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**Learning From Distributed Experience: Discussion of Carol
Levin's "Soft Assembly: Expanding the Field of Therapeutic
Actions in (My Training) Analysis"**

William J. Coburn

This article explores and discusses Carol Levin's psychoanalytic journey, her personal struggles and transformations, and her conceptualizations of them through the lens of psychoanalytic complexity theory. It examines the nature of complex relational systems with attention paid to the concepts of *system constraint* and *system freedom*. It argues that personal transformation and growth are products and properties of larger, interpenetrating, complex systems in which each of us is relentlessly embedded and that loss and grief are inevitably essential components of personal development in the context of human relational systems. The nonlinearity and dynamism of human experiencing and the meaning making process are emphasized.

It is not often we gain immediate, palpable access, in print, to a clinician's experiences of personal growth and transformation in psychoanalysis. Carol Levin's article offers one of those rare opportunities. I appreciate being able to respond to Levin's courageous exploration of her personal analytic experiences, not the least of which includes the psychoanalytic complexity sensibility with which she organizes her understanding of personal transformation and therapeutic action. Doubtless she reflects one of the few clarion voices that successfully break the "deafening and deadening silence in our analytic community." And thus I approach Levin's work with humility and gratitude as I witness her fortitude in having resisted the demands and strictures of traditional psychoanalysis and managed the gravity of deeply carved, conflicting identifications, loyalties, and hoped-for, hard-won self delineations that inevitably accompany life in psychoanalysis.

Themes that emerge in the course of her work are rich, vibrant, and far-reaching. Levin brings to light a variety of essential struggles and emotional phenomena, including what it means to be one's self, to meet the Other and to feel met by the Other, or not, and the inevitable loss and grief that accompany psychoanalytic transformation. She also beautifully illustrates, with her own life example, the interpenetration of individual emotional worlds and their inevitable phase shifts that may lead to enduring, personal transformation. Levin underscores also the watershed quality of humor in psychoanalysis: If we cannot laugh, *and* weep, about our intransigent humanness,

William J. Coburn is Senior Supervising and Training Analyst and faculty member, Institute of Contemporary Psychoanalysis, Los Angeles; Editor-in-Chief, *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology*; and Editorial Board, *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*. He has a private practice in Los Angeles.

dissociation and deadness remain our only options. In this discussion, I address several theoretical aspects of Levin's work as they articulate with her experiences of personal transformation. Her theory is as compelling as her self-disclosure is deeply moving, both containing a wide array of insights and emotional meanings.

Levin counts among her more prominent theoretical influences the work of various complexity theorists, including **Galatzer-Levy (1978; 2002)**, whose elaboration of the concept of emergence has contributed to my own complexity sensibility in substantial ways. Psychoanalytic complexity pictures emergent emotional experiences and their concomitant meanings as fluidly and dynamically patterned and exquisitely sensitive to the nuances of relational contexts—past, present, and imagined future. Thus understood, emotional experience is not rule-driven, pre-designed, or the product and property of individual, segregated minds. Rather it emerges in response to the self-organizing capacities of larger complex relational networks in which we humans are relentlessly embedded. This sensibility has profound clinical reverberations, including, importantly, the impact of the analyst's complexity-informed attitudes toward the varied and distributed sources of emotional experience, conviction, and meaning.

Levin's avowedly personal narrative renders prominent two essential and often misunderstood concepts in psychoanalytic complexity: what I think of as *system constraint* and *system freedom*. The former pertains to the acknowledgement that simply because nonlinear, complex human systems are fundamentally unpredictable, context-sensitive, fluid, and dynamic, containing more possibilities than can ever be realized, it does not follow that anything can happen, anytime, nor that there are an infinite number of possible relationship trajectories. Every complex system is necessarily delimited—though we may not always know their boundaries—and consequently constrained by a variety of factors, many of which remain unknown to us. The constraints of a particular analytic dyad, for instance, emanate from a multitude of factors, including individual histories, affect tolerances, organizing principles, dissociative processes, enactments, and unique physiologies, just to name a few. There is only so much potential in each therapeutic dyad for emotional transformation and meaning making. Conversely, in terms of system freedom, because the introduction of novelty into a system that is poised more or less between states of order and randomness (what complexity theorists refer to as self-criticality or the “tipping point”) can be transformative in ways unimaginable, there remains substantial potential for surprise and useful change from one moment to the next. This imparts an attitude of hope to the therapeutic relationship that is perhaps found nowhere else (**Lear, 2006; Orange, 2009; Coburn, 2010**). (We witness this kind of hope as it was inspired in Levin in the contexts of all three of her relationships [her analyst, her patient, and her supervisor], each in their own unique way.) These two concepts, among others, are incisively illustrated in Levin's work.

I first turn to the phenomenology of system constraint. In the wake of her transient dissociative response to her hostile neighbors, Levin implores her analyst, “Help me understand what happened.” And, in retrospect, Levin understands her experience as a longing for a specific type of responsiveness from her analyst, from important others, one that was, in this instance, not forthcoming: An attunement to her emotional experience, a resonance reflecting her unique personal emotional situatedness (**Frie, 2010**). Instead, her analyst—and, I wish to emphasize, I can only speculate here—perhaps organized Levin's emotional pain as a function of her having misunderstood her neighbors' motivations: If that could be clarified, Levin would know that

her neighbors meant her no harm, and she could relax (as perhaps so could her analyst). For Levin, a more global issue was at stake here. She yearned for the experience of emotional attunement

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from and connection with others. In the absence of “an alive response,” Levin's history was painfully revived, a ghost instead of an ancestor brought to life in the consultation room (**Loewald, 1960; Mitchell, 1998**). Instead of a “dyadically expanded ... consciousness,” Levin's “visceral dread” and withdrawal (re)emerged in this dyadic system and defined and remained a familiar relationship trajectory for both participants.

This dynamic, informed by the participants' combined histories, their current states of mind, and their environments (including the greater, more traditional, analytic community), reflects a system constraint: Despite the potential freedom in any complex human system, the affective constraints here, doubtless informed in no small way by traditional ego psychology attitudes, imparted painfully repetitive limits on this specific system (**Bacal and Carlton, 2010**) at this particular point in time. Longing for emotional recognition meets “health and maturity morality” (**Kohut, 1979**, p. 12). “That spring session,” Levin remarks, “became a tipping point in my analysis, the moment when traumatic experiences from my childhood emerged full force in a too tightly organized analytic relationship.” It was not that something potentially vital and useful did not emerge at this particular “tipping point.” Rather, what did emerge could not be used effectively at the time to encourage potential future tipping points that might unhinge this dyad from their painfully repetitive enactment (**Davies, 2005**) or “seesaw” dynamic (**Aron, 2006**). In her narrative, Levin captures a palpable sense of the utter aloneness and vulnerability that can easily collapse into intense shame and intransigent withdrawal. I commend Levin for her spirit of honesty and courage in her self-disclosure that perhaps will allow others, including myself, to be freer of the bonds of accommodation (**Brandchaft, 2007**) and shame and find greater self-delineation in our own continuing, personal development.

Before I address the phenomenology of system freedom, also evident in Levin's narrative, I wish briefly to revisit one of the definitions of complexity, as it bears on the concept of system freedom and, in particular, the brief, momentarily hopeful but not enduring phase shift witnessed subsequently by Levin and her analyst. At any given point in time, complex systems can be said to operate more or less in a state of disequilibrium. This imparts the familiar sense of aliveness and dynamism to our human networks, and in its absence, life ceases. As **Cilliers (1998)** commented, “Equilibrium is another word for death” (p. 4). While in this relatively constant state of disequilibrium, complex systems are relentlessly situated somewhere on a spectrum of greater order, at one end of that spectrum, and greater randomness, at the other end. There is no rest for a complex system. When a system's state becomes situated relatively at the center of that spectrum—what we refer to as self-criticality, or the tipping point—the system is poised for potentially useful, *sustainable* change.¹ This is because any sustainable changes, or new attractor states, that do emerge in the system, usually occasioned by the introduction of novelty (Trop, G. S., Burke, and Trop, J. L., **2002**), require enough systemic randomness to provide the requisite fluidity and dynamism, on the one hand, and yet also require enough order, on the other hand, such that changes that do occur will be potentially sustainable over time. From a complexity perspective, this is an essential ingredient in therapeutic action: That whereas useful changes or phase shifts may occur from time to time, even frequently, they need to be somewhat sustainable for them to yield any real, lasting advantage.

¹ Here, the term “useful” is left to the analytic dyad to define. Many sustainable changes that can and do emerge are not necessarily “useful” or desirable.

Thus, at this particular juncture, in which Levin's analyst steps out of her more familiar, ordered pattern of relating, stating, "I'm no stranger to trauma . . . ," we momentarily witness an increase in the fluidity of their system. This phase shift, albeit unfortunately brief, provided an egress for their otherwise locked and ordered enactment, providing a "glimmer of a third space in which we recognized and cared about each other in the present moment." However, as Levin comments, it was not sustainable. A preponderance of familiar order had returned to dominate their repetitive system (**Lachmann, 2008**). Again, only speculating, I cannot help wondering what their relationship trajectory might have looked like had, for example, Levin's analyst followed up her comment with something like: "That's interesting, I'm referring to you as a baby! From what perspective do I experience you as a baby? And if indeed we are both acting like babies, whatever that means, why *can't* there be two babies in the room? Indeed, why do I think we have to 'get ourselves out of it'? What might continue to happen to us, and with us, if we remained struggling babies, together?" Would Levin have felt more attuned to, more recognized, more able to engage with her analyst? Would her analyst have been relieved of any "health and maturity morality," coming to value experiences of dynamism, adventure, collaboration, uncertainty? Instead, we witness an example of system constraint, as I have been defining it.

Returning now to the phenomenology of system freedom, we see that Levin's experience was not confined to her relationship with her analyst. And thus if we frame outwards and examine the larger relational system of which Levin was a part, we are treated to a different picture.² We experience the richness and power of interpenetrating human systems and the potential for change on a larger scale. This is another reason why it is unlikely that we can ever isolate the true agent of change, though many of our clinical illustrations attempt to do, and claim to do, just that. To do so potentially slides into reductionism, as tempting as that may be, and is anathema to a complex systems sensibility. Thus, we witness the phenomenology of system freedom, as does Levin, when she expands her reflections and understanding to other key relationships, in particular, those with her patient and her supervisor.

Given the larger relational network that Levin shares with us, we can see that each relationship impacts the others, and vice versa, consequently freeing something in Levin's experiential world and unhinging herself from the constraints of the too-ordered system she experienced directly with her analyst. The constraining force of that relationship, though, helped provide her the strength and acumen to infuse more system freedom in her relationship with her patient. In turn, her patient contributed by daring to "teach me to become a better analyst to him," by being willing to experiment despite his own pain, anger, shame, and withdrawal. How much of Levin's openness to her patient's voice was informed by her experience of her analyst's apparent emotional absence, or by the supportive, attuning presence of her supervisor, or both? Explanatorily speaking, we can never claim to know specifically, with precision.³ In Levin's complexity-informed, experiential world, none of these sources of change and inspiration, individually, could be held

² In complex systems theory, the concept of framing provides an essential tool in understanding the behavior of systems and our relationships to them; that is, by "framing" systems for purposes of exploratory conversations, a given system can be defined as a person, as a dyad, as a group of people, as a larger society, and so forth. There are no standards by which a system is or should be defined. They are "framed" on the basis of the needs and interests of the observer.

³ Here the term "explanatory" is used in contrast to "phenomenological,"

such that the former pertains to the theories that propose to explain the emergence and presence of the latter. They reside within different dimensions of discourse. Conceptual obfuscation often arises as the result of conflating these two dimensions of discourse.

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responsible: They all interacted, systemically, to produce desirable and sustainable change in Levin's experiences of selfhood, otherhood, and worldhood. (This is an instance of the *phenomenological* aligning itself with the *explanatory*, which often does not occur.) One could argue that her supervisor seemed to be the explicit agent of change here—the good uncle in an otherwise familial system of withdrawal, inaccessibility, and obtuseness. From a complexity perspective, however, that form of reductionism does not do service to the equally necessary and primary role each relationship and relational experience played for Levin in effecting change. As Levin later comments: “I realized that ‘everything counts’” (Thelen, 2005, p. 261). Her own changes and growth—an instance of the phenomenology of the larger system freedom—can more elegantly be understood as emergent properties of the broader relational, interpenetrating systems in which we are all embedded.

Given our perpetual search for the sources of our experiences, I wish to address for a moment the question, who and/or what changes exactly in the context of dynamic human systems? Who or what changed in Levin's experiential world? For me, this question emerges out of our millennia-long human propensity to want to locate the sources of our experiences. Where did fire come from? If we could figure that out, we could create it ourselves, perhaps control it. Why are we anxious? If we could discern that, we could relax (don't count on that one). When things work in psychoanalysis, we want to know why, so we can repeat it; when things do not work, or go badly, we also want to know why, so we can avoid it, or embrace it, the next time. Plus, we humans just like the experience of knowing something: Perhaps the more knowledge we can claim, the safer we are, or, at least, feel we are.⁴

The exchange and experience between Levin and her analyst, on that particular day when Levin was so moved by her analyst's smile, serves as an elegant focal point in thinking about the *process* of change alongside the *experience* of change. In terms of considering levels of generality and different dimensions of discourse, process (or explanation) and experience often do not coincide. I refer here to the essential distinction between thinking and speaking phenomenologically, and thinking and speaking explanatorily. I have elaborated this distinction elsewhere (Coburn, 2002, 2007, 2009, 2010), underscoring the frequent and glaring difference between how systems feel and how systems work. Often, experiencing does not coincide with our explanatory assumptions (our theories) about what generates such experiencing. There is what changes things, and then there is our *experience* of change: The two often do not seem to match up. But when I read that Levin's analyst's “dazzling smile touched [her] heart,” the remnants of my own proclivity toward reductionism want to know what happened specifically, in fact jumped to, wow, her analyst changed! But who did change exactly? What changed? What exactly was different? What was the source of Levin's experience of her analyst? Had Levin's analyst really changed? If indeed the analyst must change to effect therapeutic action (Slavin and Kriegman, 1998), then we might assume she did. Levin experienced her as different, but also as the same. Did Levin arrive at being able to contextualize her analyst, understand her emotional life and context more deeply, partly as a function of the other relationship changes and exchanges in Levin's life? Ultimately we can never know exactly who or what changed, and perhaps we do not need to know. Levin

⁴ Hence, philosophy and science. Until recently, our sciences and philosophies have been rather atomistic and reductionistic, and this has shaped, for example, our conceptualizations of “the self” (Taylor, 1989).

Historically, our need to know has informed our proclivities toward reductionism, in contrast to our relatively recent hermeneutic, contextualist, and complexity oriented approaches that value uncertainty, perspective, and perpetual seeking with an open mind.

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comes to feel that, indeed, her analyst cared for her. Didn't she always? Perhaps, perhaps not. Was it Levin's new-found capacity to grieve the loss of what her analyst could not be for her that allowed her to experience her analyst as fundamentally caring? In addition to the variety of relational and systemic changes that Levin elaborates, I would argue that these changes helped Levin mourn some inevitable losses, given how she had historically experienced her analyst. Through confronting her losses, and bearing the emerging grief, Levin arrives at experiencing her analyst as indeed quite caring, feeling held and moved not by what her analyst said or did, or could not say or do, but instead by “who she was, ... her attitudes” (Loss and grief often precede personal transformation, just as they often arise from it.) To paraphrase Kohut, it is not what the parents say or do but rather who they are, as people, that informs the developmental trajectory of the individual (1984). Indeed, historically many successful analyses have hinged not on any technical prescription, but rather on the often-unconscious attitude of the analyst. Recall Glover's comment from 1937: “... a prerequisite of the efficiency of interpretation is the attitude, the true unconscious attitude of the analyst to his patients” (p. 131).

If we think reductionistically, and I am not recommending it, it would be tempting to argue that Levin's analyst finally got through to her, that her attitude—including who she was as a person—had permeated the treatment setting all along and that it just took some time to have the intended positive impact on Levin. Reductionism aside, undoubtedly her analyst's underlying attitude did play a significant role. I might also be inclined to think that her analyst *did* change, and that there was something different and special in her smile that day—that, alternatively, it might have been Levin, in part, who evoked the change in her analyst. Who's transforming whom around here? And it is not too much of a stretch to imagine her experience with her caring and astute supervisor as having been pivotal in Levin's transformation, included in which was her increased capacity to mourn. But how could we know? Explanatorily speaking, I assume that we cannot ever really know and that therapeutic action is relentlessly distributed across a larger relational network, much of which we may never come to know.

Particularly striking is that Levin comes to explore and play with a psychoanalytic complexity perspective as a function of having embodied and examined her own personal experience, and not, at least initially, from reading theory. My sense is that her exposure to these ideas put some conceptual flesh on what already was her experience of complexity and complex relational systems at work. This sensibility helped her conceptualize the change process in general, and the process of her personal transformation, in particular. I am indebted to Levin for demonstrating, in such a personal way, the nonlinearity and dynamism of human experiencing, meaning making, and the omnipresent potential for transformation. I am also indebted to her for courageously illustrating the kind of steadfastness and, perhaps more importantly, the kind of hope required to endure the painful, the repetitive, the uncertain, and the traumatic in the search for something new.

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