

Benjamin's Analytic Third: Beyond the Doer/Done-to Dynamic Presentation

According to pep-web, Jessica Benjamin's 2004 article, "Beyond Doer and Done To: An Intersubjective View of Thirdness," is currently the 2nd most cited psychoanalytic article and the 6th most popular psychoanalytic article in the world. Five of Jessica Benjamin's most important contributions include (1) the paradox of recognition (that is, the core human conflict of the need for self-assertion and the longing for connection), (2) the integration of Winnicott's theory of object-destruction/object-usage with Hegel's master-slave dialectic, (3) a critique of the rapprochement crisis (where the development of a child's capacity to elicit the mother's pleasurable recognition of his/her separateness occurs along with the development of object constancy), (4) the tendency for the paradoxes of recognition to collapse into doer/done-to dynamics, and (5) her concept of thirdness. The doer/done-to dynamic refers to the complementary relationship where one person is experienced as the other's opposite. That is, one person is the subject and the other is the object. For Benjamin, this complementary relationship inevitably occurs between the analyst and patient and is often the cause of impasses and enactments that take place in analytic treatment.

Contrary to Lacan's concept of the intersubjective third and Ogden's concept of the subjugating third, Benjamin's the concept of thirdness refers to an intersubjective process or "position constituted through holding tension of recognition between difference and sameness, taking the other to be a separate but equal center of initiative and consciousness with whom nonetheless feelings and intentions can be shared." (p. 4) But, rather than being a process or position that can be consciously determined, thirdness is seen as a developmental achievement which has a trajectory beginning with the early mutual gazing of the mother and infant and later involving conflicts around recognition. As such, the development of thirdness grows out of the attachment responses between mother and infant. This concept of thirdness is closely related to Winnicott's concept of transitional or potential space.

The concept of thirdness is useful in understanding inevitable doer/done-to impasses between the analyst and patient where a sense of connection is lost and in finding ways to re-establish an intersubjective process. Importantly, for Benjamin, the re-establishment of an intersubjective process involves acknowledging his/her responsibility in the collapse into a doer/done-to dynamic. In conclusion, Benjamin's concept of thirdness refers to an intersubjective process whereby both the analyst and patient surrender themselves and thus develop a sense of connectedness to each other's mind while also accepting each other's separateness and difference and implies a theory of mutual pleasure which posits a fuller description of self-development. It is also important to note that this surrender doesn't involve submission and mutual pleasure is not a mutual demand where the analyst imposes his/her subjectivity on the patient to counter the patient's self-assertion.

Issues to address:

1. What is the difference between Benjamin's rhythmic third and differentiating third?
2. How does Benjamin view other psychoanalytic schools of thought as addressing doer/done-to impasses?
3. For Benjamin, what does a Relational Psychoanalytic point-of-view offer that is different in working through doer/done-to impasses?
4. How does Benjamin propose working through such impasses? How might counter-transference reactions be used in such working through? How might self-disclosure be useful?
5. How is it that the analyst inevitably must change if such impasses are to be worked through?