



Meaning Making in Psychotherapy: A Multi-level Approach to Change

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**Meaning making is influenced by
constraints of the past, and is
constantly in flux.**

- Each waking moment, our brains compare a wealth of current data to memories of past experience.
- The most critical result of this comparison is to predict the next moment with sufficient accuracy so that we can make an adaptive physical action.
- Our predictions of what will happen next are predicated upon the meaning we make in relation to what is occurring in the present, as integrated with our past meanings.



Meanings include anything from the linguistic, symbolic, abstract realms, which we easily think of as forms of meaning, to the bodily, physiologic, behavioral and emotional structures and processes, which we find more difficult to conceptualize as forms, acts, or actualizations of meaning.

Tronick 2008

The interrelatedness of mind and body impacts our making meaning.

Attachment depends upon proximity-seeking actions—eye contact, reaching, calling, moving toward the attachment figure. Proximity seeking actions both reflect and sustain meaning and predictions of whether attachment figures are accessible and how probable it is that they will be responsive. Ogden in press



Match, Mismatch, Rematch

- Matching occurs only about one third of the time between infant and caregiver (Malatesta et al., 1989).
- It is adaptive to make use of a flexible interactive process of *match, mismatch, rematch* (Tronick & Cohn, 1989).
- The critical capacity is "*interactive repair*," the ability of the parent/therapist/partner to rematch with the other person.
- ***Rematch following mismatch may be even more important than matching.*** Steele & Ogden

Meanings are both self-organized and regulated internally as well as dyadically organized and regulated with others. Tronick



”Knowable” vs Verbalized Meanings

Some meanings are known and symbolizable, some are unknown, implicit but with “work” can become known, and some may be unknowable.

Tronick 2008

In therapy, finding the words for meaning is not always needed—”knowable” meanings means they are experienced and embodied, not necessarily verbally articulated. Ogden 2017

Recognition:

...that response from the other which makes meaningful the feelings, intentions, and actions of the self.

Benjamin, 1988



Partners, Meaning, & Recognition

On the intimate level, we can see how much [a person] needs and is vulnerable to the recognition given or withheld by significant others.

Charles Taylor

...meaning is not one thing – one meaning. Meaning is a layered flow over time of the different meanings emerging from the multiple levels and processes that make meaning.

Tronick 2008



When meanings are dyadically organized, a dyadic state of consciousness emerges between the individuals and contains new co-created meanings which in turn can be appropriated by each individual into their state of consciousness.

Tronick 2006

Sensorimotor Psychotherapy with Couples Ogden in press

- Be aware of how the issues/presenting problems activate implicit memories, procedural tendencies, & associated meanings.
- Pay close attention not only to verbal communication, but to body to body conversation



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- Collaborate to select the access route (remembering the fight, a phrase said by one party, a physical action by one party, etc) and explore as experiment. Involve the body.
- Emphasize using physical actions that that emerge within the couple's interaction along with the the verbal narrative and emotions

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Explore new physical actions (like reaching) that stabilize arousal & support greater connection, proximity, and healthy boundaries. Along with interpretation and social-emotional interventions.

Instruct one party to use an experiment, such as taking over, probe, physical experiment, talk to child, etc



Sensorimotor Psychotherapy with Couples 4 Ogden in press

Check it assumed meanings are accurate (“Is his interpretation of what you said accurate? Do you really feel that way?”)

Try to refrain from doing individual therapy with one person for any extended period of time

Whenever possible, end with concrete body-oriented exercises to practice between sessions

Psychotherapy is about changing the meanings people make about themselves, others and the world.

Various psychobiologic systems generate constant and multiple moment-to-moment forms of meaning that are the heart of our experience of having a coherent sense of self in relation to the world of things and people.

Different levels of meaning making can clash with one another. Tronick



“Embodied Mentalizing”

The attachment figure/therapist/partner must be able to implicitly comprehend the meaning(s) made by the infant’s/patient’s/partner’s internal state and communicate it non verbally in such a way that the infant/patient/partner feels understood.

Ogden 2014

...there seems little reason to presume that verbal and nonverbal mentalizing are perfectly correlated with each other. Shai & Belsky, 2011, p.3

There is no singular meaning to the event, it is polysemic.... And though each form of meaning influences the others, each meaning is qualitatively different than that made by others....

But keep in mind that while the narrative meaning comes to colonize the experience, it is never equivalent to the flow of the meanings experienced.

It [the narrative meaning] comes after the experience of the other meanings, and will be incorporated into the flow of meaning forward in time.

Tronick 2008



Celia, 13 years old: “Am I important?”

Meanings are both self-organized, regulated internally and private, and they are dyadically organized, regulated with others and shared...

Tronick 2006

A Dyadic State of Consciousness

Though it shares characteristics with intersubjective states, a dyadic state of consciousness is not merely an intersubjective experience.

An experiential effect of the achievement of a dyadic state of consciousness is that it leads to feeling larger than oneself. Tronick 2003



Therapeutic techniques to help couples develop understanding & self-awareness & insight as they derive various meanings

Be mindfully aware of how the issue activates implicit memories, procedural tendencies, & associated meanings.

- **Explore physical action and body sensation that emerge within the couple's interaction** along with the exploring the verbal narrative

Ogden in press

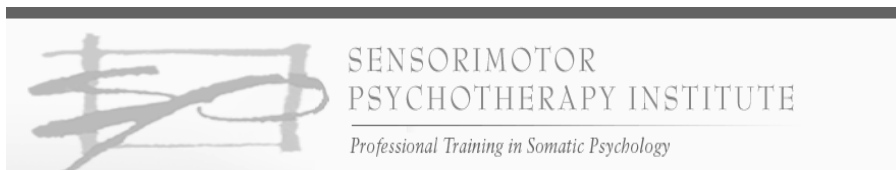
Therapeutic techniques to help couples develop understanding & self-awareness & insight as they derive various meanings

2

Learn new physical actions (like reaching) that stabilize arousal & support greater connection, proximity, and healthy boundaries. Along with interpretation and social-emotional interventions.

- **Discover/use precise words** to challenge meanings that constrain new meaning making in the present

Ogden in press



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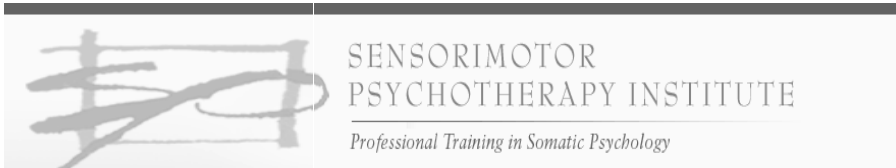
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