



A Most Complex Paradox: Rethinking the Individual

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by the work of Louis Sander (2008), this article explores the paradox of the developing individual who is at once singular and self-regulating, as well as systems-embedded and systems-property organized. Relying on a background of intersubjective systems theory, relational theory, and psychoanalytic complexity theory, examining this paradox reveals a deeper understanding of the evolving person and, indeed, what it means to be an individual. It also posits that a substantial developmental step includes one's capacity to tolerate two affectively discrepant dimensions of experience—that of being personal, singular, isolated, and agentic, and that of being intensely contextualized and relentlessly embedded in larger complex systems that determine much of one's life situatedness.

In living systems, it is not organization that develops; we begin with organization. [Sander, 2008, p. 205]

When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. [James, 2003, p. 287]

This article was inspired by, and has as its point of departure, the seminal work of Louis Sander (2008)¹ and, in particular, his grappling with the paradox of the evolving individual who at once is singular and self-regulating, as well as systems-embedded and systems-property organized. The background with which I approach this topic emanates from forms of contextualism grounded in intersubjective systems theory (Stolorow, 1997), Relational theory (Mitchell, 1988, 2000; Aron, 1996, 2006), and a psychoanalytic complexity sensibility (Cilliers, 1998; Seligman, 2005; Sander, 2008; Harris, 2013; Coburn, 2014). I aim to expand upon ways of conceptualizing the individual person and the greater developmental potentials for his/her experiential world.

Despite the fact that one's experiential world is fundamentally irreducible and quintessentially private and personal, it is hardly illusory or ephemeral and is more real than anything I can think of. It is the currency of our lives and of living lives that are so embedded and intertwined in what we think of as the world. As Orange (2001) reminded us, we inhabit the world just as “the world that I am inhabits me” (p. 94). From an *explanatory* standpoint, our experiential worlds are not exactly ours, given how radically contextualized we are and given that each of us is the product and property of larger, complex systems. However, they often may feel like they are ours, that we own them, and that they are self-generated, phenomenologically speaking. And thus, this leads to one of our human conundrums—a most complex paradox: Each of us is quintessentially separate and individual and unique, but also systems generated, context dependent, and context embedded. In this light, in what way might we hold our self and others in mind, experience our self and others, across this broad spectrum of possible dimensions of experience? For Sander (2008), the healthy evolution of the mature personality requires, to one degree or another, the presence of an attuned caregiver capable of recognizing the physio-affective states and regulatory needs of the infant. Drawing from his work and from other contemporary theorists, I argue for two vital, additional elements in the development

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¹In particular, Sander's groundbreaking chapter titled “Paradox and Resolution: From The Beginning” from “Living Systems, Evolving Consciousness, and the Emerging Person: A Selection of Papers from the Life Work of Louis Sander” edited by Gherardo Amadei and Ilaria Bianchi, 2008.

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of the individual's increasing sense of self-delineation and integration. One is the caregiver's (or therapist's) propensity and capacity to identify and articulate not just self states and associated themes and meanings, but also the specific contexts and caregiver surrounds that helped give rise to such self states originally; and the other is the individual's increasing capacity to tolerate simultaneously a sense of singularity, separateness, personal agency, and autonomy, on the one hand, and a sense of *thrownness* (Heidegger, 1962), a sense of being radically contextualized, formed, and situated by complex life histories and circumstances that are out of one's control, on the other hand.

The individual self

The notion of the individual self, with its concomitant attributions of individuality, autonomy, and agency, has commanded our theoretical, philosophical, scientific, practical, and, of course, clinical attention for decades—in some respects, for centuries. Historically, biophysiological, psychological selves were thought to have emerged in their nascent form, vulnerable but with a developmental trajectory. Mature selves somehow became separate, albeit sometimes alienated, from their originary matrix. To use Charles Taylor's (1989) term, the *punctual self* was one of "disengagement and rational control" (p. 160). He tells us, "The key to this figure is that it gains control through disengagement" (p. 160). In many traditional circles, separating and disengaging the self from its surround, effectively decontextualizing it, led to rational control in which autonomy and agency could be realized and exercised. This individual self, individuality, and the uniqueness of the person and his/her efforts at understanding and expressing it, have been privileged and sought after for millennia. Inextricably linked to preoccupations with the nature of the self, the person, his/her consciousness, and its meaning-making propensity, has also been the notion that such selves, we individuals, are fundamentally separate and isolated entities grappling with internal forces, and occasionally bumping into each other, perhaps because of those forces. The scientific endeavors of Sigmund Freud and many of his colleagues were certainly informed by this presumption of the singularity and separateness of the person. In psychoanalysis, it is no surprise that the unit of study had been defined accordingly. The experience of individuality and the assumption of its separateness had wound its way into a multitude of Western philosophies, sciences, and cultures—particularly ours—and helped inform what we still experience today as the *tradition of individualism* (Frie and Coburn, 2011).

As pervasive as this tradition has been, our more contemporary contextualist trends, found throughout a variety of disciplines (not just psychoanalysis), have radically overturned these assumptions and reconceptualized our ideas about personal autonomy, agency, authorship, ownership, and even free will. And because of our having resituated the individual person in a socio-cultural-historical, relational, contextualist, complex systems framework, the idea of individuality poses a challenge particularly to clinicians and researchers who work with the currency of, well, individual persons.

The person and his/her subjective world are the product and property of larger complex, biological, relational systems, but he/she remains a separate individual, yes? Of course, each of us prefers not to think of ourselves as gelatinous, largely permeable, indeterminate particles floating in an amorphous soup of human systems; our experiences, for the most part, indicate otherwise. We naturally presume that each of us is a separate and singular being, influenced by others and the world, most certainly, but not determined by them. We can experience agency, autonomy, and free will. Well, perhaps, and perhaps not. Frie (2011) took up this conundrum, writing that:

Individuality is one interpretation of being human, among others; it has no privileged status in telling us about our "true" human nature. We experience ourselves as unique individuals, in some way separate from, yet connected to others, as a result of the social, cultural, and biological contexts that provide us with our framework for understanding human experience. [p. 4]

Trilling (1955), a bit sardonically, wrote: "This intense conviction of the existence of the self apart from culture, is, as culture well knows, its noblest and most generous achievement" (p. 190).

With so much relationality, contextualism, intersubjectivity, and complex systems sensibilities having infiltrated psychoanalysis, what has become of the individual person? How do we understand this person, now not so simply and reductionistically determined by drives, or internalized self and object representations, or true selves and false selves, or isolated-mind motivations and organizing principles, or even internalized interaction structures? Where are the agency, authorship, ownership, and free will in the contextualized person, with himself or herself, his/her experiential world, being a product and property of larger relational systems—complex systems that are not simply ordinary but are ongoing and unrelenting, as well? Are there ways to think about the notion of individuality and individual experience without falling back into a one-person (or even two-person) model of thinking and practicing? This is the complex paradox to which Harris (2013) referred in her comment:

There is no single problem giving more worry, in every branch of psychoanalysis, than the question of how the system and the person co-mingle, co-construct, and evolve. ... Theorists are trying to establish the site or purview or habitation of the individual while living and practicing and theorizing in the full absorption of the porousness and intersubjective experience of any living beings. [p. 700]

And similarly, many of us are trying to live and practice in a contextualist, complex systems framework while trying to address the real, unique, individual person who sits in front of us and looks to us for help. If personal individuality is so systems-dependent, not simply influenced and contextualized by larger complex systems, but indeed is always and already an emergent property and product thereof, has it been rendered conceptually too ephemeral, inapprehensible, illusory, or even nonexistent? Will our complexity theory and contextualist strivings and sensibilities ultimately abolish our sense of individuality, our sense of uniqueness? Does retaining the notion of the individual, bounded person, theoretically and clinically, perpetuate the Scylla of pathologizing and decontextualizing emotional experience and relational patterns presumed to emanate from an isolated mind, and, alternatively, does over-contextualizing, or overcomplexifying (Sucharov, 2013), one's experiential world encourage the Charybdis of it being rendered or reduced down solely to an illusory epiphenomenon, thereby privileging systems over human individuals? In what way might we hold, live with, and, as Harris (2013) stated, "[work] with a complex paradox" (p. 704)? I believe the work of Louis Sander and those influenced by him offer a powerful vantage point from which these questions may be approached.

In the context of Sander's (2008) preoccupation with the early life complex paradox of the individual, he asserted that a number of paradoxes can be found in the developing infant and infant-caregiver system. He highlighted one in particular, that is, the "singularity, the uniqueness of each newborn, each family system, and each individual's own particular pathway of development. The other side of the apparent paradox," he stated, "emerges from the extensive research on the minutiae of events within the flow of interaction between infant and caregiver" (p. 167). He envisioned the paradox in that:

We begin with two biological "givens": the requirement for self-regulation (the agency to initiate action to self-regulate within the context of one's unique life support system must be the individual's own agency to initiate; the "being distinct from" pole) and the capacity for microsecond synchrony and attunement with an "other" (not cognitively managed by the individual; the "being together with" pole). Both givens are there from the beginning of life. [p. 167]

For Sander, the individual is hardly an isolated entity on its own developmental trajectory; the seamless integration of both poles lies at the center of the healthy early developmental process. He asked: "What would it mean for caregivers to think in terms of systems instead of individuals; in terms of process instead of structure; in terms of a flow of sequence, recurrence, and expectancy within the recurring exchanges between themselves and their charges instead of thinking in terms of isolated events?" (p. 168). His question bears, of course, a strong resemblance to thinking in terms of reflecting, speaking, and, in general, working relationally in the consultation room—we are no longer there to examine solely the person but, more important, the flow of transference-countertransference

experiences and exchanges that emerge from within the system. This is resonant with the Boston Change Process Study Group's (2010) emphasis on emergent process conceptions of psychoanalytic treatment.

And where, then, are the individual and individuality in Sander's framework? For Sander (2008), the uniqueness of the person ultimately does not reside in the person exactly, but is an emergent property and integration of the *being distinct from* pole (self-regulatory initiation, a rudimentary form of agency) and the *being together with* pole (the dyad's relative attunement, synchrony, and mutual adaptations). He tells us, "We begin life 'connected,' as part of each other" (p. 170). Indeed, we always already are. And thus, in terms of understanding the emerging person, from an explanatory view, paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, we can no longer say, this is I, and mine, and this is you, and yours; but from a phenomenological standpoint, each of us is quite unique and necessarily stands apart and separate from the world. (I address this vital distinction between the realm of the *explanatory* and the realm of the phenomenological shortly.) It is particularly during moments of *open space*, for Sander, and for Winnicott (who Sander references), that experiences of self-organizing initiative can emerge and can be realized, imparting that sense of agency, authorship, and ownership so essential to being a creative and expansive human being. In regard to the capacity to be alone, Winnicott (1965) wrote,

The basis of the capacity to be alone is [itself] a paradox: It is the experience of being alone while someone else is present. ... It is only when alone (i.e., in the presence of someone) that the infant can discover his own personal life. The pathological alternative is a false life built on reactions to external stimuli. [pp. 30–34]

"Discovering his own personal life" in the midst of being in relation to and intensely contextualized, I argue, is exactly one principal facet of human experiencing that I associate with individuality.

Historically, in other sectors of our field, most notably in the work of Harry Stack Sullivan and those who were either influenced by him and/or built upon his ideas, the idea of personal individuality has been a tricky subject. Many subsequent thinkers felt that Sullivan, himself, struggled with this seeming paradox—the paradox of experiencing an individual self of one's own and yet being so embedded in and overdetermined by the sociocultural matrices that presumably gave rise to it. Sullivan (1964) wrote: "What the personality [or individual] does, which can be studied and observed only in relations between personalities or among personalities, is truly and terribly marvelous, and is human, and is the function of creatures living in indissoluble contact with the world of culture and [other] people" (pp. 219–220). And also: "Personality is manifest in interpersonal situations, and not otherwise. ... No such thing as the durable, unique, individual personality is ever justified" (p. 220). He did not deny or eschew the existence of such individuality in the minds of others—how we hold, and perhaps need to hold, in our minds the presumption of the individual self; he just felt it was not in the purview of psychiatry or psychoanalysis. Crowley (1973) took up Sullivan's perhaps implicit struggle and fleshed out one rendition of our paradox, stating:

Sullivan taught that, through elimination of parataxic distortions in personal relationships, one was freed from those automatic, repetitious, constricted patterns of response, in which the "individuality" of the other person was practically nonexistent, and was then free to respond to the real characteristics of another person, as distinct from responding unwittingly to images of that person required by his past. In theory, individuality is liquidated; in practice, it becomes a goal, in the sense of responding to the real characteristics of another person. A paradox, indeed! [p. 132]

How does one slough off the encumbrances of *transference distortions* in the service of achieving the clarity of vision that would allow one to see the real individual other when that individual other is, at least theoretically, nonexistent? Sullivan would not, in Crowley's words, deny an individual self to anyone—he simply found the concept unnecessary and clearly not relevant to an interpersonally informed psychoanalysis.

Other prominent thinkers have grappled with how and where to locate the individual, with an eye in its clinical implications. Wachtel (2011), for instance, addressed this challenge in his reflections on

the contributions of David Shapiro in Piers' (2011) book, *Personality and Psychopathology*. Importantly, Wachtel spoke to the conceptual and clinical tensions and contradictions inherent in both a one-person model and a two-person model. Where does the person end and the influencing context begin? How do we hold individuality and contextuality in our minds at once? He wrote:

I have, only half in jest, referred to the one-person – two-person distinction as more accurately depicted as one between one-and-a-quarter-person theorists and one-and-three-quarter-person theorists. Putatively one-person thinkers are rarely as inattentive to the relational context or to the role of the observer as their two-person critics imply; and putatively two-person thinkers are rarely as free from “monadic” elements in their accounts of personality as the one-person, two-person language implies. [p. 34]

This tension (or is it context-dependent equivocation?) reflects our continuing discomfort with undercontextualizing and overcontextualizing, given that, indeed, we do sit across from another individual, just as that person sits across from us—across from, and presumably separate from, in many ways. Explanatorily speaking, our respective experiential worlds are so profoundly and inextricably intertwined and mutually determining of the other, whereas phenomenologically, each of us resides in a relatively private and highly distinct experiential world.

Similarly, Eagle (2011) addressed the individuality/contextuality conundrum when he explored how we might conceptualize the unit of study. Citing Mitchell's (1988) comment that an individual mind is an oxymoron, Eagle (2011) observed that:

the very possibility of developing a human mind [that] depends on human interactions seems indisputable and, today, relatively noncontroversial. That the mind is composed of “relational configurations” ... is perhaps somewhat more controversial and less clear, but also defensible. However, somewhat puzzling is the assertion that “the basic unit of study is not the individual as a separate entity ... but an interactional field” (Mitchell, 1988, p. 3). ... For most analysts the basic ‘unit of study’ is indeed the individual as a separate entity. [pp. 135–136]

Throughout this passage, Eagle (2011) called to task the degree to which Mitchell was influenced by Sullivan and the illusion of individual personality. He found confusing Mitchell's statement that “in Sullivan's way of thinking, people are not separate entities, but participants in interactions with actual others and with ‘personifications’ (or ‘representations’) of others derived from interactions with actual others” (p. 25). Being rendered understandably confused by this passage, Eagle asked, “How can one be a participant in an interaction with actual others without being a separate entity. And how can one interact with actual others without these others also being separate entities?” (p. 136). My immediate answer to these questions, following Sander, is that one is always already inextricably embedded in and comprised by one's relational surround, explanatorily speaking, and, seemingly paradoxically, is equally unique, separate, and distinguishable from actual others, phenomenologically speaking.

Some resolution to this ongoing and provocative tension can be found in addressing the distinction between at least two levels of discourse: in this case, the phenomenological and the explanatory. Many of the hypotheses or seemingly self-evident truths philosophers, theorists, and clinicians have constructed, or discovered, over time are the result of distilling, reducing, and reifying personal lived experience, and then elevating it to the status of truth and reality. Descartes' conclusions about mind-body dualism, the separation of reason and passion, and the radically disengaged nature of human thought, doubtless emanated from his firsthand experience of feeling separated and estranged from his world context (see Stolorow and Atwood, 1992). In other words, if I experience myself to be a punctual self (C. Taylor, 1989), then I must be one. This reifying activity relies on the conflation of two dimensions of discourse: the phenomenological and the explanatory—the disentangling of which remains a vital and essential component in working psychoanalytically. Elsewhere (Coburn, 2002, 2014), I have underscored and elaborated the necessity of acknowledging this distinction, in contexts of theorizing, conversing, teaching, and engaging in psychoanalytic practice, lest we confuse whether we speak of personal lived experience or the contexts presumed to give rise to such experience.

In the absence of this distinction, it is unclear whether we are investigating and attempting to describe (not explain) emergent emotional experience and meaning, or whether we are examining

the socio-cultural-relational-historical contexts in which we are fundamentally and relentlessly embedded. A striking example of this potential for confusion can be drawn from Kohut's use of the term *self*. Depending on the dimension of discourse in which one is thinking and speaking about the self, it could be understood as a dimension of experience, an ontical entity (as agent), or an intrapsychic structure. Muddling or ignoring differences between the phenomenological and explanatory dimensions has far-reaching, negative implications, not only for the outcome of professional dialogue, but also for the relationship and truth-finding trajectory of clinical engagements.

How systems work and how systems feel do not always coincide. Frequently they don't. This is one of the striking characteristics of complex systems when we think in terms of human experiencing. That is, individual emotional life is envisioned here, as Sander did, as an emergent product and property of greater, interpenetrating human systems, of which each of us is a component, and not as the result of an individual person alone. Thus, whereas I may feel my emotional world to be mine, explanatorily it is comprehended as deriving from and belonging to a larger human network of relationships. And thus, phenomenological description references a domain of discourse based in actual experience that can span across a wide spectrum of relative states of formulation (Stern, 1997). Usually, though, we tend to think in terms of affective experiences upon which we can reflect and, ultimately, hope to place into the shared language of patient and analyst. In this domain, speaking of the self would reference the experience of a person—experiential selfhood.

The second level of discourse, that of explanatory assumptions, is not so much content oriented, but rather is much more grounded in process. It refers to one's fundamental, and not infrequently unconscious, presumptions about how things operate, as well as one's beliefs regarding the bases of emotional experience and the generation of meanings attached to them. Additionally, it assumes that all human experience and emotional meaning originate from and is deeply ensconced in a larger complex system. It also assumes that human experience and attendant meanings can never be attributed only to one's past, one's present, or one's imagined future, and that the influences of each can never be fully proportioned in any clear and objective way. Speaking in a language of explanation does not, as I have written elsewhere:

Address the nature of individual experience, nor the themes that organize it, but rather references the broad universal presuppositions—our convictions about the way things work—that then organize the contents and processes of the phenomenological realm of discourse. Distinguishing between these two levels of discourse is not only crucial in subverting conflation and muddle in conversations about psychoanalytic theory, but is also an essential attitudinal ingredient implicated in the emergence of therapeutic action in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. [Coburn, 2014, p. 78]

I further commented:

Much of human emotional pain and strife, or alternatively, emotional and relational numbness and complacency resulting in the narrowing of one's affective horizons, is and are attributable to the ubiquitous discrepancies between these two levels of discourse. And appreciating the discrepancies can help us, and our patients, mediate our natural human tendency toward reifying personal experience and instead understand our experience in part as a function of interpretive activity (Gentile, 2008). [Coburn, 2014, p. 78]

And thus, explanatorily speaking, I believe Sullivan and Mitchell were quite correct that the unit of study must be the interactional field (and, I add, must be the larger relational systems, past and present, of which we are comprised). However, phenomenologically, we must always be open to thinking in terms of separate entities, given that that is how we so frequently experience ourselves and others, and in that sense, Eagle and many others are quite accurate that the unit of study, ultimately, is the individual who comes to us for help. As we shall see, the capacity to hold both in one's experiential world may be a central feature of what it means to be an individual. Alternatively stated, to be an individual person might mean that one is relentlessly confronted with and/or in some way invited into experiencing and living with this most complex paradox.

Germane to Sander's explication of this paradox, a variety of others have contributed much to conceptualizing individuality as well and continue to grapple with it in light of all our

contextualizing and complexifying. One rendition of Stolorow's (and his collaborators, Atwood and Orange, 2006) vision of the individual person, for example, can be found in their reply to Jon Mills' critique of intersubjective and relational theory. In this exchange, Mills felt that these theories "[dissolve] the centrality of the self...[decompose] personal identity... [and annul] individuality, distinctiveness, and otherness" (Stolorow et al., 2006, p. 169). Their response, which resonates with the vital phenomenological/explanatory distinction, hinges on what they felt was Mills' collapsing of this distinction. They wrote:

As subject matter investigated by the psychoanalytic method, phenomena such as ... enduring selfhood, personal identity, individuality, distinctiveness, and otherness are always and only grasped as *dimensions of personal experiencing*. Explanations of these dimensions, or of disturbances in them, in terms of their taking form within intersubjective systems do not in any way imply a neglect or annulment of them. ... Contextualizing is not nullifying. [Stolorow et al., 2006, p. 187, emphasis added]

Comparing three distinct conceptual renditions of the self—the Kantian self, the narrative self, and experiential selfhood—Stolorow found most useful, as do I, the adoption of the third, the idea of experiential selfhood. Central to this definition of selfhood, which was previously articulated by Zahavi (2005), from whom Stolorow drew, is that it is, first and foremost, quintessentially experiential, and second, that it contains the essential element of ownership, or the sense of mineness. As Stolorow (2009) stated, "All of my experiences are given to me as *mine*, as experiences that *I* am undergoing or living through" (p. 407). For Zahavi, and for Stolorow, this pivotal facet of human experiencing, that of the experience of mineness of my emotional life, is fundamental to what we think of and define as individuality or individual selfhood. In contrast, the Kantian self endures throughout time—a *selfsame subject*—and stands relatively apart and separate from its experiences upon which it can reflect. And likewise, in contrast, the narrative self is

assumed to be an interpretive construction—an evolving narrative or story about one's life and personality that reflects one's developmental and relational history and one's values, ideals, aims, and aspirations. ... Whereas the Kantian self is the inferred subject or agent of reflection, the narrative self is an object or product of reflection. [Zahavi, 2005, p. 407]

For Stolorow, and for Zahavi, both are eschewed in favor of the more experience-near sense of mineness that is potentially embedded in all human experiencing. I say *potentially* because disturbances in emotional and relational life can, for some, denude this precious sense of mineness of one's experiential world. This is seen perhaps most dramatically in many of the individuals and patients who inspired the work of Bernard Brandchaft (2010) and his conceptualization of systems of pathological accommodation. Other glaring instances of the disturbance in a sense of mineness can be found in the not-me experiences about which Bromberg (2006) and, from a complexity theory perspective, Piers (2005) have written.

And thus, I wish to include this sense of mineness of one's experiential world, admittedly not always present but potentially graspable and realized, in how we might think about individuality. I certainly agree with Stolorow that an experiential selfhood emerges through understanding and validating the person's distinctive affectivity, rendering that precious sense of mineness or ownership of one's experiential world. What has been given to me, what I have been thrown into, is indeed mine, or becomes mine over time, with much affect tolerance and with the integration of previously dissociated, not-me states. I add that experiential selfhood also emerges through the investigation, understanding, and articulation of one's own context-embeddedness—what I think of as making increasingly conscious our *prereflective systems consciousness* (the term partly inspired by Sartre's [1956] concept of the *prereflective self consciousness*)—that is, that background sense, that we may come to know to one degree or another, of the vast array of complex, sociocultural/historical/relational systems that give rise to who we are and who we might become—in other words, that which we have been handed and must come to own as truly ours. Just as Brandchaft (2010) has averred that a sense of mineness of one's own life can, in instances, be coopted and compromised by early caregivers, so can a sense of being a contextualized and contextualizing person as well

(Maduro, 2008). This frequently occurs in instances in which children are held accountable, blamed, and shamed for how they feel and behave with no awareness or consideration for the contexts in which they are embedded and from which their emotional worlds and concomitant behaviors have emerged—something akin to being blamed for the cards we have been dealt, despite that we must take ownership of them and then think about how to play them.

Alternatively stated in Sander's (2008) words (and in Sander quoting Steele, 1983), in the absence of "the processes of validation of the infant's inner experience of his own states, ... such an infant "remains persistently oriented toward the outside world for cues and guidance, disregarding to a greater or lesser extent his own internal sensations, needs, and wishes" (p. 212).

Sander (2008) underscored that a person's sense of personal agency and autonomy is always a function of the larger "systems competence" (p. 211) and not a characteristic naturally inherent a priori in the person. But in addition, and importantly, Sander extends and underscores another vital dimension and meaning of recognizing the other: He stated, "Recognition can be thought of as a way of representing how one individual comes to savor the wholeness of another—that is, the experiencing by one of some configuration of the whole, some gestalt of the state of coherence of the other" (p. 169). This form of recognition, he continued, "as a process moving toward increasingly precise specificity, serves as an essential operational metaphor for both developmental process and therapeutic process" (p. 169). Here I interpret *understanding wholeness* not solely as grasping the depth of an individual's high degree of specificity and complexity, but also as comprehending and articulating the high degree of specificity and complexity of the systemic contexts that gave and continue to give rise to the individual's emotional world.

A complex paradox

Thus far, we have been playing with the idea of conceptualizing individuality or individual selfhood as quintessentially and radically experiential and first-person oriented (i.e., not something directly observable by an outside party), as having a sense of expanded affectivity and its concomitant loosening of dissociations, as imbued with the quality of personal ownership or mineness, and as having an expanded sense of the systemic contexts that have given and continue to give rise to our emotional worlds—all of which are reflections, again, not of the individual person but, instead, as Sander (2008) stated, of a "systems competence" (p. 211). I wish now to consider incorporating one additional and, I believe, vital element into the mix of how we might reconceptualize individuality—that of the capacity to live in and to hold our complex paradox itself in our lived, experiential world.

How we think of individuality or, more precisely, experiential selfhood, with effort can be extended into realms in which one consciously lives with a lively sense of personal paradox—a complex one in which I experience myself to have been handed my body, my history, my life context and circumstances, and my surround, largely out of my control, while also, by knowing and appreciating my thrownness, I experience personal ownership and authorship of my life, even a sense of singularity, aloneness, and autonomy—a *finite freedom* (Heidegger, 1962). Drawing from Heidegger (1962), the capacity to experience both sides of this complex paradox, to hold them and live in them, I argue, is ultimately to experience a greater sense of experiential selfhood—one that neither is stripped of its context-embeddedness nor remains solely quagmired in it. Individuality, as I am extending the term here, is a person's experiential selfhood that can appreciate and live in this most complex paradox: never fixable, never resolvable.

One felicitous point of departure and a robust way of conceptualizing this additional facet of individual selfhood can be found in Benjamin's (2004) concept of *the third*, of which by now there have been posited a variety of permutations and which Aron (2006) has underscored and particularized in his paper on analytic impasse and the third. Aron wrote:

Dyads, couples, and systems tend to get stuck in complementary relations. This complementarity is characterized by a variety of splitting in which one side takes a position complementary to—the polar opposite of—the other side. If one is experienced as the doer, then the other becomes the done to (Benjamin, 2004a); ... if one is the victim, then the other becomes the victimizer; ... if one is active, then the other becomes passive. [And I add: If one becomes the contextualizer and complexifier, the other becomes the Cartesian and decontextualizer.] Polarities are split between the two members, and the more each one locks into a singular position, the more rigidly the other is locked into the opposing, complementary position, thus heightening the splitting and tightening the polarization. At any time, the split may be reversed without significantly changing the structure of the complementarity. The active member may suddenly become passive while the passive member becomes active, thus their surface roles are switched, but the dyadic structure remains split between activity and passivity. [p. 353]

In complexity theory terminology, this type of complementarity is beautifully illustrated by the concept of the limit cycle attractor about which Piers has written in relation to understanding the dynamics of self states. Piers (2013) briefly defined “limit cycle attractors ... [as] systems that settle into a repeating sequence of states” (p. 443). We might think of the seesaw of which Aron (2006) speaks, or of a clock pendulum of which Harris (2005) speaks, moving back and forth, defining a bilateral and predictable arc in space.

Aron (2006) elaborated upon this type of complementarity:

Another image that metaphorically captures the rigidity of complementarity is the fixed pendulum. In describing chaos theory as a model for a relational developmental theory, Harris (2005) utilizes the fixed pendulum as a model of a rigid attractor. She contrasts the rigid, change-resistant qualities of the pendulum to the less predictable strange attractor which is always on the edge of chaos, a state that can be disequibrated and then reorganized in unexpected ways. The image of the fixed pendulum is similar to the seesaw and it captures the experience of therapeutic impasse and reversible complementarity described by Benjamin in that it only moves from one side to the other, back and forth, without any of the freedom, flexibility, and unpredictability needed for a relationship of two autonomous individuals interacting in a system of mutual recognition of independent subjectivities. [p. 354]

This dynamic can be particularized for our purposes by considering contexts in which the patient, with any sense of agency and finite freedom obliterated, experiences himself/herself solely as a pawn of the universe, entirely determined by context and embedded in an emotional conviction of “I have no say!”—while the analyst remains fixated on its opposite pole, insisting that the patient is an individual person with agency, unbounded freedom, and creativity. And, of course pendulum-like, these roles may reverse at any moment with neither participant capable of holding a third position of which Benjamin and Aron speak—in this context, of holding our complex paradox in consciousness.

And so, Aron (2006) rightly asked:

So how does one move from the structure of complementary relations to a more flexible arrangement? The two participants must find a way to go from being positioned along a line toward opening up space. I am referring, of course, to psychic space, transitional space, space to think, space to breathe, to live, to move spontaneously in relation to each other interpersonally. [And I add: perhaps the *open space* of Winnicott and of Sander.] The conceptualization of the third attempts to model this state in that a line has no space, whereas a triangle does. Britton (1989) spoke about being able to free himself to think to himself while with a patient, to take a step to the side within his own mind so as to create mental space. Picture this literally in terms of geometric space. While on a seesaw, one literally cannot take a step to the side; moving sideways is just not an option. As soon as one can take a step to the side, one has transformed a line into a triangular space with room to think and to relate. One has created options enabling the two members of the dyad to position themselves with some degree of flexibility and freedom of movement. One's position within triangular space does not completely determine the position of the other as it does on a seesaw. [pp. 354–355]

Whereas the complementarity and hoped-for triangular resolution of which Aron (2006) wrote doubtless are found throughout many dyadic relationships and throughout much of our clinical work, the more obviously dramatic complementarity, role-reversing battle may not always be so evident or so central phenomenologically; the analyst or the patient may not necessarily always be drawn into a polarized position—that would depend on a variety of factors. But this paradigm does provide a useful analogy for how we humans tend to reside somewhere on the context-fatedness/unbounded freedom spectrum, and sometimes even at one end or the other of that spectrum. Whether polarized

battles emerge, the ability of either patient or analyst, or both, to hold both ends of this spectrum, offers a greater sense of experiential selfhood. This presumption arguably is a kind of attitude, which, if adopted, will necessarily impact the clinical surround. To quote Sander (2008) once again, “What would it mean for caregivers to think in terms of systems instead of individuals; in terms of process instead of structure; in terms of a flow of sequence, recurrence, and expectancy within the recurring exchanges between themselves and their charges instead of thinking in terms of isolated events?: (p. 168)—and, I add, in terms of living in and holding, experientially, our complex paradox?

Clinically, we can imagine how this particular attitude might inform therapeutic action for some of our patients. This attitude may emerge in the form of our interpretations and responses that oscillate, depending on the clinical moment, between speaking to the individual person who is efficacious, has agency, desire, dreams, goals, and autonomy, and to the person who is context-embedded, who has been and is thrown, and who remains inextricably intertwined with and related to other complex, relational systems that were not of their making. In this light, we work toward holding our most complex paradox—that we are simultaneously and paradoxically systemically-determined beings, thrown into our life-situatedness, and also individual persons, always with potentialities and possibilities that can be of our own making.

I believe these assertions and conclusions emanate, in no small, part from my understanding of the pioneering work of Louis Sander, to whom, among others, I owe a debt of gratitude. Given that each of us is, at once, a separate individual and a systems-embedded being, exquisitely capable of and sensitive toward interactions with other systems-embedded beings, it behooves us to strive toward bringing both domains of thinking and experiencing into conscious awareness and to tolerate affectively this most complex paradox.

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