assumptions, beliefs, values, expectations, observational sets and opacities, and so forth. The area of progressive neutralization informs observation, whereas the area of transference can obscure observation.

Next, let us call the observing function in this simple schema of mental organization *I*, the subjective experience of agency. *I* can focus on information conveyed via sensory activity, or *I* can observe other kinds of mentation, such as memories, fantasies, and ideas. The observing capacity of *I* is usually referred to as attention, but it is important to maintain a broader conceptual frame for defining the mental function of observation. Most of the empirical research on attention pertains to observation of phenomena via sensory organs. Sensory activity is not required for observing other kinds of mentation. Kohut's (1981) introduction of the term *extrospection*, as distinct from introspection and empathy, accentuates important differences in operations entailed in making observations of physical versus mental phenomena.

### *Extrospection*

Experiencing sensory activity is the defining characteristic of extrospective observations. Our sensory systems provide information about phenomena that we call *physical*. What can be perceived about physical phenomena is ultimately restricted to what can be

<sup>7</sup> This is consistent with Freud's (1915) suggestion that "an idea may exist simultaneously in two places in the mental apparatus" (Ucs. and Cs.), and that, "indeed . . . if it is not inhibited by censorship, it regularly advances from one position to the other, possibly without losing its first location or registration" (p. 175).

gleaned from sensory experience. Even so-called hypothetical constructs (MacCorquodale and Meehl 1948) require some validation by observation of material phenomena via sensory organs. Making objective extrospective observations requires that we suppress idiosyncratic impressions and focus on accurate descriptions of sensory representations of physical phenomena. In other words, the objective extrospective observer has to distinguish between sensory representations and other kinds of mentation, and furthermore to avoid the latter, which are considered sources of observer error or bias.

The distinction between sensory representation and other forms of mentation is what mental health clinicians refer to by the term *reality testing*. When observer bias is sufficiently controlled, two or more observers should be able to agree about the sensory representations of particular phenomena. To be more precise, observers agree about the linguistic or mathematical signifiers they use to describe sensory representations. Scientists call this *interobserver agreement* and have devised methods for calculating its degree.

### *Introspection*

Experiencing manifest derivatives of unconscious mentation is the defining characteristic of introspective observations. In this mode of observing, *I* experience memories, imagery, thoughts, and feelings that do not require sensory activity. These phenomena originate in my mind. I do not need retinal stimulation to experience a mental image. When psychotherapy patients engage in introspective observation, they usually withdraw from eye contact with me and often cover their eyes with their hands. They are inhibiting visual sensory stimulation to enhance observation of what occurs to them from within their minds.

Maneuvers to reduce sensory input may occur when concentrating—say, while reading or thinking, as well as when introspecting—but the mental activities are different. Actively thinking about a particular topic involves mentation that is organized in ways that we call inductive or deductive reasoning, logic, mathematics, and so

on, all subsumed under the category of secondary-process mentation. In contrast, when I make introspective observations, I try not to think of anything in particular. The requisite mental operation is to enhance *receptivity* to whatever occurs to me, what is available to experience, whatever appears in my mind's *I*. When I can establish introspective receptivity, I find the "processes, fleeting occurrences, in continual flux and change" that Wundt (1910, p. 4) deemed inappropriate for scientific investigation.

If I can suspend disbelief while remaining introspectively receptive, meaning emerges from what is observed, from the images, fragments of memories, partial thoughts, melodies, feelings, desires, and so on. I assume that constellations of mental phenomena available to introspective observation are determined by unconscious mental organization that will never be completely observed, just as I will never observe all of physical reality via sensory activity. Therefore, I call what occurs to me while observing introspectively the *manifest derivatives of unconscious mentation*. Introspection may be the most direct method of observing psychic reality.

### *Empathy*

Empathy requires the combining of extrospection and introspection, observing the sensory activity evoked by the presentations of another person while remaining receptive to what occurs from within. The operations I believe to be necessary to form an adequate definition of empathy are: (1) engaging in the task of comprehending the unconscious mentation of another person; (2) taking in what the other person is communicating about his or her experience—extrospection; (3) being receptive to manifest derivatives of one's own unconscious mentation—introspection; (4) discerning whether these derivatives are resonant representations of the other person's unconscious mentation; and (5) considering how these derivatives may be useful in comprehending the other person's unconscious mentation.

I will briefly discuss each of these operations.

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- (1) *Engaging in the task of comprehending the unconscious mentation of another person.* Although empathic observation may occur involuntarily, my experience is that intentional effort is usually required—that is, that I engage in a particular task. During much of my waking time, I am not striving to be empathic; I am doing something else. Sometimes it is difficult to engage empathy, such as when I am tired or distracted or under the sway of some particular transference. When I do actively engage in the task, my explicit intention is to glean something of the unconscious mentation of another person. I do not strive to be empathic with physical objects or with organic entities that are not human beings. I may use inference, analogy, or intuition in trying to understand nonhuman entities, but not empathy because I have no reason to expect that they have unconscious mentation. Of course, I may use inference, analogy, and intuition to attempt to understand another person, but these should not be confused with empathic observation (Goldberg 1987; Kohut 1959).
- (2) *Taking in what the other person is communicating about his or her experience—extrospection.* Observing empathically requires taking in via sensory representations as much as possible of what the other person is communicating about his or her experience. In my clinical practice, I think of this as *tracking*. Of course, persons emanate a wealth of information that can be processed sensorially, in addition to the consciously intended meanings of the words they speak. Much has been written about verbal and nonverbal communication. However, merely taking in all the sensory cues presented by another person and thinking about them or categorizing them involves secondary-process mentation and does not constitute empathy. For empathy,

the importance of all the available cues emanating from the other person is to provide data, if you will, to be processed outside awareness by the observer's unconscious mental organization.

- (3) *Being receptive to manifest derivatives of one's own unconscious mentation—introspection.* Being introspectively receptive while tracking what the other person is communicating requires disciplined effort and can easily be disrupted. For example, some persons seem to require overt affirmation of such close tracking that there is little opportunity for observing derivatives of unconscious mentation. Others seem so focused on extrospection and defended against introspection that resonant derivatives of the observer's unconscious mentation may be sparse. In such situations, the observer may use what Agosta (1984) calls *analogical recollection* or *analogical apperception*, in an effort to engage or reengage empathy. The clinician's anxiety about not knowing readily, or not having something that seems therapeutically important to say, seems a common source of interference with empathy. Using one's introspection in the service of empathy requires confidence in an informative process that is outside the direct control of the observer.
- (4) *Discerning whether these derivatives are resonant representations of the other person's unconscious mentation.* An assumption here is that the unconscious mental organization of the empathic observer is affected in a resonant manner by the unconscious mentation of the person being observed. This is what Freud (1912) described in his metaphor of unconscious communication: the observer's unconscious is likened to a telephone receiver decoding the electrical vibrations in the telephone line set in motion by the speaker. My clinical experience of empathic observation is that de-

rivatives of my unconscious mentation that come to awareness are usually abbreviated or condensed memories of what a patient has communicated previously. This is no guarantee that particular derivatives are resonant representations of the patient encoded in my unconscious, but I can test this by telling the patient what has occurred to me and asking if it seems significant to her or him. It is not unusual for a memory to occur to me and soon thereafter be mentioned by the patient.

For example, while listening to a patient talk about a recent argument with a spouse, I might recall a previous instance in which the patient was annoyed with me, or a memory from the patient's childhood of being disappointed by a parent. I might choose not to comment on what has occurred to me, and yet the patient begins to speak of the same content.<sup>8</sup> If I do comment about what has occurred to me, the patient often says, "Yeah, I was thinking of that, too."

I consider these instances to be evidence of *empathic attunement* or intersubjective agreement, the parallel to interobserver agreement about physical phenomena. When I mention something that has occurred to me while listening to the patient, and this seems insignificant to him or her, the patient will usually let me know this by disregarding what I have said, or acknowledging that it might be connected but that he or she was emphasizing something else—among a host of other responses. These may be taken as instances of *empathic failures* (although it is possible that

<sup>8</sup> A clinical example of this is found in Smith's (2000) illustration of the complexities of his analytic listening during an hour with a female analysand. While she laments not taking family members on a vacation because they fight among themselves, Smith notes that "I start to say, 'It deprives you,' think better of it, afraid she will hear it too critically for this point in the hour, and then, *to my surprise*, hear her say it herself: 'I feel deprived of that immediate pleasure of being with my grandchildren and giving them a really nice holiday'" (p. 122, italics added).

I may have resonated to unconscious mentation that the patient is unable or unwilling to entertain at the moment).

- (5) *Considering how these derivatives may be useful in comprehending the other person's unconscious mentation.* Including this mental operation as one of the defining characteristics of empathy allows us to distinguish empathy from intersubjective dialogue. For empathy as a mode of observation is directed at comprehending the unconscious of another person. Intersubjective dialogue involves unconscious resonance between two persons speaking spontaneously, persons who experience attunement to one another. Such dialogue may flow, feel enlivened, and be creative, but does not require a focus on comprehending the unconscious mentation of the other. Also, conscious deliberation about derivatives of unconscious mentation of the empathic observer brings these observations into the realm of secondary-process mentation, where they may inform, and be subjected to, logic and reason.

## CONCLUSION

If we could return to the level of observation and description, not only the description of what we see in the patient but of what we observe ourselves doing, we might begin to agree on what is fundamental in the dilemmas we all face and what, in their solutions, we hold in common. In any case, I suspect that rather than recreating old turf wars, we would be surprised by what we found. The beneficiaries would be our students and our patients. [Smith 2001, p. 511]

The simple operational definitions proposed in this paper are a step toward clarifying how we use introspection and empathy to observe unconscious mentation, our own and that of other persons. The proposed operations need to be critically and empirical-

ly evaluated by psychoanalysts and revised as necessary, or perhaps discarded. If they hold up to scrutiny, they may facilitate dialogue among different psychoanalytic communities and foster the development of systematic investigations that are directly pertinent to psychoanalytic process. A necessary task for such research is the construction of systematic measures of empathic attunement—or, if one prefers, of intersubjective agreement.

I believe the methodological challenges inherent in this kind of research are surmountable. At the least, simple operational definitions should put into perspective the folly of proclaiming that a preferred theory of mental organization delimits psychoanalysis. The foundation of psychoanalysis is observation alone (Freud 1914, p. 77), and testing the relative explanatory value of different theories of mental organization requires some generally accepted operations for observing the phenomena to be explained.

My conclusion will likely be viewed by some analysts as based on outdated ideals of a bygone era of logical positivism, positing something “real” out there (e.g., the unconscious mentation of another person)—aspects of which, at times, can be accurately observed. Such positivistic thinking leads to hierarchies of concepts pertaining to psychoanalytic knowledge, such as the levels of abstraction proposed by Waelder (1962), based on distance from actual clinical practice: observation, clinical interpretation, clinical generalizations, clinical theory, metapsychology, and philosophy. Waelder saw observation and clinical interpretations as indispensable to psychoanalysis, while viewing the higher-order concepts as dispensable. According to Waelder, the more abstract concepts (e.g., “cathexis, psychic energy, Eros, death instinct” [p. 620]) were the most common targets of criticisms of psychoanalysis, often levied by persons with no direct clinical experience.

More recently, compelling questions have been raised from within our profession that challenge the ideal of observation as the foundation of psychoanalysis. One argument is that analysts’ preferred theories and personal mental organizations permeate acts of observing in idiosyncratic ways that obviate the ideal of

making accurate extrospective, introspective, and empathic observations. An obvious example of the imposition of preferred theory is Reik's (1948) card-index caricature of categorizing the analysand's productions to fit theoretical concepts while avoiding surprises that can occur during empathic observation.

Clinical case reports in the analytic literature often give the impression that the author went into the analysis looking for something in particular and found it—whether “it” be wishes and defenses, selfobject needs, or complex object matrices. I have no estimate of how many analysts work in this way, but I do recall some lore I learned as an analytic candidate: that analysts of disparate theoretical persuasions are more similar than different when supervising.<sup>9</sup>

An obvious example of the analyst's mental organization imposing on observation would be the analyst's transference functioning as an interference with empathic observation—just as the analysand's transference interferes with introspection. Requiring training analyses as part of psychoanalytic education may be viewed as a means of gaining experiential knowledge of unconscious mentation, including areas of transference, and of developing the capacity to work with it. Of course, there are no guarantees that a trained analyst will have developed sufficient capacities to work with his or her unconscious mentation, as transference may wax and wane. One indication of problems in this area would be persistent or acute difficulty in empathic observing.

Epistemological and theoretical positions proposing the *inevitability* of analysts imposing their subjective mental organization on what they observe come wrapped in many different conceptual packages, which I will not review here because my attempts to unwrap these conceptual packages with equanimity usually generates the state of “general imbecility” referred to by Becker (1973, p. 208). My goal in this paper is simplification, hopefully not to the point of naiveté. I may need to emphasize that the

<sup>9</sup> See Smith (1997, 2000, 2001) for a detailed and convincing look into the reasons why analysts talk past each other, and how doing so may obscure similarities in their clinical practice.

operations I have proposed for empathy include the use of the analyst's own unconscious mental organization in a disciplined, systematic attempt to observe and understand that of another.

Of course, the difference between "using" and "imposing" the unconscious mental organization of the analyst is important in regard to the accuracy of observation. I am confident that we can observe physical and mental phenomena and devise methods for assessing interobserver and intersubjective agreement—methods that can be used to increase repeatability or reliability of our observations, which in turn can be taken as indirect indices of accuracy of representation of what is observed. Doing so requires established descriptions of the operations involved in observing phenomena, and this holds true for extrospective as well as introspective and empathic observations.

As an academic and experimental psychologist, before becoming a psychoanalyst, I taught experimental methods and statistics. To my surprise, one of my more challenging tasks was teaching students to write accurate descriptions of their methods of extrospective observation and of what they observed about their subject matter, and to distinguish these from inferences about, and conclusions drawn from, their observations. Looking back from my current vantage point, I am amused that I was surprised. The organization of our sensory experience is imposed on the phenomena being observed. In turn, language is used to describe observations, thereby imposing linguistic structure on experiential data of observation. Writing accurate descriptions of observational experience is difficult work, partly because so much of our conventional language is metaphoric (Lakoff and Turner 1980). Nevertheless, it can be done to a degree of precision that allows both interobserver agreement about the qualities of phenomena observed extrospectively and repetition of the observations by others.

My hope for psychoanalysis is that we can work collaboratively to establish agreement at least about the operations involved in making introspective and empathic observations. My clinical experience is that, when I am able to employ the operations I have

proposed for empathic observation, empathic attunement increases, as does the analysand's familiarity with derivatives of unconscious mentation and his or her capacity to work with these. If other analysts find this as well, confidence in the applicability of the proposed operations would be increased. If not, the proposed operations would need revision or replacement.

In moments of fanciful speculation, I imagine an even more compelling test of the proposed operations. Imagine, if you will, that three analysts from disparate theoretical camps (say, for example, an ego psychology analyst, a self psychology one, and an object relations one) agree to employ the operations I have proposed for empathic observation while listening to a single analysand attempting to describe introspective observations (to freely associate) over an extended period of time. I predict that we would find more instances of congruence of empathic attunement among the three analysts (i.e., concordance of manifest derivatives of unconscious mentation resonant to the unconscious mentation of the analysand) than would be expected on the basis of reading theoretical papers and case reports written by these analysts. I would not be surprised, however, if the three analysts continued to disagree about what to interpret, when to make an interpretation, and the dynamic formulations of the analysand's mental organization. Competing interpretations of data enliven scientific exploration, but do not define the field of study.

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