

Understanding the Value of The Circle of Security in Relationship to Adult Psychotherapy

“The task of coming to know oneself through the way one experiences being known, lies at the heart of self-organization.” - Karlen Lyons-Ruth, Ph.D.

*“There is no such thing as a baby, there is only a baby and someone.”
- Donald Winnicott, M.D.*

We are relational beings. Our first teachers about relationship (for better or worse) are the caregivers who raise us. At birth an infant has approximately 100 billion neurons in its brain. By the time that child is three years old, those neurons have formed 1000 trillion neural connections. Infant researcher Daniel Siegel puts it this way: “Human connections create neuronal connections. Behavior [shared between infant and caregiver] creates behavior.” What we experience early tends to repeat itself later in life. Hence our earliest sense of how relationship goes has much to do with creating a sense or “internal working model” of how we see ourselves, others, and options (secure or insecure) for relating.

Much of this early learning is pre-language based. Long before an infant has words, s/he is learning the specific “procedures” necessary for relationship with the specific caregivers s/he is in contact with. (“When I do this she comes closer. When I do this she backs away or gets upset.”) Gradually each baby forms an anticipatory template of what significant others will accept, reject, attack, delight in, withdraw from, support, etc. As the months move into years, conclusions learned early tend to replicate themselves in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. In this light, psychopathology can be understood as repetitive maladaptive self-fulfilling prophecies.

Working with problematic internal belief systems about relationship is the stuff of psychotherapy. The Circle of Security approach, via its reliance upon decades of research within attachment theory, gives the clinician a way to “map” the very specific capacities and vulnerabilities that each client experiences within relationship. [Note: this information is useful in a wide variety of psychotherapeutic contexts: psychodynamic, family systems, couples, cognitive behavioral, etc.] By way of particular interview questions and video-procedures it is possible to “diagnose” the unique strengths and struggles that each client brings to relationship. Having access to a clear differential system for understanding where these strengths and struggles consistently emerge allows the therapist an individualized way to enter the inner world of the client and begin addressing where change may be considered. Gradually, through both non-verbal and verbal attunement on the part of the therapist and the resulting shared reflection between client and therapist, previously unrecognized thoughts and feelings begin to be experienced and shared. It is here that the client can, if they so choose, to undergo a shift in her/his sense of options within relationship (children, spouse, co-workers, etc.).

We are relational beings. Whether early in life or in adulthood, coming to know ourselves within the context of being known – genuinely understood, honored, and cared for – can make all the difference.