

REFRAINS

Of Apes and Infants: The Cutting Edge of Psychoanalytic Thought?

Carmel Flaskas* and Brian Cade**

*Carmel Flaskas and Brian Cade were asked to read and comment on two recent publications which, in very different ways, seem to be taking the field of psychoanalytic psychotherapy in new directions, Robert Langs' **The Evolution of the Emotion-Processing Mind** and Daniel Stern's **The Motherhood Constellation**. What follows is a slightly edited version of their individual reactions to the books, to each others' views, and to a question posed by the editors.*

Carmel Flaskas: The two books chosen by the Editors for this 'Refrains' are both examples of contemporary psychoanalytic thinking, yet each explores very different topics, and represents very different psychoanalytic strands. The first, by Daniel Stern, explores the 'motherhood constellation', in terms of the relational system of parent-infant, as well as the therapeutic approaches to parent-infant psychotherapy. The second, by Robert Langs, frames human emotional life within an evolutionary and biological perspective, and situates the contemporary project of psychoanalysis within this frame.

My comments here will not be made within the review 'mode' of balanced presentation of the books' content and then some even-handed assessment. Rather, I relished the Editors' invitation to simply read the books from the position of my own interests, and write something about them for the *Journal*. And so I did just read the books, very much from my own interest in the current debates and discussions within systemic family therapy, and also from my long-term interest in psychoanalytic thinking and its intersections with systemic therapy. And the comments that I am about to make have no pretensions to representing a 'fair' discussion of the books within their own terms.

I find myself wanting to say quite a lot about Stern's work, and not much at all about the book by Langs. I really enjoyed *The Motherhood Constellation*, which in the first part asks, 'what kind of clinical situation are we part of when the presentation in therapy is the parent-infant relationship?' Stern tackles his own excellent question by developing a layered discussion of the

relational system involved in this particular context for therapy. In the overview, he frames the mother and infant relationship in relation to the father-infant and the parental relationship—dyads within triads—and includes then the therapist's position and the wider support system for the parent-infant (and especially mother-infant) relationship. In later chapters, he also discusses both the changes for the mother in her image of herself-as-daughter-to-her-own-mother, and in the couple's relationship with each other.

But rather than simply chronicling, Stern is centrally interested in the rich relationship in this system between interaction and representation, and between the conscious and unconscious. In particular, he is interested in what he calls the 'parents' representational world', and the way in which parental representations become enacted in interaction with the infant—and in the nature and formation of the infant's representations of the interactions. Stern would please those amongst us who like to privilege the behavioural dimension in relationships, for he stresses that there is nothing magical about conscious or unconscious representations—they do not float around the emotional stratosphere waiting to be 'caught by' or 'put into' the baby, but rather they come to be felt and seen in the moment-by-moment sequences of interaction between parent and infant which form the baby's 'schemas-for-being-with' and 'proto-narratives' of self-in-relation-to-others.

Clearly I'm not doing justice to Stern's work in the description I have just given of this first part of his book, but nonetheless I am going to move right along and very quickly say something about its resonances for my own theory and practice struggles in systemic therapy. I like a good many things about the current momentum to use ideas of social constructionism and the metaphor of narrative in systemic therapy, yet I admit also to finding

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major limitations in the way in which these ideas are being used. Although there has been a concerted attempt by some systemic therapists to address the social context of constructions and personal stories, there seems to be a vacuum in understanding the construction of personal stories as being part of an emotional process as well as a social process. The near-total emphasis on (spoken) language has further restricted the nuances of conscious stories and unconscious stories, contradictory stories, partial stories and unfinished stories, and the way these different kinds of stories can (and indeed do) all sit side-by-side.

Moreover, at times there seems almost a Pollyanna belief that if stories can be constructed, well then they can just be deconstructed and reconstructed, as long as we ask the right questions and encourage different stories, speak from a position of non-expert uncertainty, and of course maintain curiosity! This seems to go alongside a somewhat bizarre competitive moralism which circulates as the idea that if we somehow manage to do all these things then we are being inherently more respectful than any other kind of therapist can possibly be!

I'm partly saying this as a joke, of course, but I'm partly serious as well. At any rate, one of the main things I appreciated as a systemic therapist in reading Stern's description of the parent-infant relational system was his appreciation of the kind of human complexity he was trying to address. On one hand, I felt again the impoverishment of some of our current theory about constructed meanings and stories which become reduced to current languaged ideas, negating the complexity of the real and concrete development of individual and family stories in very particular emotional and social landscapes. And at the same time, in reading Stern, I felt more hopeful of the possibility of extending some of the current thinking in systemic therapy, and could see the possibility of systemic ideas which relate the conscious and unconscious, the languaged and unlanguaged, and which also begin to capture some of the complexity of the relationship between representation and interaction, meaning and behaviour. I like these psychoanalytic ideas and think there is potentially an enormous richness in them.

I have said nothing yet about the second half of Stern's book, which addresses the common ground between different modalities in parent-infant psychotherapy, including different psychoanalytic approaches, approaches which focus on the infant's behaviour, and approaches which include the family. Stern's starting point here is a reaffirmation of research findings which stress that the therapeutic relationship itself is more important in successful therapy than techniques and models. The non-competitive tone of the discussion was a relief, as was Stern's interest in thinking of different 'entry points' for therapy, which comes from conceiving parent-infant psychotherapy as a system.

Stern's final plea to psychoanalytic therapists is to respect the particularity of the motherhood constellation and the parent-infant therapy system. He argues

that this calls for more flexible practices around engagement and the therapeutic relationship, and for allowing the mode of 'serial brief therapy' as having an integrity within itself rather than being a 'second-best' mode of therapy. The first call seems generally pretty good advice for us all, and the second I found quite confirming about the need to match therapy to the relationship systems of families, and the particularities of developmental constellations.

But now I must turn to Langs' work, which attempts to locate psychoanalysis within the evolution of the human species and the biological capacities or limits of our emotion-processing minds. I must be frank—I can't offer a good 'reader-fit' for Langs' interests. I groaned at the first sentence: 'Modern-day perspectives make it clear that psychoanalysis can no longer be considered as anything but a biological science' (1996: 3). I felt as if I was looking across a great chasm of political and philosophical difference. I simply can't buy that kind of assertion about the nature of the world, and anyway if I thought for a moment that psychoanalysis had to be (just) a biological science, I would consider this objective grounds for jumping off the Harbour Bridge! Indeed, either the 'biological' or the 'science' part of it would invoke the Harbour Bridge image for me. I had something of the same reaction in the 1980s when the new epistemology, and then constructivism, were being heralded as providing a biological basis for family therapy—I felt very sorry for myself for embarking on this book, and then belatedly remembered that talk of apes always sends me to sleep.

I consoled myself that Brian Cade is interested in evolutionary ideas, and so at least one of us should have something useful to say about Langs. And there probably *are* a number of useful things to say. If I could leave aside my awareness of the politics of knowledge, and ignore every statement claiming firm and objective truth about human beings, then Langs does have some interesting ideas. To think of our limits as a species in terms of our emotional 'architecture' does have value. In particular, the idea of our human vulnerability in needing emotionally to comprehend our mortality and helplessness, and our reliance on defence to survive this vulnerability, is thought-provoking in terms of therapeutic interests. Mind you, there was no naming of the great differences in gendered patterns of emotionality, with respect to this 'species' demand—and please, don't start talking about male and female apes or I'll fall asleep ...

But the exercise of writing about both books for me underlines the arbitrariness of boundaries and demarcations around frameworks for therapy, and challenges something about my own readiness to so firmly identify myself within systemic therapy. Both Langs' and Stern's work are located within contemporary psychoanalytic thinking. Bateson's heritage, including the move through the new epistemology and (biological theories of) constructivism, is part of the tradition and history of systemic therapy, and sits alongside the current interests in postmodernist thinking, social constructivist ideas,

and the turn to defining relational analysis as the contemporary centre of systemic theory.

Yet I find myself having more in common with Stern's ideas, and being more inspired by them, than I have ever felt by the biological tradition of systemic therapy. And in terms of practice thinking and practice orientation, I am pretty sure that my work is more harmonious with Stern's ideas than with some currents in systemic therapy. I am not renegeing here on my identification with systemic therapy, but simply saying that the boundaries of 'psychoanalytic therapy' and 'systemic therapy' are not as clear as we often paint them. There are enormous theory and practice differences within each tradition, and some parts of each tradition are in practice closer to each other than they are to other regions within their 'own' territory. It does challenge one's identification with, and desire to have, a disciplinary 'home'. This challenge is disconcerting, yet at another level it is also consoling.

I find it consoling because it reminds me that one of the wonderful things about being a therapist is the space it gives you to focus on human experience in therapy, and to be curious about theory while maintaining an allegiance to experience. Which in turn allows a freedom with respect to theory and ideas, wherever they may come from—and this, I think, is potentially very hopeful for the project of the development of systemic theory as well as systemic practice. I will finish my comments at this point, lopsided though they may be, and give the floor to Brian.

Brian Cade: As a brief therapist, I was initially put considerably offside by the following comment in Langs' foreword: 'Because today's promotion of brief 'therapies', quick fixes, and instant gratification is selfish, short-sighted, and destructive to human survival, the depth of psychoanalysis is needed more than ever' (ix). I was later relieved and amused to find that Langs basically places any and all therapies into the 'brief' (and therefore potentially destructive) category other than his own, which requires working intensively on the deep unconscious (a domain that he claims is not accessible through language). After a long, tortuous and repetitive ramble during which he identifies our knowledge of, and our unbearable fear of, death as our core existential dilemma, he demonstrates a total misunderstanding of natural selection in naming it as the process which led to the human mind creating a 'deep unconscious' in order to prevent emotional overload arising from this fearful knowledge. Whilst brain research shows that there are emotional memories which are not accessible to introspection, this is because of how the brain is 'wired-up' and has been so for millions of years of evolution. Langs' ramble is full of lists, and lists within lists, and he finally concludes that natural selection has failed us and led to the development in humans of a 'dysfunctional mental design':

... the realization that the emotion-processing mind is at the heart of civilisation's current woes places psychoanaly-

sis at the very centre of our struggles for personal and collective survival.

... we must use the fresh knowledge that we garner ... to help our species live in greater peace and emotional stability for centuries to come (205).

I was shocked that he would be content with such a modest goal!

On the other hand, I was interested to see that Stern shared my long-held view that processes such as projection, introjection and projective identification *had* to be transmitted through behavioural channels even though they have often been talked about as though they were conveyed through some mystical medium. Stern describes how

The mother's fantasies and representations must first take a form that is perceivable, discriminable, directly influential and potentially meaningful to an infant. In other words, they must first be transformed into interactive behaviour ... Perhaps neglecting overt behaviour in favour of the intrapsychic, as psychoanalysis has historically done, has helped maintain this particular form of unneeded mystification (42).

Stern takes a detailed look at the directly observable behavioural exchanges between mother and infant, the sequences that develop as each responds to, and then influences the subsequent responses of, the other. His descriptions of the varied interactional patterns that can thus evolve is richly detailed and compelling. Such an analysis is in the tradition of the earlier communication researches of Schefflen (Schefflen, 1960; Schefflen, 1974) and others, and of the original Bateson group (Bateson, Jackson, Haley and Weakland, 1956; Bateson, Jackson and Weakland, 1963), that led to the development of The Interactional View. Films of the interaction between patient and therapist, between therapists and families, and between individual family members, were studied repeatedly and sequences identified which were seen as both reflecting and controlling how the participants viewed and responded to relationship-events, affectively as well as behaviourally. As Weakland observed:

First there was the beginning of a close identification of communication and behaviour, as two sides of one coin, so to speak—that the most important aspect of social behavior is its communicative effect, and that communication is the major factor in the ordering of behaviour socially (1976: 311).

I was struck that Stern made no acknowledgment of this earlier work. He talks of his analysis of the reciprocal way that behaviours communicate, and communication orders and controls behaviour, as though it was a new idea.

I was also extremely interested in Stern's ideas about the development of 'schemas-of-being-with' which both influence, and result from, interactions. For example, a mother's mental representations of how her own mother-was-with-her will affect how she sees herself with her own child. Her mental representations of how her father-was-with-her-mother-with-her will affect how she sees her husband with herself and her infant.

This is very similar to R. D. Laing's earlier ideas about the family as fantasy. Laing posited (using terminology from systems theory) that:

Relations and operations between elements and sets of elements are internalized, not elements in isolation ... Parents are internalized as close or apart, together or separate, near or distant, loving, fighting, etc., each other and self ... The family is not an introjected object, but an introjected set of relations (1972, 4-6).

Again, Stern makes no references to these earlier ideas. As in the family therapy field, it appears that the wheel keeps being rediscovered. (On reflection, I guess this is less a comment on the quality, importance and usefulness of Stern's book and more a comment on the way that recent developments in our field seem to take an approach to its history similar to that of Joseph Stalin to Russian history—with, for example, his succession of increasingly depopulated, air-brushed photographs of Lenin's early associates).

It is interesting that neither Stern nor Langs refers to any of the recent (or, come to that, *any*) research into the structure and the workings of the brain, research that has significantly advanced our understanding of emotional experience and emotional memory (e.g. Damasio, 1994; Goleman, 1996; LeDoux, 1996). In fact, Langs goes so far as to make the absurd (in my view) statement that:

... this mental module—the emotion-processing mind—must be explored within the mental realm and viewed as an entity whose structure, manifestations, intakes and outputs, general properties, and adaptive functions are distinct from those involving the human brain ... ' (8).

He thus seems to be seeing the mind as some kind of disembodied entity, as some people think of the soul.

My assumption that all mental processes are a function of the structure of the brain does not preclude the notion that we operate unconsciously in many areas of life. We are 'wired up' that way:

We concluded people normally do all sorts of things for reasons they are not consciously aware of (because the behaviour is produced by brain systems that operate unconsciously) and that one of the main jobs of consciousness is to keep our life tied together into a coherent story, a self-concept (LeDoux, 1996: 33).

LeDoux goes on to say:

... some, perhaps many, of the things we do, including the appraisal of the emotional significance of events in our lives and the expression of emotional behaviours in response to those appraisals, do not depend on consciousness, or even on processes that we necessarily have conscious access to (65).

Scientific studies are also making contributions to that area with which psychoanalysis has long been intensely concerned, childhood trauma. As LeDoux points out:

... conditioned fear responses involve implicit or unconscious processes in two important senses: the learning that occurs does not depend on conscious awareness and, once

the learning has taken place, the stimulus does not have to be consciously perceived in order to elicit the conditioned emotional response (182).

He then goes on to describe the work of Jacobs and Nadel (1985) who observe that although early trauma may be beyond the reach of memory, it

might have lasting, detrimental influences on mental life. They proposed that the system that forms unconscious memories of traumatic events might mature before the hippocampus ... we now know ... that this system crucially involves the amygdala and its connections.

LeDoux adds (205) that studies have now confirmed this hypothesis.

It seems to me there is considerable scope for a bringing together of core psychoanalytic concerns and the discoveries of brain research. Sadly, this is an area that neither of Stern nor Langs touches upon.

Stern appropriately concentrates much of his attention on the mother-child relationship, which is clearly the crucial relationship in the majority of situations. He also considers in detail the relational precursors and effects of maternal depression. However, although he pays some attention to other significant relationships (husband, mother's mother, etc.), he underplays the significance they may *currently* be having on how the mother copes. Haley discussed the potentially dramatic impact the birth of a child can have on the pattern of relationships in the wider family (Haley, 1973). Coyne, who has for many years studied the interactional patterns surrounding the onset and maintenance of depression, also refers to the way that the extended family can have a *direct* current and ongoing impact on the mother-child dyad. For example, he points out that:

Stable relationships may generally provide a buffer against depression, but when they are stable yet low in support and validation, they may encourage a chronic depressive cycle (1976: 37).

The Editor Interjects: When I read Langs' book myself, I was struck by what he says about the total lack of direct communication between the 'deep unconscious' and the conscious, and his belief that the unconscious communicates *solely in narrative form*. This is clearly his extrapolation from the classic psychoanalytic notion of 'latent content', in which (for example) the patient's unconscious communicates its disturbance when the therapist breaches some boundary (e.g. by arriving late) in the form of a story or anecdote about *someone else* committing *some other kind of boundary violation*. You'll remember, Brian, that Langs says that the 'deep unconscious' responds automatically to all issues to do with 'rules, frames and boundaries', therapeutic or otherwise. In reading this part, I was prompted to wonder, as I have often wondered, just how systemic work takes account of, or fails to take into account, the clients' 'unconscious' communications at this deep level. Is it something family therapists can just 'sidestep'? Brian, would you agree that our brains are simply 'wired' to register 'reptile level' disturbances to

boundaries? Would you, for example, agree that in working with more profoundly disturbed clients and systems, attention to 'rules, frames and boundaries' is considerably more important than in working with emotionally less rigid systems?

Brian replies: Langs makes the bold assertion that psychoanalysis is a biological science. Like Carmel, but probably for different reasons, I view this assertion with alarm and incredulity. First, let me draw a distinction between psychoanalysis as an explanatory framework and psychoanalysis as a set of procedures for helping people. The latter clearly are connected to the former (and thereby hang some difficulties to which I will return) and have given rise to some approaches to human distress, together with an underpinning tradition of values, that I believe have some importance, including the notion of providing a safe and predictable container.

However, as a scientific explanatory framework, psychoanalysis holds surprisingly little water. We are clearly structured to process and respond in many areas of our lives either without, or in advance of, conscious awareness. However, to my knowledge, there is no significant controlled laboratory evidence of the existence of an 'unconscious mind' that acts as some kind of deeply buried, partitioned section in the brain into which we somehow channel memories of the traumatic, and/or fantasies of the intolerable and the unacceptable. There is also no significant evidence of the concept of repression, or of the central importance of a thus 'forgotten' past as an explanation for present distress. In fact, a recent unpublished British report on recovered memories, commissioned by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, found that:

... no empirical evidence exists to support either repression or dissociation ... No evidence exists for the repression and recovery of verified, severely traumatic events, and their role in symptom formation has yet to be proved (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 13, 1998:1).

All proofs of the validity of psychoanalytic theory appear to arise from the clinical experience of practitioners who are already committed to it and use the tenets of the theory to prove the theory. As Cioffi comments, 'What a psychoanalytic explanation tells us is itself' (1969: 194). In total contradiction to Langs' assertion that the development of 'the unconscious mind' followed the development of language, LeDoux points out that:

Consciousness and its sidekick, natural language, are new kids on the evolutionary block—unconscious processing is the rule rather than the exception throughout evolution. And the coin of the evolutionarily old unconscious mental realm is nonverbal processing' (1996: 71).

The development of language and consciousness, and our consequent ability to imagine, has led to a greater richness of emotional responsivity associated with, and triggered by, a wider range of situations involving greater levels of subtlety and complexity; and influenced

both by the cultures and structures of our social contexts and by the specifics of the histories of our interaction with all aspects of our environments, subjective and objective. Yet, the core of our unconscious functioning revolves around survival mechanisms that are hard-wired and have developed over millions of years and are thus not available to introspection. Post hoc reconstructions, with the help of our imagination, can weave *an* understanding (not *the* understanding) that can help us make some coherent sense of our experiences, and a 'reality' becomes created.

So, yes, I do believe boundary disturbances are responded to initially through ancient 'wired' fight or flight defenses, then moderated through higher level processes that reflect our family, social, cultural, gendered, etc., etc. life experiences. A simpler explanation of the 'metaphorical' response of the patient to the therapist arriving late would be an upbringing that has instructed you not to be rude and certainly not to a doctor. With a female patient there would be further explicit or implicit injunctions against confronting or upsetting a male in authority, and particularly in a context where any negative feelings you express are routinely interpreted as projection or as a further sign of some underlying pathology that you didn't know you had (e.g. the much abused Dora discontinued treatment after refusing to accept, amongst many other highly speculative and abusive suggestions, Freud's thesis that she wished to have sex with her father. This was interpreted as her inability to tolerate her unconscious erotic feelings toward Freud!)

Where a post hoc reconstruction is undertaken in therapy, particularly in an intense relationship, the therapist's beliefs can exert a powerful influence in the creation of that 'reality'. As Frederick Crews suggests:

... therapists and patients come to share a causal outlook predetermining the kinds of factors that both parties will consider significant, and both the patient's verbal productions and the therapist's thematically pointed selection among them cannot escape being influenced by that bias (1995: 151).

Elizabeth Loftus (1993) has shown how memory can be a somewhat fragile thing unless constantly 'rehearsed', is inherently sketchy, decays rapidly over time, and is easily corrupted (and thus can be influenced by an emotionally and/or intellectually compelling interpretation, particularly when received in a state of high distress, desperation or emotional fragility). Psychoanalytic explanation is usually presented as a *truth* concerning emotive material unavailable to the client without the interpretive expertise of the therapist, and in a relationship context that tends to create dependency and heightened susceptibility. I am not saying that therapy based on psychoanalytic ideas cannot be helpful, but I suggest, when it is so, that it may have less to do with psychoanalytic explanation and more with basic relationship factors that are present in any effective therapy (see Miller, Duncan, and Hubble, 1997), the same factors that, as Carmel points out, Stern acknowledges.

In our field, the current climate of suspicion about science and reason means that the emotive explanation will often hold sway. So let me conclude with a comment from Damasio:

Realizing that there are biological mechanisms behind the most sublime human behaviour does not imply a simplistic reduction to the nuts and bolts of neurobiology. In any case, the partial explanation of complexity by something less complex does not signify debasement (1994: 125).

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PAPER CALL: YOUTH WORKERS AND SCHOOL GUIDANCE OFFICERS!

The editors hope to put together themed issues that feature successful systemic work in these settings. If you think you and your colleagues have anything to share with a wider audience, it's time we heard from you!