

Enactment in a nutshell:

“The New York Relational School has a saying: *“That which gets dissociated is bound to be enacted.”*”

Terry Marks-Tarlow. ‘Merging and Emerging: a non-linear portrait of Intersubjectivity during Psychotherapy. 2011

Often it is imagined that enactment is basically the same as transference, but it’s not. Enactment is the complex, unconscious, and relational dynamics of the transferential-abstraction.

With transference, the client constructs me into his wounded story. I finish the session dead on time every week, and this is perceived as a manifestation of the parent who only did as much as he had to, who ticked the boxes but never really engaged and never went the extra mile. However, contrary to the client’s fantasy, this isn’t personal; it’s simply how I finish every session. If it says anything about anyone, it says something about me; but the client constructs it into being about him.

With enactment, though, I do actually become the client’s withholding parent. Not just a version or a reminder but, on some level or another, in some fragmentary way or another, the energetic and dynamic re-manifestation of that actual parent. This sounds magical and implausible from a conventional viewpoint, but I hope that by the end of this piece you might see that, from a contemporary vision, it is not only plausible but essential and inevitable.

This is not just what inevitably happens in the therapeutic encounter, but what happens between people. Enactment Theory goes some distance into explaining how it is that we energetically co-organise, especially in intimate relationships. What the therapeutic-encounter does is offer the opportunity for this inevitable co-organising enactment to be seen, recognised, contained, re-worked and integrated.

I’ll begin with the theoretical understanding of enactment that I use, and then I’ll break it down.

Enactment occurs when significant dynamics from a primary attachment-wounding become manifest in the implicit dynamics of the therapeutic relationship, in an unconscious co-participation that goes beyond the material presented, beyond transferential constructs; and into an actual here-and-now, two-person, body-mind re-emergence and replication of the relational wounding.

The therapist becomes implicated unconsciously in this relational-trauma, a co-participator rather than an analytic observer or a benign healer. Consequently and paradoxically it is the therapeutic relationship that now needs to be understood and healed, rather than the abstract of a past relationship. Enactment is a

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complex, self-organising, relational, systemic and inter-generational re-emergence that manifests across a spectrum of dissociation, and activates the attachment-history of both participants.

Psychological fragments of the primary story might appear anywhere in the dynamic therapeutic relationship – whole character re-emergence, partial traits, dynamic patterns, down to tone of voice, prosody, posture, imagery, choice of language, and so on. The more that these fragments are noticed, experienced, understood, gathered, contained, and known within the relationship, the more the complex-system of the relational-psyche moves towards a tipping-point of character-transformation; which will itself occur spontaneously.

In a final repudiation of reductionism, each fragment of the re-emerging story is itself the re-emerging story; each fragment a fractal, carrying and offering access to the imprint of the whole.

Crucially, it must be carefully noted that it might be the dynamics of the primary trauma that we re-enact, but it might also be the dynamics of the psychological adaptations to it that we enact. Typically, a re-emergence of the trauma will lead to a therapeutic-rupture across a wide spectrum of severity, and a re-emergence of the psychological adaptations will lead to a therapeutic-stasis across a wide spectrum of severity.

For a more detailed description of working therapeutically with enactment, please feel invited to look at this extended article that I wrote in 2018: [“Working with enactment from within the body-mind relational-field.” 2018](#)

Enactment in bullet-points:

- There is a primary relational drama that is generated and maintained by the psychologies of the various participants, and expressed in many ways; including with dynamics, words, body-language, prosody, tone, facial expressions, energetic presence and so on.
- To the extent that this drama is severe, repetitive, unbearable and unresolved ,it will become recorded and internalised into the child’s body-mind system, repressed and dissociated; defended against and kept from full consciousness.

What was happening on the outside, is now happening on the inside.

- The ego is driven to protect us from re-experiencing pain, but also in liberating us from traumatised habituality, for which we need to re-experience the pain. We have an imperative to not feel and an imperative to feel; a delightful conflict.
- Whilst we are deeply and habitually inclined to consciously keep a distance from that which triggers us, we are also deeply and habitually inclined to unconsciously re-create traumatising scenarios, so that we might re-work them, and change their shape in our psyche.
- This explains why people can end up in a succession of relationships that have significant characteristics of a primary trauma, the most obvious of which being the violent childhood that repeats itself endlessly in a violent adulthood.

The outside becomes the inside,
and then become the outside again;
but in repetition and re-traumatisation.

- The therapeutic relationship is an opportunity for the traumatised wounding to re-emerge into a relatively safe and secure environment, where it can be re-experienced and re-worked without being just compulsively and endlessly enacted.
- The paradoxical irony though is that traumatised dynamics tend towards emerging when they are triggered, when they feel unsafe. So the therapeutic relationship needs to be both unsafe enough, and safe enough. If it's too safe, then the trauma won't emerge, and if it's not safe enough then it will just continue to replay and re-traumatise.

Not safe enough = re-enactment = trauma alive and available.

Too safe = nothing happens = trauma unavailable.

- A therapeutic-stasis tends to indicate a collusion with the client's adaptive defences, whilst a therapeutic-rupture tends to indicate a re-enactment of the primary trauma.

rupture = collision = enactment of primate wounding

stasis = collusion = enactment of primary defences against the wounding

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- Sometimes what happened primarily will be fully paralleled in the here-and-now, with a total character re-presentation, but far more usually the re-enactment reveals itself subtly, with nuances of expression. Michael Soth refers to 'gathering the fragments', and I love this phrase. We gather the fragments of the re-emerging trauma, notice and experience how they have constellated within and between us.
- The more that these fragments are gathered and integrated, the more liable the complex psychological system is to move towards a tipping-point of spontaneous characterological transformation.