

## INCOMMENSURABLE WORLDS AND THE ANALYST'S TRAUMA: REPLY TO MADURO AND COBURN

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Maduro's article is seen to constitute a powerful and moving autobiographical study through which his cardinal principles of rigorous relationality, affectivity, and the courage to know have emerged. Building on Maduro's suggestion that the intersubjective can serve as analogue to resolving incommensurable paradigms, I have proposed the more general thesis that inter-conceptual incommensurabilities inevitably carry the traces of an underlying clash of experiential worlds. I have also suggested that absolutisms are not universals but arise out of specific trauma informed relational contexts. Coburn's article is seen to be a clinical study of apparently incommensurable experiential worlds. By bringing the abstract and lived forms of complexity theory into a playful relational dance, the analytic dyad was able to create a third world whereby resolution of intersubjective impasse was accompanied by a more nuanced understanding of a complexity sensibility that takes into account individual agency. The discussion concludes with a brief comment on dialogic possibilities between psychoanalysis and neuroscience.

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I find it both a pleasure and challenge to discuss Maduro and Coburn's articles, ones that address the question of how do we approach both clinically and conceptually the problem of incommensurability of theories and persons. The pleasure is due to my deep interest in this problem, both within psychoanalysis and the wider mental health world within which psychoanalysis has been demoted from its dominant position in the 1950s to being just one more player in the multiplicity of approaches to human emotional suffering. The challenge is because both of these fine papers are very personal, multilayered, and complex with numerous dialogic points of entry. So I have to make choices, a task that has always been difficult for an obsessive thinker with an omnivorous appetite for endless dialogue.

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Maduro sets the table for the principal theme of the two articles by asking: "Does incommensurability on the level of scientific paradigm always represent a radical constraint on valid interdisciplinary inquiry and integration, or can it be addressed?" (Maduro, this issue, p. 146). He, then, suggests a clinical path of inquiry to the above question by suggesting: "The intersubjective is offered as analogue to the interdisciplinary in order to wonder whether psychoanalytic knowledge respecting intersubjective conjunction, disjunction, impasse, and transformation in the treatment context can shed light on self psychology's efforts to expand its horizons through integrative dialogue with foreign disciplines" (this issue, p. 146).

I not only heartily agree with the above but would also suggest that the intersubjective is more than just analogue to the interdisciplinary. If we accept Maduro's more general view of the "Faces in a Cloud" (Stolorow and Atwood, 1979) premise that a clinician's personal paradigm is embedded in his psychological world, a "product of his/her encounters to date with the finitude of our shared world, as well as his/her best effort to come to terms with these encounters" (Maduro, this issue, p. 147), then an interesting corollary to the above premise is that all psychoanalytic theory can be seen as an emergent product of the experiential worlds of a dialogic community (see Sucharov, 2000). Conceptual and personal incommensurabilities, as beautifully demonstrated in Coburn's article, are, therefore, intimately interconnected:

Apparent inter-conceptual incommensurabilities inevitably carry the traces of an underlying clash of experiential worlds.

Maduro follows with a powerful and moving psychoanalytic autobiography, one where the intertwining of the personal and the clinical/conceptual is presented with both compelling intellectual force and poignant emotional passion. We come to see that his holy triad of rigorous relationality, affectivity, and the courage to know constitutes his paradigmatic phoenix that has emerged out of the ashes of his devastating childhood trauma of shattering loss and massive invalidation. It comes as no surprise that his interdisciplinary dialogue will be restricted to perspectives consistent with his own, and that any theory that appears to violate his three cardinal maxims with the ever present threat of opening his trap door (decontextualization of the individual, biological reductionism), will be outside his zone of dialogue.

I need to say more about Maduro's personal narrative, or perhaps I should call it narrative poetry. His account is a "tour de force" that left me searching for words to capture my experience both in listening to his story at the Conference Panel and reading his text. I do not believe I have ever encountered a psychoanalytic biography where the vulnerable human being behind the theorist/clinician came to life with such emotional honesty. This is sublime and moving story telling at its best, a telling that pulled me into his child summer world of "warm, humid, and salty" Cape Cod air, as I sat next to him and his grandmother outside the neighbor's tennis court, being an unwilling witness to that terrible moment when a heart stops, a life is extinguished, and a child's heart is crushed.

The images accompanying the text are particularly evocative. The one with the child standing over a corpse with two women with their backs turned captures more than words can; the poignancy and terror of a child left alone to cope with the unimaginable that had exploded into his tender soul. At any rate, Maduro's imagery penetrated my own unconscious. In a recent dream, a close family member with an ailing heart was leaning over to pick up a tennis ball and appears to go into cardiac arrest. Unlike Maduro's tale of cruel finality, the fate of my family member remained suspended in a cloud of uncertainty.

Where Maduro moves us with his gripping personal biographical tale, Coburn gives us a very human portrait of the analyst in the trenches, mucking about with his patient as they butt heads around two apparently irreconcilable experiential positions. In contrast to Maduro, Coburn's psychoanalytic biography is not foregrounded but does appear as an implied backstory. Coburn tells us that he is no stranger to the world of shame and personal defect, one that he is hesitant to return to, and hence, his initial unwillingness to enter Douglas's world of like-minded deficiency and self-blame:

He could not imagine stepping into my world, and I did not want to step into his.  
(Coburn, this issue, p. 166)

I, therefore, do not think it is a wild psycho-biographical speculation to suggest that Coburn's deep interest in complexity theory with its emphasis on systemic and contextual influences may have served as an antidote to shame-ridden feelings of personal defect and self-blame. Furthermore, personal paradigms that are emergent products of traumatic worlds are likely to be held with a tenacious grip, with an ensuing difficulty in dialogic engagement with views that are either incommensurate with or at least appear to challenge the paradigm's core tenets. In Coburn's case, at least in his encounter with Douglas, he was manifesting both a rigid and limited view of his theory. Elsewhere, I have written about the distinction between complexity as an abstract theory intellectually held, and "lived complexity" whereby one experiences complexity as an emotionally lived experiential truth (Sucharov, 2013a). And part of that truth is the toleration of ambiguity, uncertainty, and paradox, all of which are fundamental aspects of complexity theory, especially its lived form.

It is, therefore, an interesting irony that at an experiential level Coburn, by virtue of his reluctance to hold the paradox of apparent incommensurability and enter Douglas's world was slipping out of the lived form of the very theory that he has elaborated with such intellectual clarity. And we have seen that Coburn's fear of a backslide into old and traumatizing waters of shame and grief lead to both a rigid and limited view of his personal paradigm, foregrounding the feature of contextual systemic influence while pushing into the background the inevitability of paradox and ambiguity in a human complex system that must take into account the experience of individual separateness and agency.

However, what saved the day was an unspoken relational atmosphere of mutual affection and connectedness between Coburn and Douglas, an atmosphere that allowed for a modicum of playfulness, a feature that I have elsewhere described as vital for the mutual embracing of paradox and uncertainty (Sucharov, 2013a). By playing with their

apparently incommensurable worlds, shared feelings of shame and personal defect were softened, and they were able to create a third world both at the experiential and the conceptual level, whereby resolution of intersubjective impasse was accompanied by a more nuanced understanding of a complexity sensibility that takes into account individual agency:

And I would add, there is a chance for tolerating the perplexity and strangeness of experiencing and living in two radically and apparently separate worlds. . . . In this light, I argue that perhaps it is a developmental step toward greater self-delineation and integration of self and world to tolerate simultaneously a sense of separateness (and perhaps estrangement), autonomy, and personal agency, on the one hand, and a sense of “thrownness” . . . a sense of being emergent, situated, and contextualized by complex life histories, cultures, and circumstances that are out of one’s hands, on the other hand: having one foot in each world, so to speak. (Coburn, this issue, pp. 164–165)

Thus, we see that when we bring the abstract and lived forms of theory into a relational dance we expand exponentially the richness of explanatory possibilities. The therapeutic encounter of Douglas and Coburn is a beautiful example of the mutual intertwining of conceptual and personal incommensurability and their resolutions. Theory formation is, therefore, an organic and dynamic relational process where conceptual and experiential intersubjective discourses are continuously informing each other.

#### **NOTE ON ABSOLUTISMS AND THE MUTUAL REGULATION OF UNCERTAINTY**

Maduro described that terrible moment on the tennis court as the “pulverization of my developmentally sustaining ‘absolutisms of everyday life’” (Stolorow, 1999). My question here is what is it about the particularities of Maduro’s childhood experience preceding the death of his father that lent a developmentally sustaining character to those absolutisms. This question flows from a view of absolutisms as useful generalizations, but not as universals of everyday life; like all other experiential positions they are highly contextual to specificity of families, cultures, and historical periods. In fact a close reading of Stolorow’s (1999) article on absolutisms indicates that they often originate in childhood to serve vital restorative and defensive functions in the face of massive and traumatizing invalidation of the child’s emotional reality.

This is quite consistent with the views of Brothers (2008), who has written extensively on the process of uncertainty regulation and trauma, whereby the coordinated regulatory processes between infant and caretaker produce changes in the experience of uncertainty as to the availability of a self-sustaining relational exchange, and that under optimal relational conditions, mutually regulated certainties (systemically emergent certainties) gradually emerge, certainties that are flexible and experience modifiable. Trauma, however, shatters these certainties, resulting in emergency measures to restore certainty in the form of rigidly held certitudes (absolutisms) that invariably involve a

marked restriction in the capacity to tolerate, let alone embrace, the rich complexity of life with its attendant uncertainties and ambiguities (Brothers, 2008; Sucharov, 2013b).

So the presence of rigidly held absolutisms may itself be a product of childhood trauma. I think if we examine more closely the intergenerational aspect of Maduro's trauma so compellingly portrayed in his narrative, we are left to wonder whether the rigid quality of this absolutism that was shattered was itself a context specific relational outcome of traumatic loss in the earlier generations, whereby Maduro's mother, in the face of her own invalidation regarding the loss of her father, and perhaps other developmental relational traumas, formed rigidly held certitudes or absolutisms that were unconsciously transmitted to Maduro. There likely was never a flexible sense within the family system that although tragedies are highly unlikely to happen, they might, and if and when they do, there will be abundant emotional support to grieve and move forward. So Maduro's experience of mother's psychotic like denial of the death of his father with accompanying devastation: "It didn't really happen, and there is nothing to feel terrible about," had already been preceded by "It's never going to happen" long before the moment of his father's death. Maduro may have found himself in a family that was sadly unprepared for cataclysmic loss.

#### **PSYCHOANALYSIS AND NEUROSCIENCE: NEW DIALOGIC PARTNERS**

I need to add a final comment on the potential for dialogue between psychoanalysis and neuroscience, a topic receiving little or no attention in the two papers. In the past decade there has been a burgeoning of work on the neurophysiology of emotional experience especially the impact of severe trauma on brain functioning. In my own practice, two patients independently walked into their session clutching a book by Bessel Van der Kolk called *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Van der Kolk, 2014). I quickly purchased my own copy and began to read what was clearly a plethora of groundbreaking work of deep relevance to the many patients I see who struggle with the embodied effects of chronic and severe trauma.

While I understand that Maduro will have no truck with a reductive biology that ignores the complexity and context sensitivity of emotional experience, what impressed me about Van der Kolk's book was its holistic non-reductionistic character in which experiential "top down" psychotherapeutics were integrated with body based "bottom up" approaches designed to address dysfunctional brain physiology that impacted among other things a patient's capacity to receive and provide empathy and to access important feeling states, both of which are essential to any self-psychological informed psychotherapy.

I am just beginning to digest this new work and it is well beyond my scope to offer even a brief summary with any informed articulation. What I have done was to purchase copies of the book to hand them out to many of my patients. One patient, a male with severe childhood sexual abuse said: "I am reading my story." The most moving reception was from Barbara, a patient who has survived horrific and prolonged sexual abuse by a predatorial foster father and who has worked hard on healing. She clutched

the book gently in her arms looking at me with tears welling up as she pointed to the evocative title on the book cover: “The Body Keeps the Score,” words that spoke to her so profoundly. It was a moment of feeling deeply understood by an author whose book she had not yet opened. Although I continue with my usual therapeutic style, I spend a few moments with selected patients discussing aspects of Van Der Kolk’s book (and other texts brought to my attention by informed clients), as we begin to add an important dimension to helping them make sense of their troubled and complex experiential world.

Alas, so much has been left unsaid, but it is time to thank Maduro and Coburn for giving us so much to think and talk about. Let the conversation continue.

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