
The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life is part of The Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology. The series editor, Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., states that the purpose of this series is to advance the understanding of the complex neurobiology of the human mind by presenting and integrating the many multidisciplinary views in this area. The series proposes to explore and integrate traditionally independent fields of research—such as neurobiology, genetics, memory, attachment, complex systems, anthropology, and evolutionary psychology. The goal of this series is to offer mental health professionals a review and synthesis of scientific findings often inaccessible to clinicians. The series aims at integrating “the best of modern science with the healing art of psychotherapy.”

This is indeed an ambitious goal. However, Daniel Stern’s book, The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life, makes a considerable contribution to the stated goal of the Norton Series. Stern’s book presents theoretical constructs, research results, and clinical vignettes and summaries relating to the present moment, “the here and now” in both everyday life and in psychotherapy. This is clearly a difficult subject for analysis and for elucidation. However, Stern provides a significant contribution toward explaining and integrating these concepts.

Daniel Stern’s book places the present moment, “the here and now,” at center stage in the process of psychotherapy. In this sense, we practitioners of hypnotherapy are in agreement with Dr. Stern’s point of view, since much of our work in hypnosis is conducted in the “here and now.” In hypnosis, we are frequently exploring an intense immediacy, an intense feeling moment. And in addition, we as therapists are attempting to meet with, and feel with, our patient in those intense immediate moments (Scagnelli, 1980; Murray-Jobsis, 1985). It is because of this intersection of interest and focus that I think practitioners of hypnotherapy will find this book interesting and rewarding. The last third of Stern’s book, dealing with the present moment as it operates in clinical settings, will be particularly informative and interesting for the clinician utilizing hypnosis.

The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life is presented in three major sections. The first section explores the nature, the structure, and the duration of the present moment, “the here and now.” This section also explores the problems in identifying and defining the present moment since it is largely experiential and non-verbal. A list of features that describe a clinically relevant present moment is presented. The time frame of the present moment is described as a brief moment lasting between 1 and 10 seconds. Some
examples of present moments are presented to give added clarification to this largely theoretical section.

The second section of the book, entitled, “Contextualizing the Present Moment,” focuses on the present moments that arise when two people make a special simultaneous mental contact, an intersubjective contact. This, according to Stern, involves the mutual interpenetration of minds that permits us to “know” what another person is experiencing or feeling. Citing Whiten, Stern states that: “We are capable of ‘reading’ other people’s intentions and feeling within our bodies what they are feeling. Not in any mystical way, but from watching their face, movements, and posture, hearing the tone of their voice, and noticing the immediate context for their behavior. We are quite good at this ‘mind reading’, even though our intuitions need verifying and fine tuning.” (Whiten, 1991).

Stern then proceeds to present neuroscientific evidence for this capacity for empathically knowing and experiencing another being, for the existence of this intersubjective matrix. He cites much scientific work on mirror neurons. This research reports neuronal firings in an observer of another’s behavior, neuronal firings that mirror the motor neuronal firings of the other person. Stern also cites research work on phase synchronization exploring how people move in temporal coordination with one another, apparently participating in an aspect of the other’s experience. In addition, Stern cites research work in the field of early child development supporting the existence of primary intersubjectivity, citing the infant’s ability to imitate and to coordinate the timing of behavior with the mother’s behavior as a support for the existence of an intersubjective matrix.

Stern concludes that the developmental evidence suggests that the infant is born into an intersubjective matrix that continues to develop, along with the infant’s physiological development, in breadth and complexity. He further states that intersubjectivity is a condition of humanness and is essential for species survival. He also suggests that the desire for intersubjectivity is one of the major motivations that drive a psychotherapy forward, that patients want to be known and want to share their feelings and experience of themselves. Stern theorizes that humans need intersubjective experience to define, maintain, or reestablish self-identity. That “we need the eyes of others to form and hold ourselves together.” From this viewpoint, the intersubjective motive and experience is a major factor in directing the therapeutic process of psychotherapy, where the sharing of inner feelings and experience is desired and must be negotiated. In support of Stern’s position, this human need to be known and validated by another human being has also been observed and reported in the hypnotherapy literature (Scagnelli, 1975, 1980).

Stern also presents a very interesting problem about this concept of an intersubjective matrix of shared feelings between and among humans as an essential condition of humanness. He questions, if this intersubjective matrix is so pervasive, why are we not constantly captured by the nervous systems of others and their experiences? Stern then theorizes a gating system of attention and an inhibition capacity that allows the individual to limit or suppress the intersubjective or empathic reception and response. Stern then suggests that this is an area with great potential for future scientific and clinical study. He points out that many psychiatric disorders such as autism, and narcissistic, borderline, and anti-social personality disorders are characterized by a lack of empathy and the inability to adopt another’s point of view. Consistent with these theoretical views, the hypnotherapy literature has proposed the theoretical view that an inability to appropriately limit and modulate a highly functioning empathic capacity may be a contributing factor in some schizophrenic disorders (Scagnelli,
1980; Murray-Jobsis, 1985). Thus it does appear that this whole area of empathic capacity and regulation may have great potential for future study and clinical applications.

As the reader may have discerned by now, these first two sections of Stern’s book are heavy-going and challenging material. However, these sections are worth the effort to work through and digest them. They provoke a valuable review and exploration of the human mind and of the psychotherapy process. For psychotherapists who utilize the hypnotic experience as well as the therapeutic relationship to advance therapeutic progress with patients, the ideas presented in these sections are fascinating. The theoretical concepts and scientific research presented in this book describe much of what and how we work with our patients. When working with hypnosis and when utilizing the therapeutic relationship, we are primarily working in the “now.” The hypnotic experience promotes the experiencing of a present moment (or a present memory of a past moment) with an intensity and immediacy of feeling. In addition, the hypnotic experience permits the therapist to enter into the patient’s feeling state, and experience the patient’s present moment with him. Then utilizing the hypnotic experience and the therapeutic relationship, the therapist encourages the reception by the patient of the therapist’s experience of them (a corrective, healing reinterpretation of themselves; Scagnelli, 1980; Murray-Jobsis, 1993).

The third section of Stern’s book presents a view of the present moment as it operates in the clinical setting. And this section may therefore be of most interest to clinicians and practitioners of hypnotherapy. Stern suggests that we look at psychotherapy from a phenomenological perspective focusing on the experiencing of “the here and now.” He suggests that this shift in perception and emphasis will lead to changes in how we think about our work as psychotherapists and what we do from moment to moment. The resulting changes will be a greater appreciation of experience, and a less hurried rush to interpretation. This focus on “the here and now” allows us to rely more heavily on non-verbal experiencing of feelings and implicit knowing and awareness without necessarily requiring verbalization or interpretation of this knowledge. Such implicit knowing and awareness can sometimes provide the basis for change and therapeutic growth without the need for interpretation or verbal definition.

Again, Stern’s view and shift of focus for psychotherapy fits well with clinical approaches to psychotherapy utilizing hypnosis. With the introduction of hypnosis into psychotherapy we are more accepting of ambiguity, of inconsistencies, and of non-verbal experiencing and awareness. Frequently hypnosis permits both patient and therapist to know some things non-verbally (an awareness of information or feeling) and to experience each other’s experiences implicitly and non-verbally. We also often see patients progressing toward health without benefit of explicit interpretations. Therefore, I think psychotherapists who utilize hypnosis will find this clinically oriented section of the book particularly interesting and informative.

Stern further proposes that intersubjectivity (the interacting and experiencing of the self and other’s existence in the immediate moment) is a major motivational system in life and in psychotherapy. He proposes that it is clinically helpful to view the desire to be known and achieve intersubjective contact as a major motive in driving psychotherapy forward. He concludes that the therapeutic relationship is essentially a two-person, co-created phenomenon. He also sees the therapeutic process as a creative process, moving forward and evolving through an on-going series of immediate moments. In this sense, again, the hypnotic process has much common ground with the intersubjective experience as described by Stern.
In summary, I think this is a book that will take time and effort to read and absorb, but I think it will be well worth the effort and time investment by psychotherapists in general and especially by those of us who practice hypnosis.

**References**


