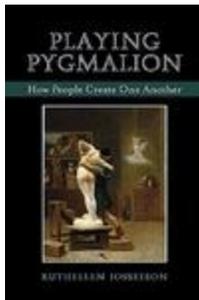


Relation Shapes: Intimate Constructions of Self and Other

A review of



Playing Pygmalion: How People Create One Another

by Ruthellen Josselson

Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 2007. 150 pp. ISBN 978-0-7657-0487-0 (hardcover); ISBN 978-0-7657-0488-7 (paperback). \$75.00, hardcover; \$34.95, paperback

Reviewed by

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When Henry Higgins in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* says to the flower girl, Liza Doolittle, "You're an ungrateful wicked girl. This is my return for offering to take you out of the gutter and dress you beautifully and make a lady of you" (Shaw, 1912, p. 28), we feel aghast at his arrogance. How dare this professor, no matter how educated or elevated, presume that he has the right to shape another person and make her conform to his vision of proper behavior! In her brief but eloquent monograph *Playing Pygmalion: How People Create One Another*, Ruthellen Josselson, a professor of

psychology at Fielding Graduate Institute and a practicing psychotherapist, argues that such interpersonal sculpting is at the very heart of all relationships. Through the influence of unconscious wishes, conflicts, and scripts drawn from our earliest relational interactions, we create one another in the desired and/or feared images of those first intimates from our past. Yet we do more than simply impose expectations on our current relationships.

From the interweaving of subjective worlds that occurs during any intimacy, whether between parent and child, siblings, romantic partners, or close friends, we develop illusions about one another. As these illusions infiltrate our mutual perceptions and feelings, cognitive distortions give way to the taking on of roles that fulfill these imposed visions. Locked into the dance of a relationship, one can no longer tell the dancer from the dance. Only later, if we happen to break away from a particularly powerful relationship, are we able to see how much each person's sense of self and actual behaviors had shifted in the direction of the other person's expectations and wishes.

To explicate this vital insight about human interaction, Josselson links concepts from relational psychoanalysis to four in-depth case studies of intimate dyads. She brings an interpretive lens to these studies that fits comfortably within the tradition of Melanie Klein's (1975) ideas about projective identification and more contemporary perspectives on intersubjectivity (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992), the analytic third (Ogden, 2004), and the relational matrix (Mitchell, 2000). What all of these perspectives share with Josselson's own viewpoint is the conviction that a highly meaningful dimension of relationships takes place unconsciously and consists of the intermingling of the subjective wishes and fears of each person in the relationship.

Josselson builds on this clinical theory by taking it out of the consulting room and illustrating it in the daily lives of individuals. She has performed the daunting task of identifying relational dyads, chosen from her practice or ongoing research studies, and interviewing each member of the dyad for several hours. As part of the interview process, Josselson asks each interviewee to create relationship maps at five-year intervals that depict the

various circles of intimacy in the individual's life. These maps convey the centrality and distance associated with different intimate others over the various points of the life span. Relying on her clinical and interviewing acumen, Josselson is able to elicit highly emotional and candid accounts of the most important events and relationship challenges in the lives of each dyad member.

In successive chapters, we hear from identical twin sisters, a father and a daughter, a mother and daughter, and a husband and wife. Each chapter presents relationship accounts from each member of the dyad. In the concluding section of each chapter, Josselson pulls back from the dyad and raises critical questions about how each person has unconsciously pressed the other one to participate in a mutual construction of self and other. She clarifies how this creative process forges a powerful intimacy but also confines and distorts each person's more varied and fully realized self. For example, in the chapter on Tom and Kathy, a married couple, we learn of how the initially dependent Kathy, who has appeared sexually inhibited to her more traditional physician-husband, casts off this role when she begins to develop a freer intellectual life through graduate psychology courses. Recognizing that she has been enabling her husband's fear of sexual intimacy in addition to her own, she eventually takes on a more flexible and adventurous lover, which results in the end of her marriage. Interestingly, when Josselson reinterviews Kathy years later, she finds out that Kathy has come to realize that her lover was actually a much more shy and restrained person than she had first imagined. In order to escape the confining relationship with Tom, Kathy had created a second projection of "sexual risk taker" on the man who served as a conduit to her freedom.

By the concluding chapter, the reader has gained a much richer and more expansive understanding of relational intersubjectivity operating in the real world of intimate relationships. Considering this prodigious accomplishment, I have only two reservations. First, throughout the book Josselson contrasts the notion of illusionary and distorted images of the self with more genuine or true aspects of identity. Yet she leaves unclear how we would ever know what part of the person is not a response to some imposed role or fantasized

dimension. Is there some way to know a self distinct from scripted patterns, distortions, and projections? Second, I would welcome Josselson's greater elaboration on how this research into relational dynamics influences her thought process and interpretive work in her psychotherapy practice. How would an increased sensitivity to the process of creating others translate into particular kinds of therapeutic strategies or interventions?

Leaving these caveats aside, Josselson's gift to the larger field of psychology is to take the important advances in understanding interpersonal dynamics achieved by relational psychoanalysis and illustrate their workings in the narratives of individuals' lives. For this reason, her book should be of interest not only to psychotherapists but also to researchers in social psychology and personality. It would be appropriate for use in advanced undergraduate and graduate seminars that seek to educate students about close relationships and identity formation from a psychodynamic perspective.

The take-home message of *Playing Pygmalion* is clear. Individuals are born into and live their lives in a relational matrix; the notion of a bounded autonomous individual, as propagated by Western culture in the guise of "lone cowboys" and "self-made men," is indeed a fiction. We were not born alone and do not die alone. We are woven into each other's lives in lattices of illusion, desire, and regret. The dramatic relational stories, rendered in this book's pages with compassion and wisdom by Josselson, demonstrate that we cannot help but create one another as we struggle with being bound inextricably together. There can be no Galatea without Pygmalion, but, as this valuable book reveals, there would be no Pygmalion without Galatea (and no Professor Higgins without Liza).

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1554-0138

April 23, 2008, Vol. 53, Release 17, Article 3

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