Letter of Intent

Changes in Adult Attachment Status and Emotional Self Regulation

Through Mutual Synchrony

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Statement of the Problem

Pistole (1999) points out that “the human relationship is the primary component interwoven explicitly or implicitly through all counselling” (p. 437). Bowlby (1988) has conceptualized the nonverbal aspects of the therapeutic relationship as a ‘secure base’. I am interested in investigating the qualitative aspects of the therapeutic relationship – those aspects that may transcend any particular verbal or nonverbal ‘techniques’ that therapists may employ but which are instrumental in affecting therapeutic change. This phenomenon has been conceptualized variously as ‘interactive resonance’ (Schore, 2003a), ‘mutual synchrony’ (Schore, 2003a) or ‘implicit relational knowing’ (Lyons-Ruth, 1998). Mutual synchrony typically operates outside of focal attention and conscious experience apart from expression through language (Lyons-Ruth, 1988). “language is used in the service of this knowing but the implicit knowings governing intimate interactions are not language based and are not routinely translated into semantic form.” (Lyons-Ruth, 1998, p. 285). Similarly, Robbins (1998) suggests that as therapists strive to be present with clients, they can make use of verbal metaphor to “create or discover bridges to link non-discursive and discursive communications” (1998, p. 17). Robbins suggests that therapists “must be open to both primary and secondary modes of communication process” (p. 19) – being at once comfortable with a holistic, intuitive and receptive orientation “that is essentially spatial” (p. 19), while having the adaptiveness in which the choice of words gives structure and definition to nonverbal flow” (p. 19).

Schore (2003a) also suggests that the ‘nonspecific’ factors that are common to all forms of clinical treatment are part of the nonverbal exchange (such as the attachment relationship, regulation and the emotion processing right brain) and represent a major
factor in the therapeutic process. As therapists’ awareness of subtle cues of sensory perceptual communication increase, they may achieve more successful and meaningful interactions with clients.

It seems that there are underlying mechanisms within the therapeutic relationship that can alter the brain systems that process and regulate external and internal information. These mechanisms serve to reduce clients’ negative emotional symptoms and expand their adaptive capacities (Schore, 2003a). Data from developmental affective neuroscience (Cozolino, 2002; Schore, 2003a; Siegel, 1999) illustrate that in the critical early periods of life, the maturing human brain/mind/body evolves to greater degrees of complexity within the context of an affect regulating relationship with another human being. This poses questions for the human capacity for change within ‘corrective’ or ‘reparative’ relationships at later points in one’s development:

This essential interpersonal component of a growth-facilitating developmental matrix clearly suggests that psychotherapeutic changes are mediated by aspects of the relationship of the patient and therapist. When effective, this co created dyadic system can facilitate the further development and organization of the patient’s brain/mind/body systems. The brain sciences demonstrate that the adult brain retains plasticity, and this plasticity, especially of the right brain that is dominant for self-regulation, allows for the emotional learning that accompanies a successful psychotherapeutic experience. (Schore, 2003a, p. xviii)

It is compelling to investigate the reparative potential of the intersubjective meeting in the therapeutic relationship – how a therapeutic interaction can serve to challenge or disconfirm clients’ ineffectual working models.
The questions that can form the foundation for this literature review may be worded as follows: What has attachment theory and more recent neuroscience taught us about how infants’ brains are shaped? How do early (infant) experiences impact social and emotional development? What does the literature suggest about adult therapeutic corrective experiences? Can the qualities of mutual resonance or interactional synchrony be described so that others can comprehend this way of being with clients?

Rationale for the Study

The counsellor client relationship has been established as a fundamental base from which the client change process emerges (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999). Rather than techniques, it might be more useful to understand the mechanisms of the relationship that help to construct meaningful and successful working alliances. There seems to be a ‘knowledge explosion’ in the realm of neuroplasticity (Lewis et al., 2000; Schore, 2003a, 2003b). I would like to synthesize what is known about the therapeutic interactive conditions which effect changes in adult attachment status.

Lewis, Amini, and Lannon (2000) suggest that if an individual’s adult relationships are troubled, it is because the child extracted patterns from early attachment relationships and these patterns form ‘Attractors’ in the limbic brain. “New lessons must fight an uphill battle against the patterns already ingrained, because existing Attractors can easily overwhelm and absorb moderately novel configurations” (p. 164). However, Lewis et al. (2000) suggest that despite the waning of neural flexibility after adolescence as well as the longevity of Attractors, the emotional mind can be revised in adulthood. They point out that “when a limbic connection has established a neural pattern, it takes a limbic connection to revise it” (p. 177).
This project may have relevance because while there has been a focus on therapist offered techniques, there has been less investigation into the implicit interplay between therapist and client and how this important aspect can be growth enhancing or therapeutically helpful. In Schore (2003a), Krystal notes that “…the ‘infantile nonverbal affect system’ continues to operate throughout life” (p. 26). Schore suggests that “a deeper understanding of the interactive affect transacting mechanism of the nonverbal, unconscious transference-countertransference relationship represents the frontier of clinical psychoanalysis” (p. 26).

In this light, it is intriguing to investigate how potentially corrective or reparative relationships can be therapeutically helpful. It would be helpful to investigate the qualities of what can be described as ‘mutual synchrony’ or ‘interactional resonance’ and consider the implications for the field of counselling. In other words, if the experience of intersubjective knowing between client and counsellor results in changes in the client’s implicit relational knowing, these “moments of meeting [may] open the way to the elaboration of a more complex and coherent way of being together…” Lyons-Ruth, 1998, p. 288). It may be useful to investigate the qualities of these “moments of meeting” between client and therapist for the potential that the qualities may hold for successful therapy which may enact clients’ self-healing.

Reference to Literature

Research data demonstrates the neurological development of the infant that accompanies the emotional bonding of mother and child (Schore, 1994, 2003a). The primary caretaker actually “facilitates a growth and stabilization of interconnections
located in the frontal cortex and right hemisphere of the brain” (Robbins, 1998). Schore (1994) reports analogous findings regarding the therapeutic relationship:

The patient therapist relationship acts as a growth-promoting environment that supports the experience-dependent maturation of the right brain, especially those areas that have connections with the subcortical limbic structures that mediate emotional arousal. Structural change, an outcome of long-term psychological treatment, specifically involves the rewiring of the connections of the right frontal limbic cortex and the consequent replacement of toxic with more internal representations of the self. These events allow for the emergence of a system that can efficiently mediate psychobiological transition between the various internal states. (p. 437)

Similarly, Bowlby (1988) theorized that an individual’s internal working models could be constantly revised and changed based on experiences in the individual’s adult life. D’Elia (2000) surmised that attachment patterns are, therefore, “not immutable and non-independent of subsequent experience” (p. 332). While the focus of this investigation is not primarily on Bowlby’s conceptualizations of attachment, the qualities themselves that provoke the client’s feelings and conceptualizations of security, trust and compassion within the therapeutic relationship are of interest. The attachment literature may be relevant in its suggestion that an internalized ‘secure base’ may be reconstructed if the therapist is capable of being responsive to and attuned to the feelings, thoughts and behaviours of the client (Bowlby, 1988; D’Elia, 2000; Lyddon & Sherry, 2001; Mallinckrodt, 2000).
As a literature review, this project will synthesize theory and research that pertains to interactional synchrony; how patterns are established in infancy within the infant-caregiver relationship and how individuals organize and regulate themselves as adults based on these patterns. I will review recent psychoneurobiological literature which investigates corrective or therapeutic relationships and how individuals may be able to be ‘re-regulated’. Recent interdisciplinary findings illustrate the structural systems of the developing unconscious in terms of brain research. This literature focuses on internal psychic structures and how they are influenced by early relational patterns. Prominent in this field are researchers such as Lewis, Amini, and Lannon (2000), Schore (1994, 2003a, 2003b), and Siegel (1999).

In addition, the literature review for this project will be composed of theory and research that pertains to the therapeutic relationship, particularly that which is related to the concept of ‘mutual synchrony’ or ‘interactive resonance’. References can include Tallman and Bohart’s work on the client as a common factor (1999), Bachelor and Horvath’s writing (1999) on the therapeutic relationship, Prochaska’s work on the variables that produce change in clients (1999) and any work that references the therapist-client relationship in the process of psychotherapy and client change (e.g., Gelso & Carter, 1985; Greenberg & Pinsoff, 1986; Rogers, 1957). Additionally, the qualities of the relationship that have been shown to be significant across diverse therapy approaches would be discussed (e.g., Beutler, Machado, & Allstetter Neufeldt, 1994; Lambert & Bergin, 1994) as well as what may be specifically therapeutic about the relationship (Kolden, Howard, & Maling, 1994; Orlinsky & Howard, 1987). It will be important to
review the literature and research on the non-verbal and symbolic reparative phenomenon as it relates to the therapeutic relationship.

Synthesis of the more recent neurobiological aspects that flow from attachment theory “allow for a deeper understanding of how an affect-focused developmentally oriented treatment can alter internal structure within the patient’s brain/mind/body systems” (Schore, 2003a, p. 37).

Method and Procedures

The central purpose for conducting this literature review is to enhance the author’s and other counsellors’ knowledge and practice of ways of ‘being’ with clients – apart from particular techniques and interventions – that seems to be reparative and deeply meaningful for clients. I will examine the literature to determine the extent of research and theory focusing on this phenomenon and then systematically organize this information outlining specific themes. I intend to provide a comprehensive understanding of mutual synchrony and changes in adult attachment status based upon the research findings. It is hoped that the information presented in the literature review will provide the author and others with an effective description and understanding of mutual synchrony and changes in adult attachment status through the therapeutic relationship so that this can be differentiated from (and incorporated with) the work of problem management.

In conducting the literature review, I will follow a systematic approach as outlined in Mertens (1998). My orientation emerges primarily from an interpretive/constructivist approach. In this regard, existing research and theory will be
synthesized while remaining open to the potentiality that additional literature examination will be required as new information surfaces.

Secondary sources will be reviewed in order to achieve an overview of the topic and to become informed on the existing literature. Primary research articles will be identified using the ‘ancestry’ approach. That is, reviewing texts by prominent authors and researchers such as Cozolino (2002), Schore, (2003a, 2003b) and Siegel (1999) and examining the reference lists of these relevant texts (and then examining the reference list of relevant journal articles). Relevant articles and books will be identified by searching the electronic databases of ERIC, PsychINFO, PsychLIT, PsychARTICLES, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection and Academic Search Premier. Publications from 1950 to present will be considered. The following keywords and phrases will be included: “attachment”, “adult attachment”, “patient attachment orientation”, “affect regulation”, “affective neuroscience”, “child development”, “adult development”, “developmental psychology”, “interpersonal relations”, “trauma”, “right brain”, and “therapeutic (working) alliance”. Again, the search will be expanded by examining the reference section of the articles and books found in the database search. Further resources will be identified by consulting with professionals who have expertise on this topic. Qualitative and quantitative research will be considered for this review as both are relevant to this subject.

The articles, books and studies that will be considered as significant for this review will match at least one of the following criteria: 1) that the article or book discusses the role of attachment relationships in human development, 2) that the article or research discusses the impact of interpersonal relationships (both early childhood and
adult) on internal psychic structures, affect regulation and nonverbal psychological attunement, 3) that the article or research discusses the developmental interactions of the individual with his or her social environment and describes how the regulation of social and emotional behaviour emerges through this interaction, 4) that psychoneurobiological models are offered for describing the mechanisms that affect psychotherapeutic change, 5) that the article or research discusses principles of treatment which correspond to the term “mutual synchrony” (also referred to as ‘limbic resonance’, ‘psychobiological attunement’ or ‘affect attunement’).

I will collect enough relevant articles and studies until I believe that a saturation point has been reached. This point will be achieved when the review of the literature results in themes and examples being repeated instead of extended (Mertens, 1998). I will synthesize the information into a number of themes which will provide an organized and comprehensive overview of the topic.

Implications and Benefits

Schore (2003a) posits that others (self-objects) serve as “external psychobiological regulators that facilitate the regulation of affective experience, and they act at nonverbal levels beneath conscious awareness to co-create states of maximal cohesion and vitalization” (2003a, p. 14). The implications and/or benefits from this project may be to give further attention to the underlying mechanisms of the therapeutic relationship – those mechanisms which can alter the brain systems that process and regulate external and internal information and which may help to reduce the client’s negative emotional symptoms and expand his or her adaptive capacities. Illustrating this may encourage and support the concept of the potential richness of the therapeutic
‘container’. If therapists can be more intuitively attuned to their clients’ relational cues as well as the complex and potentially reparative qualities inherent in the therapeutic relationship, then they may more effectively assist their clients by providing corrective experiences through this potentiality. This may enhance the therapeutic experience.
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