

THOU SHALT NOT KNOW THY RELATIONAL CONTEXT

Blindness to the Contextuality of Emotional Life

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Introduction

A central thesis of contemporary relational psychoanalysis is that human emotional life is inherently relational --that is, that an individual's conscious and unconscious emotional life is inextricably embedded in, and constituted by, the world of human relationships in which it comes into being (see e.g., Atwood and Stolorow, 1984; Mitchell, 1988; Aron, 1996). That the "very being" of emotional life is embedded in others, that is, that emotional experience is inherently relational (Orange, Atwood and Stolorow, 1997, p. 71), does not, however, mean that we necessarily experience this embeddedness. In fact, even presuming the developmental conditions and capacities that make its experience possible, it is my observation that we human beings are often deeply reluctant to bring our emotional lives' embedded or relational nature into linguistically elaborated awareness --that is, to fully see and feel it.

In this Presentation, I attempt to elucidate an emotional process, named "decontextualization,"¹ that functions to obscure individual experience of the contextual embeddedness or relationality of emotional life.

Clinical Illustration of One Form of Decontextualization

The Case of Allen. The Inherently Sensitive Boy. Fourteen year old Allen lived alone with his father, his only living parent. Because the father had

¹ Refer audience to "Hand Out" that defines *decontextualization* (see [Appendix A](#)).

a history deprived of love, where early caregivers repeatedly invalidated and devalued his feelings, the father viewed his own emotional life, and himself, as inherently unworthy. As a result, he avoided awareness of his own shame-soaked emotional states, and tended to see others and the world in emotionally flattened, concrete and practical terms.

When young Allen felt insecure and frightened by academic demands, conflicts with peers, or other events at school --what I will call a first level of pain-- he looked to his father for soothing understanding and reassuring perspective. Repeatedly, however, the father's emotional flatness, and concrete and practical sensibility, rendered him ill-attuned to Allen's self-doubts and anxieties, and to his longing for paternal comfort. In reaction to these ill-attunements, Allen experienced painful hurt and disappointment in his father -- a second level of pain.

When Allen would dare to express this reactive, or second-level, pain to his father, including his associated perceptions of the father as emotionally unavailable, dismissive and ill-attuned, the father would fall into a subtle, but discernable, depressed shame state. In defense against his own shame, the father communicated to Allen a wish -- a wish that, for Allen, had the power of a commandment-- that Allen disregard his reactive hurt, disappointment and associated negative perceptions of the father, and replace them with perceptions and feelings that were soothing to the father's sense of self.

The father guided Allen in how to fulfill this wish by offering an alternative explanation of the hurtful and disappointing interactions between them, an explanation that conveyed the father's need to avoid his own painful shame. This explanation consisted in the idea that Allen possessed a natural gift, and burden, of inborn emotional sensitivity. Per this idea, Allen's emotional sensitivity was the principle determinant of his intensely painful feelings, and existed independently of Allen's relational contexts, except perhaps to the minor extent that those contexts served as triggers.

As emotionally required explanation, the *sensitive boy* idea functioned to organize, or reorganize, both Allen's and his father's perceptions of Allen's hurts and disappointments, and their constitutive relational contexts -- in particular, the constitutive role in them of the father's ill-attunements.

Specifically -- and corresponding to the primary, repressive dimension of this decontextualization process-- the sensitive boy idea stripped Allen's hurt and disappointment of the interactivity-with-father, particularly reactivity-to-father, that constituted them. Additionally --corresponding to the second dimension of the process-- it pressured Allen to replace the prohibited experience of his reactivity-to-father with experiences of himself as an unrelated, isolated sensitive brain.

This instance of decontextualization freed the father of shame-saturated perceptions of, and feelings about, himself as being with Allen in ill-attuned, disappointing and hurtful ways. At the same time, however, it imprisoned Allen in perceptions of his pain as a “gift” produced by his radically isolated brain --a brain that, in gifting itself pain, must certainly be defective.

The Primal Motivation to Decontextualize Human Emotional Life, And Its Consequences

I contend that, at the most elemental perceptual and affective levels, awareness of emotional life’s embeddedness-in-other, that is, its relational nature, entails often unbearable states of existential and emotional vulnerability (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992). It is my observation that we human beings insulate ourselves from these vulnerable states in layers of Cartesian² defense, namely, *visions* of our subjective life as material and object-like, and sharply separate from the world of human relationships in which our subjectivity exists; *feelings* of invulnerability and grandiosity; and *beliefs* that our understandings transcend the subjectivity that produces them, as if understanding can exist independently of the historically and relationally situated subject who understands.³

² I refer to these defensive perceptions, feelings and beliefs as *Cartesian* because I see them as deriving from the philosopher Rene Descartes’ metaphysical view of human mind as radically non-relational --as radically separate from the natural world, and world of other human minds (Descartes, 1641).

³ A few developmental assumptions: In this Presentation, I propose that we can perceive, and have feelings about, the relationality of our emotional experience (albeit from a perspective within it), and that we can defensively (albeit unconsciously) avert perceiving this relationality. This proposition entails several developmental and metaphysical assumptions. For purposes of this brief Presentation I will name just a few. First, I assume that in order for a decontextualizing subject to perceive and affectively react to his emotional experience’s relational dimensions, he must have developed a relationship to his subjective life (see Ogden, 1986, p. 209; Mitchell, 1993, p. 33). His affectivity and its relational contexts must be objects of his perception and feelings. Second, I assume that the decontextualizing subject must have achieved those developmental capacities prerequisite to his capacity to see and have feelings about his emotional life’s relational structures and states, to ascribe meanings to them, and to act upon (e.g., avoid) them. These underlying capacities would include the capacities to differentiate self and other, to experience agency in oneself and in other, and to symbolize affect with language. Finally, I assume that human emotional experience’s constitutive relationality exists and is, to some extent, perceptible.

The Existential Embeddedness We Fear and Avoid

What is the embeddedness or relationality that we avert in processes of decontextualization? The relationality of emotional experience is characterized by five primordial features, namely:

- (1) The *thrownness* (Heidegger, 1927) of a person's emotional development, and experience of self and world, into the emotional characters of his primary caregivers, and into his social milieu at large; this *thrownness* entails the respect in which the person is delivered --without any say or control-- into his relational context.
- (2) The intrinsic *temporality* of emotional experiencing; this temporality is finite and thus implicates loss: loss of self (anxiety), loss of others (grief), loss of the whole self-other-world mix-up; it also entails a unity of our past, present, and imagined future relational interactions live in our every emotional state.
- (3) The intrinsic *perspectivity* of emotional experiencing, in that our emotional experience always arises from within, and not outside of, a relationally and historically "thick" (Dostal, 1993) situation; this perspectivity implicates the limitations of human knowledge, which can only be partial, even if gloriously circumscribed by this human --versus God-like-- limiting feature.
- (4) The *immateriality* of emotional experiencing in that it is made of interactive "process" (Jones, 1995) and meaning, and is not a material entity or thing.

- (5) The *interactivity* between self and other (and world) that is constitutive of emotional experiencing.

Decontextualization varies in form depending in part upon which, or which combination, of these five features of emotion's relationality the subject evades. Today I focus my Presentation on the constitutive *interactivity* of emotional life (the last of the five features mentioned), and our evasion of it when we decontextualize.

The Constitutive Interactivity of Our Emotional Experience. The intersubjective system is an explanatory model that captures human emotional life's inherent embeddedness and relationality and, in particular, its constitutively interactive nature. In this model, emotional phenomena exist, form and transform in systems, or at the interface, of the mutually and reciprocally interacting emotional worlds (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992; Stolorow, 1997) of two or more experiencing subjects, for example child and caregiver, analysand and analyst.

Implicit in the notion of *mutual and reciprocal interaction* is the idea that the individuals who co-constitute dyadic relationships are both agents of their own respective emotional experiencing, and, in the constitutive interplay of their respective emotional worlds, contributing agents --or co-contributors (Fosshage, 2007, pp. 326, 329)-- of the other's emotional experiencing (see Wallace, 1985). It is this constitutive interplay that makes for so-called mutual and reciprocal *interaction*.

Assuming the prerequisite developmental capacities, I contend that the human subject can discern and specifically perceive, have feelings about, and linguistically formulate or, in the alternative, blind himself to this *interactivity* --that is, his own agency, the agency of the other with whom he relates, or features of their dynamic interplay-- and the constitutive role in (his own or another's) emotional life. In seeing this interactivity, one experiences a central aspect of emotional life's contextuality; in decontextualizing or obscuring one's perception of it, one experiences emotional life in a decontextualized form or state --that is, in some respect, and to some extent, as non-contextual.

We can now address the central questions elicited by clinical evidence of decontextualization: what necessitates decontextualization and how does it work?

**Decontextualization as Defense: Experiential Blindness to the
Activity, Reactivity and Interactivity that Structures Human Emotional Life,
and its Roots in Developmental Trauma**

The possibility of an experiencing subject acquiring and maintaining a sense of his emotional life's contextuality depends, as does the possibility of all other affective and perceptual experience, upon relational contexts of attunement and malattunement (Socarides and Stolorow, 1984/85). Caregivers' (in the developmental system), and analysts' (in the treatment system) capacity for, and delivery of, "attuned responsiveness" (Stolorow, 2007, p. 3) to a child's or patient's perceptions of, and feelings about, the relational underbelly of his affectivity --for example, Allen's experience of his father's ill-attunement-- is critical to the seamless integration of those perceptions and feelings

into the child's or patient's self-experience (Kohut, 1971; Krystal, 1988; Socarides and Stolorow, 1984/85).

In any relational system, emotional attunement may be selective in respect to the totality of a person's perceptual and emotional process. One person may attune to one aspect or dimension of the content of another person's affective/perceptual experience, without attuning to, or while communicating rejection of, other aspects or dimensions.

Within relational contexts that breed decontextualization, I believe that mis- or mal-attunement relates specifically (even if not exclusively) to a subject's perceptual and/or affective discernment and experience of the *interactive structures* (and temporal, perspectival, and immaterial structures) of his given emotional state. In Allen's case, for example, I can tell you that the father responded with validating recognition of certain core aspects or qualities of Allen's feelings of hurt and disappointment, but with invalidating mal-attunement to the *reactive* features of those feelings, like Allen's perception of his father's self-preoccupation and dismissiveness. It was in this way that Allen's perceptions of his father's actions and inactions, and the reactive aspects of his emotional pain, were unable to be integrated into his self-experience.

In the repeated *absence* of attuned, validating responsiveness to the child's perceptions of, and feelings about, the interactive contexts of his emotional experience, or in the repeated *presence* of invalidations, devaluations, or rejections that specifically and selectively target those perceptions and affects, a child may come to see his experiences of interactivity as sources of dangerous relational conflict. The resulting subjective experiences of conflict (Socarides and Stolorow, 1984/85; Stolorow, Brandchaft and

Atwood, 1987) may lead to inhibitions in, and defenses against, the integration of those conflict-laden experiences, including wholesale repression of them (see e.g., Stolorow, 2007, p. 8). Such “shutting off” (Bowlby, 1988) processes function to maintain the integrity of the child’s developing organizations of experience as well as his attachment bonds with caregivers (Bowlby, 1988, p. 108; Stolorow and Atwood, 1992).

Decontextualization and the Capacity to Symbolize Experience. As I stated above, the experience of one’s emotional life’s relationality is a fairly complex form of experience that presupposes various developmental capacities. Among them is the capacity to symbolize perception and affect in language (this comes on-line around 8 – 15 months of age). The capacity to integrate somatic affect states with language is, I believe, prerequisite both to configuring perception of, and affective reactions to, the interactivity of experience and to the agency that is involved in the evasions of such perceptions and affects that we make in decontextualization.

Once the capacities for symbolization and language are on-line, the process of avoiding perception and affect takes on a new, critical dimension: the repression of relationally dangerous, conflict-laden perception and affect becomes tantamount to aborting the process of encoding the offending, somatically organized perceptions and affects in language. With specific regard to linguistically integrated experience of the *interactive* features of one’s emotion, the avoidance of such experience thus involves aborting integration of the otherwise somatic and nonverbal perceptual and affective organizations of interactivity with word. The result of this repressive process is that linguistically elaborated experience of emotional life’s embeddedness in constitutive interactivity --

including especially the willingness to think and speak about it-- is resisted if not disabled.

Decontextualization as Bi-Dimensional Process: The Substitution of Cartesian

Perceptions and Affects for Repressed Experience. As in the case of Allen and his father, when a caregiver rejects or otherwise purposively mal-attunes to her child's efforts to linguistically experience the interactive features of his emotional states, perhaps especially painful emotional states, she will likely also convey a "wish" (Bowlby, 1988), instruction or even commandment (Miller, A., 1979) that the child substitute for the offensive experience perceptions of his emotion as non-contextual. As illustrated in Allen's case, the father's wish or commandment was that Allen's pain be seen and understood as arising from Allen's "isolated mind" (Stolorow, 1992, p. 9) --that is, from an emotional subject or entity who exists apart from, and is unaffected by, his world, especially his world of paternal interaction. Most children will, like Allen, register the caregiver's purposive rejections of offending experience, on the one hand, and guidance towards favored substitutive perceptions and feelings, on the other, as both *prohibitions against* experiences of interactive contextuality and *requirements for* substitutive experiences of non-interactivity, or, more broadly, non-relationality or non-contextuality.

In developmental contexts involving this kind of parental "pressure" (Bowlby, 1988, p. 108; see also, Miller, A., 1979), the child, like Allen, will likely resolve the subjectively felt relational conflict through accommodation (Brandchaft, 1994, 2007) to the caregiver's multifaceted emotional mandates. Corresponding to a bi-dimensional decontextualization, in one dimension of the accommodation, the child will, as already

detailed, about the process of putting his perceptions and feelings into words, thereby repressing what is not permitted to be experienced within the relational field, namely, offending features of the interactive heart of his emotional state. And, in a second dimension of the accommodation, he will positively articulate in consciousness what must be substitutively perceived of the nature of his states, namely, their “indulgent ... and favourable” (Bowlby, 1988, p. 108), Cartesian non-contextuality.

Recently, a traumatized patient of mine was grappling with her memory of, and emotional reactions to, a series of painful intersubjective exchanges. She said to me: “I can’t tell if something really happened or if this is just a state of my being.” Here, she struggled to maintain the validity of her sense of her pain’s contextuality (that “something really happened”), yet felt the accommodatively reductive and confusing pull towards her pain’s decontextualization, or what I might term, in this instance, its *ontologization* (my pain is “just a state of my *being*”).

The Pathological Legacies of Too Much Decontextualization. When these sorts of relational interactions are a repetitive feature of a developmental system, they are likely to give rise to amalgamations of negative and positive organizing principles (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992, p. 55) that prereflectively determine which configurations of contextuality --like interactivity (or temporality, perspectivality or immateriality)-- must be repressed, and which --like non-relational isolation (or ahistoricity, objectivity or materiality)-- must be seen (Atwood and Stolorow, 1984, p. 36). Such organizing principles then operate to organize subsequent experience, especially in present moments

and contexts where experience of one's affective life's interactive structure --or, more broadly, its contextuality-- is perceived to be relationally disharmonious.

When experiences of interactivity in the developmental system repeatedly herald unbearable relational danger, later emotionality can come to be infused with the conviction that its interactive features are dangerously unwanted, hurtful, alienating and so forth. One consequence can be a broad, enduring aversion to the sense, much less reflective awareness, of the action, reaction and interaction between self and other, and their contributions to the emotional experiences one feels, or does not feel, as the case may be.

Another note on the child's acquisition of the capacity to symbolize perception and affect: with this capacity, the child possesses new tools and possibilities for communicating and relating around his and others' subjective lives (see Stern, 1985). With respect specifically to the child's experiences of his own emotion's relationality, the capacity to symbolize enables the child to represent linguistically and share with caregivers his complex perceptions of, and affects about, his emotional life's relational features.

Particularly rich opportunities for development and pathogenesis emerge insofar as the shared experiences pertain to the child's perceptions of, and affects about, his interactions with the caregivers themselves --the primary relational dimension of his affectivity in the developmental system.

When the child shares satisfying, positive experiences of his interaction with his caregivers, the caregivers are likely to respond with interested, attuned responsiveness, if

only because such experiences will typically harmonize with their narcissism. What happens, however, when the child attempts to communicate with his caregivers about his painful, negative experiences of interaction with them? It may be especially in contexts where caregivers are attuned and receptive to the child's experiences and expressions of painful caregiver interaction that the child builds enduring confidence that relational features of his pain are not fraught with undesirability and conflict. Repeated parental mal-attunement at these critical intersubjective moments, however, is precisely the point of trauma --what I call *relationality trauma*-- in developmental systems of decontextualization.

In the clinical setting, such developmental histories and the accommodatively self-decontextualizing organizing principles that are so often their legacy, are likely to determine significantly the character of a patient's expectations of, and resistance to, exploration and dialogue about his sense of interactivity, particularly disharmonious interactivity, with his analyst. In a similar vein, an analyst's appreciation of a patient's developmental history of *relationality trauma* will help her focus an aspect of the treatment on "negotiating" (Pizer, 1992) the contextualization of the transference --that is, negotiating mutual acknowledgement of, and dialogue about, experiential details and nuances of their treatment interactions (see Ehrenberg, D. B., 1974; Stolorow and Atwood, 1992, pp. 56-59; Fosshage, 2007, p. 339; Coburn (in press); Stolorow, 2007, pp. 8 – 9).

Decontextualization in the Extreme. Too often, decontextualization is the legacy of emotional relationships that involve radical invalidation of, antagonism towards, threats

and even violent punishment for the child's perceptions of, or feelings about, the interactivity of his emotional life, especially his pain. As such, severely decontextualizing developmental systems can result in extreme forms of psychopathology involving principles of subjective organization that produce a subject's profound and pervasive sense of the invalidity of his experiences of emotional interactivity (e.g., the sense of invalidity of his *reactive* terror). Since, as we established at the outset, relationality is ascribed to the "very being" (Orange, Atwood and Stolorow, 1997, p. 71), or "ontological core" (Stolorow and Atwood, 1979, p. 189) of human emotional life, such pathology amounts to nothing less than emotional convictions in the invalidity of one's *being* as a feeling and perceiving subject that, in extreme cases, may be characterized by experiences of "personal annihilation" (Stolorow, Atwood and Orange, 2002, p. 139).

Cases of physical, sexual, and other abuse at the hands of family members or other trusted caregivers often entail built-in motivations on the part of the perpetrator to expunge from the relational field --that is, from his or her own experience, and especially from that of the child's-- any perception of, or reactive feeling about, the egregious violation or abuse that is being, or has been committed. One of the many consequences of this sort of traumatic dynamic is a prereflective unwillingness (that may crystallize into an inability) in the victim to linguistically formulate --that is, to integrate with words, speak of, convey-- his perceptions of, and affects about, the emotional interactions (e.g., emotional violation/exploitation), and by extension the interpersonal events (e.g., rape), occurring within the injurious relationship (see e.g., Perlman, 1993, 1999).

The Attribution of Painful Meanings to Experiences of Relationality

One byproduct of repeated and developmentally traumatic invalidation, devaluation, rejection and other mis- and mal-attunement to perceptual/affective experience (regardless of its content) is that it takes on painful and frightening meanings (Stolorow, 2007, p. 4). From repeated mal-attunement to a child's painful experiences of the interactive aspects of his emotion, the child may, for example, interpret his linguistic formulation and awareness of these aspects as an unforgiveable failure or betrayal of the caretaker's emotional needs, for which the child will be abandoned or otherwise punished. This dynamic can produce in the child a conviction that the relationality of his emotional life is inherently shameful. These sorts of convictions, or organizing principles, produce a kind of shame --what I term *relationality shame*-- that perpetuates decontextualization, since the defense against this relationality shame often takes the form of further decontextualization (perhaps because the defense is itself constituted by, and vulnerable to, decontextualization and invalidity).

For example, in an effort to escape painful relationality shame, the child may not only repress the conflict-laden experiences of his affectivity's interactivity, but also erect a defensive Cartesian self-ideal that centers on an image of his emotional experience as purified of the interactive (or temporal, perspectival, or immaterial) features whose recognition he perceived to be unwelcome or damaging to caregivers (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992). I define such ideals as *Cartesian self-ideals* because they are constituted by images, and associated feelings, of one's own, and others', minds' isolated, non-interactive, atemporal, epistemologically objective, and material nature. Such ideals may

present conspicuously, as in grandiose John Wayne-like ideals and self-images of relational invulnerability, or they may operate less conspicuously behind seemingly undramatic, difficult-to-perceive patterns of relentless self-blame or defensive idealization (see e.g., Fairbairn, 1952, pp. 59-81).

In cases where such a defensive Cartesian self-ideal takes form, the child ends up relentlessly decontextualizing himself and his place in the world. He continuously chooses who he is and can be, and who others are and will be, based upon the blinding prohibitions and requirements that have necessitated the ideal. Painful and deadening self percepts are apt to emerge, like “I am worthwhile and good if I see myself and my pain as disconnected from my surround, and worthless and bad if I don’t.” As such, the relational prohibitions and requirements of early life, and the child’s solutions to relational conflict --like erection of, and compliance with, Cartesian self-ideals-- become institutionalized as determinants of experiences of self, other and world.

Decontextualization and the

Inability to Formulate Important Experiences and Actions

A further byproduct of developmental trauma (regardless of the perceptual or affective states that are invalidated or devalued) is the “constriction and narrowing of the horizons of emotional experiencing” (Stolorow, 2007, p. 4; see also Stolorow, Atwood and Orange, 2002, Chapter 3). As a result of the primary, repressive dimension of decontextualization, the perceptions of, and affects about, emotion’s relationality are relegated to a dynamically unconscious state (Stolorow, Atwood and Orange, 2002), and reflective awareness, and perhaps even a rudimentary sense, of the interactive nature of

one's experiential process is disabled. Any remnant of perceptual awareness and relational reflectiveness that may survive this repressive process is, in turn, likely to be obscured by the presence of decontextualization's secondary dimension, namely, substitutive Cartesian illusions.

The relational blindness that results from decontextualization is highly problematic because rudimentary perceptions of one's emotional life's relationality (like seeing one's own agency, interpretations, impact and responsibility; other's agency, interpretations, impact and responsibility; and some of the complexities of their interaction) are developmentally prerequisite to the possibility of invaluable reactive experiences like blame, hurt, disappointment, anger, feeling exploited (Perlman, 2008), and feeling outraged. Moreover, these reactive experiences are in turn prerequisite to the possibility of concrete reactions and attempts at interpersonal solution and self-care, like efforts to resist intellectually or physically, object, register complaint, report and expose abusers, sever damaging attachments, and the like.

In short, when perceptions of, and feelings about, the relationality of emotional experience are repressed and obscured by illusion, and thus unavailable for use --that is, when one is imprisoned in what can be the pitch-black isolation of decontextualized states-- other critically important experiences that rely upon relational sight become, by extension, inaccessible as bases for emotional response and concrete remedial action.

Conclusion

Although human emotional life is existentially embedded in constitutive relationships with others in time, experiencing it as such can entail unbearable states of vulnerability. Perhaps too often, we defensively avert perceiving and feeling this vulnerability. We accomplish this avoidance by decontextualizing our own, or anothers', emotional life: we repress and deny its contextuality and, more often than not, insulate it in Cartesian experiences of radical independence, atemporality, certainty, and solidity. This defensive process can produce emotional ideals that insidiously and painfully determine our views of, and feelings about, self, others and the world, and limit our competence in recognizing and responding to damaging relationships.

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APPENDIX A

“Decontextualization” Defined

In decontextualization, as I define it, conscious, linguistically articulated emotional and perceptual experience --that is, linguistic KNOWledge-- of the relationality of emotional life is, within certain relational contexts, disarticulated and repressed into dynamic unconsciousness (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992), and replaced in consciousness with Cartesian images of emotional life's non-relationality.