

Subjectivity, Epistemology, Clinical Theory, and More: Reply to Commentaries by Barbieri, Bertoli and Mazzoleni

*Stephen Seligman**

I am grateful for the responses of Giuliana Barbieri, Silvia Bertoli and Anna Lisa Mazzoleni, as well as to Fabio Vanni and the editors of this Journal for the opportunity to present my paper and to respond to my colleagues' insights. They take up a very wide array of implications and complexities involved in theorizing intersubjectivity and the vicissitudes of the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis. Here is an incomplete list: idealization; self-idealization by analysts; the nature of attunement, and its particular relationship to imitation; the relationship between behavior and motivation; memory; mirror neurons; the strengths and weaknesses of applying infancy research to psychoanalysis; psychoanalytic epistemology; implicit knowledge; the many forms of analytic therapeutic action; and more. It is a great privilege for an author to have so many directions noted in response to a paper, especially in such a richly informed and consistently dialogical manner. I will take up the three comments in turn.

G. Barbieri

Giuliana Barbieri takes on the problems and functions of idealization in analysis, with special attention to its risks. Her elaboration of the risks of the analyst's idealization of the analytic role bring attention to an aspect of our work that has been difficult to talk about. Her approach is balanced and sympathetic. Analytic work is necessarily conducted privately and with much uncertainty. Compared to most other forms of clinical work and commerce, we have fewer clear markers of efficacy and value, often having to

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rely on subjective and intersubjective perceptions. It is easy therefore especially tempting to rely on idealizations, especially in an unconscious way. These also can find support in our analytic institutions, which depend on interpersonal and organizational loyalties rather than the more objective markers that can be seen elsewhere. This is not to say that we can do better than work under highly ambiguous conditions; this is one of our finest virtues and even our gift to our patients and to adjacent disciplines. But we will benefit from being aware of the pitfalls that come along with our strengths, as Barbieri shows.

I also appreciate Barbieri's affirmative openness to behavior as a part of the psychoanalytic setting and her interest in implicit/procedural meaning. I am glad for her pointing toward current findings about memory, which have important implications for psychoanalysis, some of which have not yet been integrated into our field. However, we may have a subtle difference in how we are thinking about these matters, one which secondary to the basic fact that we see these findings from similar points of view. If I understand her correctly, Barbieri is organizing a binary distinction that aligns like this: Implicit meaning-action-behavior, on the one hand – declarative knowledge-thoughts and words, on the other. My own reading of these models is that these systems are often intertwined, and that this kind of reflective inter-relation can be an important part of change process in psychoanalysis. At the end of her essay, she does discuss the prospects of an integration of these systems, of course. So perhaps it is best to say that in the brief confines of a few pages, that Barbieri is presenting the ambiguous territory in which we must proceed in we think about these new ideas – both in our conceptualizations and in our everyday clinical work.

S. Bertoli

Silvia Bertoli introduces important conceptions from some of the neuro-psychoanalytic syntheses that have emerged recently, particularly the discoveries about mirror neurons and the work of Daniel Stern and the *Boston Change Process Study Group*. She also calls on psychological findings about the value of dissonance in promoting change and growth in development. In this way, we find ourselves resonant in an interest in drawing from various sources and disciplines so as to expand our psychoanalytic horizons. She also sees links between the newer approaches, particularly of Stern, and the now-classical conceptualizations of Bion and Winnicott.

I have one note of caution about Bertoli's argument. I feel that there are several neurophysiological and neuroanatomical bases of intersubjectivity, rather than mirror neurons being primary. The affect systems that I feature in my paper rely on many different neurodynamic structures – the vagus

nerve, both midbrain and cortical areas, facial musculature, all of the sensory and motor systems, and, of course, behaviors of all sorts. I am indeed most interested in the kinesthetic, perceptual, affective and social origins of intersubjectivity, rather than looking to the brain itself for core processes or first causes. Trevarthen (2009), for example, has stressed motor activity and musicality as the core motivations that support intersubjectivity. I do not here mean to minimize the importance of mirror neurons, especially as I have found that understanding the particular nature of mirror neuron process offers a strong window into a crucial aspect of intersubjectivity: experiencing someone else's feelings and actions 'as if they were your own'. But the complexities of the multiple systems that underlie intersubjectivity help us realize most fully how important it is to, and embedded in, our basic somato-social existence.

A.L. Mazzoleni

Anna Lisa Mazzoleni illuminates some of the most central questions that flow through my paper and indeed, my work overall (Seligman, 2018). In particular, she brings further attention to the relationship between "one-person" and "two-person" views of subjectivity, and the extent to which direct observational research about infants and their families can be applied to psychoanalytic theory and clinical work. I am grateful that she sharpens our reflection on these issues. She suggests that advocates of the inclusion of the observation of infant-parent interaction into the psychoanalytic field are confounding relationship, "as distinct from interaction". This includes the important arguments of André Green. She further argues that the integration that I (and others, like Stern) advocate (and that Green opposes) "fails to help the analyst understand the patient's suffering and what is happening on an implicit level in their relationship".

I am very pleased to be able to take up this important controversy here. My own opinion is that Mazzoleni's critique, like Green's, is overly binary. I do agree that the entire internal world cannot be inferred from the interactions that can be observed; there can be no psychoanalysis without this postulate. This does not, however, mean that we cannot become aware of meanings and intentions by observing interactions; the converse is not always true. This includes becoming aware of unconscious phantasies and other primary processes. As I have said, interaction is saturated with the feeling and force of the entire psychic reality, and in both psychoanalysis and everyday life. Space does not permit a more extensive discussion of this matter, which I have addressed it in greater length elsewhere. (See, again, Seligman, 2018).

Similarly, I take Mazzoleni to argue that I have "gone too far" in empha-

sizing the salience of the dynamic relationship between self and other in the construction of subjectivity. I hope that I have been clear that I do not feel that “there is no self” or no distinctive subject. At the same time, it does not seem possible to me to conceive of a human subject without actual and imaginary relationships with others. While I mostly refer to infancy research to support this perspective in this paper, there are a wide array of sources for this view in well-established philosophies, neurodevelopment and cognitive neurosciences, genetics, and many social scientific disciplines, as well as in much of the current psychoanalytic arena. Instead, I regard the relationship between the individual and others (in some sense, then, the subject and intersubjectivity) as a matter of a dynamic, transactional system, in which the one cannot be entirely isolated from the other, as I declare in my paper.

I am, regrettably, unfamiliar with Minolli’s (2015) theory of “that Ego-subject” on which Dr Mazzoleni draws. Still, there seems to be an important tension here. Dr Mazzoleni’s critique introduces and clarifies some of its important implications, which deserve our continuing attention: The relationship between the subject, the object, and intersubjectivity is, again, one of the formative dimensions of the psychoanalytic field.

Finally, I again offer my thanks to all three discussants for their attention and insight, and to Dr Vanni and the editors of *Ricerca Psicoanalitica*.

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Conflict of interest: no one. This work was not supported by any grant.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: the manuscript does not contain any elements that would allow the recognition of the patient.

Received for publication: 29 May 2020.

Accepted for publication: 29 May 2020.

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Ricerca Psicoanalitica 2020; XXXI:288

doi:10.4081/rp.2020.288

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