

## The Rhythm of Recognition

### Comments on the Work of Louis Sander

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This commentary considers Sander's contributions to our thinking about recognition, with particular emphasis on his idea of rhythmicity as a major organizing principle. The author suggests ways in which rhythmicity contributes to our apprehension of and participation in the third, that aspect of the intersubjective relationship which is cocreated and yet lawful. Both Sander's research and his contemporary reflections represent an important effort to unite our understanding of energy and information as complementary aspects of the same communication process.

I AM HONORED TO BE ABLE TO COMMENT ON THE WORK OF LOUIS SANDER, inspiring work that has personal importance for me. I have also had the advantage of being able to read several of Sander's versions of his ideas, which have clarified a great deal for me. I have attempted to appreciate the reach of his mind, the almost tangible effort to embrace depth and complexity in order to integrate the specificity of human interaction with general principles of organic life. Not being as comfortable in the domain of biology and organic principles, I have assimilated his thinking into areas more familiar to me, areas where I can recognize the insights he is offering. To engage with Sander's ideas about recognition, uniquely different and yet resonant with my own thinking, has been an opportunity illustrative of the concept. I feel a special kinship with his ideas about knowing and being known as a kind of meeting that goes beyond cognition as well as his dialectical appreciation of paradox and the value of contrary movement.

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Sander's clinical vignette about the mother who is having difficulty getting in synch with her baby illustrates, among other things, the principle of mutuality—that the mother must feel recognized if she is to do well with her infant. Observing mothers gives one an immediate sense of how much the baby's lusty devotion to the mother's milk or acceptance of her soothing ministrations functions as an affirmation of her agency. Further, the vignette illustrates the importance of the function of thirdness—the mother's needing to see her infant through Sander's eyes, to observe from the position of a third in order to step out of embeddedness. This is a point to which I return later.

Much of what I have written about recognition comes from my own experience with maternal subjectivity. I will try to bring this experience to bear on Sander's very stimulating paper, in particular, his ideas about rhythmicity as a kind of incarnation of recognition and the way it functions to "hold together" complex systems. I find particularly elegant the illustration of this encompassing principle for understanding how components that are "distinct from" can be brought into a higher level of coherence through being "together with." I am referring to Sander's study on the effects of early demand feeding and the baby's gradual adjustment to circadian rhythm, which has special meaning for me. When I was having my first child, I was doing a postdoctoral fellowship in infancy research at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and so was subjected to their rather stringent medical practices. It was an especially arduous labor for both me and my son, who was soon jaundiced. The protocol at Einstein being quite strict about bilirubin counts, he was taken out of my arms and put under the lights with a four-hour feeding schedule. This regimen led, as Sander's work would have predicted, to the baby's being unable to adapt to any degree of our circadian rhythm, so that he was over two weeks of age before he got the idea of sleeping at all in the night. Nearly two years of parental cajoling were required before sleeping through the night was thoroughly internalized. (Possible long-range effects of this early experience, anecdotal rather than scientific, were his early fascination with blues, rock, Beat poetry, jazz, and other art forms practiced late at night.)

In addition, what seems relevant to both the matter of recognition of specific uniqueness and agency as well as mutual adaptation is what seemed to me to emerge from this initially difficult beginning. While mutual adaptation at the somatic level of feeding and sleeping was not smooth because it was interfered with, nonetheless, it was still

possible for my baby to "exercise agency in its own state regulation" (Sander, 1988, p. 73) by appealing to the caregivers and having an effect. I thought of this as the paradox of greater dependency. On the one hand, there was initially a greater effort required on my part to adapt to his states and greater dependency on my baby's part to achieve state regulation. On the other hand, the success of his appeal and my effort seemed to create a "competent system" in which it was possible for my baby to enjoy significant periods of creative disengagement—which Sander has termed "open space"—when he could be absorbed in his own rhythms and activities (kicking his mobile to make the ducks move, watching as he twirled his hands). As Sander has argued, "disengagement in a state of equilibrium in the system is a condition that favors the achievement of a sense of agency in the infant and the sense that its motivations and goals are its own" (p. 69). Thus, paradoxically, dependency fostered independence because it was met by recognition and caregiver adaptation. I think that this experience suggests how mutual regulation and mutual recognition, though not identical, interact in complex ways.

Whether we speak of regulation or recognition, the chief point of Sander's (1988) original study seems to be to highlight a paradoxical tension: that the adaptation of the system requires recognition of the specific rhythm of the individual baby in order to align him or her to the caregiver's rhythm. As I indicated before, this paradox seems central to contemporary psychoanalytic rewriting of traditional notions in which independence and dependency are opposed. This opposition informs ordinary thinking about dependence and independence, such that activity is usually misunderstood to be absolute autonomy rather than as agency within an interactive system. By contrast, the concept of recognition entails the idea that having an impact on the other directly affects one's own sense of agency. This point is clarified by Sander (1988):

The mutual adaptation, which is achieved between infant and caregiver in the competent system, establishes for the infant that one's own actions can directly effect one's own states in desired directions. In such a system, self-regulation becomes an active interpersonal skill. Hence, the role of the infant's inner experience in the organization of her adaptive behavior becomes central to the effectiveness of the interactive strategies she develops [p. 74].

He continues by contrasting this experience "with the situation in the incompetent system, in which the infant reexperiences its own state as being a result of or secondary to a more primary structure of outer events" [p. 74].

It is worth noting how Sander introduces here the notion of reactivity to the external as opposed to the sense of agency that develops through a more harmonious adaptation. In this way his thinking is closely related to that of Winnicott (1971). For instance, he is very interested in reaching the transitional experience in which the strain of distinguishing outer and inner can be relinquished, and he makes use of the idea of recognizing the spontaneous gesture. Sander's observations on the development of agency seem related to those concepts, and also to Winnicott's "creative illusion," as he termed the baby's useful sense of omnipotence when it thinks that it has made the breast appear. In other words, the baby does not yet distinguish communication (I asked mother to come) from making things happen (my call made her appear). Only gradually can these experiences be separated. What I extrapolate from this original confluence is that a sense of agency and the ability to recognize the other are not originally opposed, as in the notion of competing wills, but must develop in tandem with one another. This issue is addressed by Sander (1992) when he brings agency into relationship with negotiation. The degree to which the relationship confirms the "infant's agency to initiate action in regulating its own state and organizing goals that are its 'own'" determines where that relationship is situated on the spectrum between imposition and negotiation (p. 11).<sup>1</sup>

Unpacking Sander's thought shows us a number of different elements in the recognition process: recognition of the specific individual enhances agency, self-cohesion, and ultimately the capacity to recognize the other. At the same time, these elements can be understood as aspects of a system, a relationship, in which recognition serves to resolve paradoxes of being distinct and being together, creating greater coherence and unity even as it facilitates the differentiation of the individual. Frequently, what we are confronted with in the clinical situation are the repercussions of lack of attunement, the failure of entrainment to rhythmicity of affect. Such failure has generated the problem of competing wills, a system based on imposition. It appears to the patient as if the successful implementation of one's own agency is being hindered by the agency of the other. In short, one is victimized by externalized others or parts

of self. Accommodation seems like submission to the will of another rather than part of mutual adaptation. Sometimes the structure of outer events, if not the will of the other, seems like an inexorable force; reality is not created and discovered, it is suffered. This view of reality results because the patient is hindered from using mutual interaction with the object to achieve better regulation. The "outside world" appears to be obstacle, not vehicle. Not surprisingly, this experience of the world goes hand in hand with difficulties in internal regulation, so that one's own internal affective states also appear to be frightening. At the same time, the internal cannot be recognized as such. Thus, it appears that real external events are the cause of painful states and that these cannot be affected by the self's own agency.

The relationship between the internal and the external is quite different in the competent system described by Sander. Rather than contradiction between attention to the internal and attention to the external one finds a harmonious fertilization of the two spheres. It is precisely a failure to bring the two kinds of attention into alignment that is reflected in the life experience and interaction of many of our patients—and the culture at large, to judge from the ideologies of power struggle, your will against mine, that we encounter in cultural depictions. Attention to one's own feelings, aims, and intentions seems threatened by attention to the other. Sander's concern is with mutual adaptation and negotiation that allows the resolution of such contradiction when it arises, since, indeed, this process enhances self-coherence and recognition. He concludes, in an earlier draft, that with the achievement of a more adaptive mutual regulation in the therapy relationship there can be a "moment of open space for the patient to gain new awareness that it is her or his own self who is initiating, and even further, just what it is that one is initiating" (Sander, 1998). This moment, in turn, allows a "wedge in the process of self-differentiation," a distinction between the old problematic adaptive strategies and the sense of agency in the present.

Yet another aspect of the internal-external dialectic emerges in Sander's essay here with his differentiation between mutuality and the infant elicitation of response through agency. Here he contrasts the sense of "what is given" with "what has to be gotten." So, on one hand, we hear of a space in which the patient can experience initiating, acting; then, of a space of mutuality in which there is a sense of something given, perhaps, emerging spontaneously, transitionally. This quality of effortlessness is important to that transitional quality of

moving between external and internal without strain. Thus it seems that harmonious adaptation engenders a sense of agency, but also a sense of flow or freedom that goes beyond agency. Does this mean that we should think of mutuality and agency as different axes in the interacting system? Or perhaps we could say that there are two different levels of rhythmicity: the first might be the oscillation between states of being together-with and being apart (external versus internal attention, engagement in one's own activity); the second, the rhythm within the mutually adapting interaction, as in the looking at and looking away. Is it perhaps the case that one level of oscillation is superordinate at one phase, such as entrainment of biorhythm, or are they always equally important, interacting systems?

The examination of rhythmicity, as well as the alternation between active eliciting of response and "givenness" as qualities of interaction returns us to the way caregiver accommodation lends coherence to the system. The clear point of recognition theory, which Sander has elaborated repeatedly, is that the coherence of the individual, her energy and level of organization, are enhanced by communication based on the specificity of the shared signal. In turn, this specificity enhances the child's effectiveness and feeds back into the system, lending it a sense of coherence and freedom. Thus Sander's study of early nursing patterns provided a brilliant illustration of how, when the significant other is permeable, responsive, recognizing—that is, gives over to the rhythm of the baby—the system seems to move naturally in the direction of a deeper "law" of reality. Through attuning, an entuning (an entrainment to tuning in) occurs so that the system now works in a more effortless way. It has the quality of something given, even though one participates in creating it, the transitional quality, in which it is not possible to say whether it has been made or found. Here, again, the "given" contrasts with "what has to be gotten."

I think of the quality of givenness as zero-coercion—in other words, it is an interaction in which nothing is demanded of you and, just as important, you have not had to demand or extract anything. From within this interactive space it is possible to feel the most authentic sense of agency as emerging from within. While many have critiqued the essentialism of Winnicott's term true self (see Mitchell, 1993), I think the concept refers to this experience of agency as not reactive but inner determined. We are speaking here not of a reified thing but of a state, an affective state that allows for creativity.

I take the idea of givenness to refer to the property of intersubjectivity that is thirdness, the creation of something that no longer identifiably emanates from one person or the other but mediates between them. What I mean here is a principle well-documented in play interactions in infancy, for instance, by Beebe and Lachmann (1988), namely, that both partners seemingly align with a pattern or direction, rather than directly striving to match each other. Perhaps this is what Sander is referring to in his discussion of a rhythmicity that creates certain kinds of patterns. I think of thirdness as akin to following a shared theme in musical improvisation (see Benjamin, 1999). Ogden (1994) has used the idea of the analytic third to mean the analytic relationship as an entity, a third subject generated as a middle term sustained by the analyst and analysand as two separate subjects. This version of the third is not quite the one to which I subscribe, although Ogden's specification of a recognizing third comes closer. I see the third as something like the rhythmic structure or pattern that two or more partners simultaneously create and surrender to. Like transitional experience, it has the paradoxical quality of being invented and discovered. As in musical improvisation, there can be surprises, but there is a key and a rhythmicity; patterns can change but not arbitrarily.

So, if I understand correctly, we are trying to conceptualize how recognition becomes the basis for the patterning of mutual interaction, a kind of intersubjective structure. Such patterning is also a crucial property of the therapeutic endeavor, of all relating that achieves the quality of thirdness. Another important aspect is that the asymmetry of the relationship, in this case parent and infant, but also therapist and patient, frames the dialogues. Thus, when the parent or therapist accommodates, this accommodation has the quality not of giving in to demand but recognizing and respecting the needs, limits, and capabilities of the other person.

It seems to me that the dialogue functions similarly to the process of feeding, in that the mother's initial adjustment to the infant then allows the system to achieve something like a rhythm of its own that has a quality of lawfulness, again not unlike musical patterning. In music we recognize the necessity of attunement both to the other and to some deeper structure. This deeper structure might be thought of as like the circadian rhythm, which appears in Sander's studies. Not inviolate and absolute, yet a foundation for the variations and the implementation of a recurring pattern.

Now, when a mother makes the attempt to get a pattern going she is not merely accommodating to the baby. Even though she may experience the baby's demand as opposed to her deeply felt need for sleep, she sees it not as an expression of his will against hers, but, rather, as an objective property of the system. This disjunction in need is felt to be inherent in the nursing couple. Her accommodation therefore is the first, most incipient model for thirdness, which appears when we tune in to the music as something not merely self-produced or other produced but having a quality of necessity. That her behavior, in accordance with the principle of the third, produces behavior on the baby's part that accords with a more or less objective pattern is indeed a striking illustration of what might well be a deeper principle. It is her recognition of the other and of necessity that seems to open a channel for the synchrony of the third.<sup>1</sup>

I find it exhilarating to think of this relationship between organism and pattern as extending to whole communities of fireflies flashing in synchrony. Sander talks about the synchronization of rhythms by referring to harmony and also the specificity of the shared signal. In an earlier paper, Sander (1992) elaborates the importance of matching specificity by allowing the organizing of the incredibly complex systems of organic creatures as well as systems of coherent organization between them. He considers also the work of Tronick on the expansion of capacities as a result of dyadic interaction. In order to create the kind of coherence he is referring to, there has to be a specificity of determination that is then recognized, creating common expectancies.

In human relations, however, there is another aspect to this achievement, having to do with conscious activity. I have the idea that fireflies more or less have to synchronize, and at some deep biological level there are things humans have to do as well. But humans

<sup>1</sup> Elaborating this maternal attitude in relation to thirdness at greater length, I have proposed that we think of the mother as experiencing the "third in the one." That is, the moral third of respect for the baby's need and immaturity is crucial to what has sometimes been understood as oneness—for the mother is not "symbiotic" or at one with her baby as the baby feels himself to be with her, despite the deep empathy and harmony she may feel in satisfying his needs. Conversely, I have suggested that the third that is so often called on in psychoanalytic theory is not to be understood primarily as the intervention of an other, but, rather, requires the "one in the third," the attunement and empathy that make it possible to bridge difference with identification, to infuse observation with compassion (Benjamin and Aron, 1999; Benjamin, 1999, 2001).

can be amazingly out of synch with what they have to do, or should do, or would be better off doing. Their minds and wills can violate patterns or refuse to join patterns or oppose them. In his delineation of adaptive tasks Sander, in his essay here, includes the negotiation of opposition, the importance of "allowing the experience of taking a contrary position . . . while still providing access to regaining the specificity of recognition of intention to be 'together with.'" Thus, what we often are confronted with is the failure to regain recognition, to negotiate difference. Humans can become incapable of reading patterns; they may be alexithymic or guilt ridden about them. Furthermore, they seem able to entrain to arrhythmias or negative rhythms, as in the chase-and-dodge interaction, which reveals a negative synchrony.

Much of our therapeutic endeavor is taken up with trying to grasp what is happening when we are caught up in such negating patterns. The opposition to establishing rhythm seems to proceed from a difficulty in the evolution of thirdness. Persons for whom this evolution has failed as I suggested earlier, have not had the opportunity to negotiate difference. They experience what ought to be seen as a kind of necessity, as a willful imposition of the other; by the same token, they can see miseries they themselves have created as objective necessities. Bringing ourselves and the other, through our interaction, into a form of togetherness that produces an experience of the third is thus often the therapeutically challenging task. Sometimes thirdness can occur only through a reenactment of early, preverbal patterning: attention to state, often revealed through silence, sound, and breathing, creating a deep synchrony at the level of the procedural knowledge that precedes verbal representation (see Knoblauch, 2000; Seligman, 1993).

If I understand Sander's exposition correctly, then a basic function of the third, that is, of more than one organism being in correspondence to a pattern, is to facilitate the organization and coherence of the complex system and to enhance self-regulation. This would be equivalent to saying, as in Sander's citation of Tronick's idea of dyadic expansion, that "when the collaboration of two brains is successful, each fulfills the systems principle of increasing its coherence and complexity—the infant becoming capable of performing actions in the dyadic system that the infant would not be capable of performing alone." So following the third has, in this view, the effect of facilitating a collaboration that enables learning and organization in the developing person.

Furthermore, in a way I can only intuit, the patterning that comes into effect through recognition of the other's specific needs, gestures, and acts has the effect not only of increasing coherence but also of affecting flow of energy. Here the concept of rhythmicity is particularly suggestive: "The rhythms of oscillating systems become coupled when they share a common signal" (Sander, this issue). Sander continues by explaining that coupling amplifies the signal, enhancing the flowing of energy, which "can be thought of as *motivational*." This formulation strikes me as so important because it seems to be a move toward unifying what have often been conceived as separate systemic models—those based on energy metaphors and those based on informational metaphors. The greater inclusion and coherence that could emerge from the interaction of these two different perspectives does, indeed, seem to offer a great potential for expanding consciousness.

I do feel compelled to pose a last question relating to the effort to think of recognition in organic terms: what are the implications, in the light of all we know about the terrible vicissitudes of human interaction, of setting out principles of recognition in teleological terms, that is, as necessary for adaptation and development? One might, after all, conclude that many human groups have learned to function with precious little recognition of specificity in crucial areas. What should we think about how often the recognition process goes awry, patterns are destabilized, expectancies violated, and the thirdness or recognition breaks down? As psychoanalysts, we are constantly considering the results of our human freedom to deviate from the principles that enhance growth and facilitate recognition, especially the principle of rhythmicity. As exciting as it is to ponder the implications of a non-mechanistic concept of unifying biological and psychological perspectives, there may be a gulf between them—the condition of human freedom—that we must not only strive to bridge but also maintain. Perhaps this is the specificity of the psychic sphere that Sander's exciting and thought-provoking integration opens up to us.

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