

SOSA Proposal Narrative

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Concise description of the proposed scholarly activity: During the SOSA award period, I will complete my book, *Feeling, Action, Thought: Language in Psychoanalysis*. The book integrates psychoanalytic theory, linguistic theory, and empirical research from a range of fields to present a psychoanalytic theory of language that is informed by current scientific knowledge and useful for clinical practice. Psychoanalysis is the 2nd most prevalent theoretical orientation of clinical psychologists in the U.S. Despite being a source of useful clinical theory and insights, psychoanalysis has remained relatively isolated from knowledge developed in other fields. Engagement with current knowledge from other disciplines is a stated priority of the American Psychoanalytic Association. Accordingly, and based on my prior work, I was invited to write this book by the editor of the *Psychoanalysis in a New Key* book series published by Routledge.

Proposed objectives and purpose of the scholarly activities: The overarching purposes of my book are: 1) to update psychoanalytic theories of language and infant development in light of current research, which is challenging longstanding beliefs; and 2) to present a useful theory of language as a therapeutic modality in psychoanalytic therapies.

Psychoanalysis comprises theories of psychological development and therapeutic change. Regarding the former, psychoanalysis attends to ways in which early life experiences shape one's personality and functioning subsequently. Such theorizing must be grounded in an understanding of typical developmental processes. Yet the predominant psychoanalytic theorizing about infant development rests on research conducted during and prior to the 1980s. This theorizing asserts that infancy is a period of nonverbal development, and that developments of the sense of self and capacity for interpersonal relatedness begin in the absence of language.

Research is revealing previously unknown infant capacities, yet most psychoanalysts remain unaware of this work. Regarding language development, research demonstrates that the 12 month old infant has the capacity to understand both the communicative intent inherent in speech and particular words within speech. Thus, the capacity for language is born during the first year of life and develops along with the sense of self and capacity for relatedness. I explore the implications of this research for understanding both infant development and lifelong modes of verbal relatedness, including those that contribute to the therapeutic action of psychotherapy.

Relatedly, psychoanalysis is “the talking cure,” and speaking and listening are its primary therapeutic mechanisms. Yet psychoanalysis lacks a unifying theory of language as used in therapy. Instead, the discipline comprises incomplete and conflicting theories, characterized by narrow and outdated views of language. A prevailing theory is that because language is an abstract system, it is inherently disconnected from lived experiences, such that verbal ways of being and knowing are separate from bodily and experiential ways of being and knowing. This has been understood to imply that there are striking limits to the therapeutic action of language. Yet research in diverse fields suggests that understanding and using language involves both abstract linguistic processes and experiential or embodied ones. To give one example, when we hear or read sentences describing bodily actions, brain regions involved in *performing* actions are activated, suggesting that language is a site of both linguistic and embodied modes of knowing.

Bringing together a scientifically grounded understanding of infant language development and a contemporary view of language that has a place for multiple modes of meaning within the verbal realm, I present a theory of language that unites the disparate views within psychoanalysis and informs clinical practice. Specifically, I elaborate the potentials of language in three distinct realms: 1) *thought* - to use the symbols of language to think, reflect, interpret, categorize, etc.; 2) *action* - to get things done, especially interpersonally; and 3) *feeling* - to evoke feelings, perceptions, and multisensorial ways of being. Language offers these

potentials as well as ways to integrate these different modes of being. Indeed, it is through language that the mind connects to the body and the external world.

My book comprises three sections, 12 chapters, and approximately 300 pages. Section I presents a detailed discussion of current research in infant language development, focusing on the processes by which the infant derives meaning from others' speech and learns words. The research shows that the infant understands words in speech through a combination of perception (the simultaneous sound of a word and sight of an object to which the word refers) and social cognition (the understanding that speakers use words to refer to objects and to communicate with others). Thus, understanding words in infancy mobilizes the three processes of feeling, action, and thought. I will complete Section I by the start of the SOSA award period.

Section II explores the infant's understanding of the parent's words within the parent-infant relationship. In particular, I examine research into parents' uses of speech: 1) to attune to their infants' ongoing feelings and experiences; 2) to address infants' attachment needs and wishes, using words as interpersonal action; and 3) to convey meanings of relational and emotional words (e.g., *happy*, *love*) as they relate to ongoing interactions. This examination reveals the ways in which the words of parental speech both participate in and come to represent the infant's interpersonal interactions in the modes of feeling, action, and thought.

Completing Section II is my first task for the SOSA award period. My initial review of the research for this section revealed that many useful studies examine the role of parental speech as an ancillary variable, rather than as a primary focus of the study; thus locating relevant studies requires some detective work. Moreover, because my use of this research is novel, there are currently no integrative reviews that can assist me. Regarding the writing process, I have developed some of the ideas for these chapters in a recent major paper that has been accepted for publication pending revisions. Writing the three chapters of this section involves integrating the research into my detailed outline and elaborating the clinical implications.

Section III explores research demonstrating the degree to which the language of adolescents and adults, like the language of infants, involves simultaneous activation of the realms of feeling, action, and thought. The behavioral and brain research demonstrates many ways in which language itself (e.g., the content and quality of each person's lexicon) and language processing (e.g., the effects of hearing and using speech on brain and body) involve these realms, as well as the ways these realms are activated during particular verbal tasks.

Completing Section III is my second task of the SOSA award. Previously, I completed a comprehensive review of a major aspect of this research, the embodied language and cognition literature, and my prior writing on that topic provides a solid starting point for this section. I have also published and presented papers exploring the clinical implications of the nature of language as embodied. The research literature in this area is more cohesive than that for Section II, but there are many conflicting findings to synthesize. Moreover, this research has benefitted from use of new technologies, particularly brain scanning methods, resulting in a rapidly expanding state of knowledge; consequently, there is much new research to review.

[Detailed plan of scholarly activity with proposed timeline:](#) I will use the SOSA release time to complete Sections II and III. My general work plan is to conduct literature reviews with my student research team in the Fall semesters and work intensively on writing in the Spring semesters, when I hope to take the SOSA release, as well as in the summers.

I will read and analyze all the recent (2007 to present) original research reports and secondary sources in two general realms related to Sections II and III as described above: 1) use of words for multiple functions within the parent-infant relationship; and 2) embodied and

multisensorial basis of words and verbal processing. These research literatures are complex, vast, and expanding rapidly. Each spans numerous fields, including cognitive science, linguistics, developmental psychology, and cognitive psychology; these fields have diverse methods and terminologies I must understand and analyze. Consequently, gaining a deep understanding of these research areas is time-consuming and labor-intensive. Yet in-depth analysis of primary research is a strength of this project, and of my work generally; more typically, psychoanalysts have drawn conclusions about research based on literature reviews and books written for a general audience, rather than on primary research reports.

Timeline **Fall 2018** - review literature for Section II; begin Chapters 6 & 7
 Spring 2019 [SOSA semester] - continue literature review as needed; complete Chapters 6 & 7; begin Chapter 8
 Summer 2019 – finish Chapter 8; finalize Section II.
 Fall 2019 - review literature for Section III; begin Chapters 9 & 10
 Spring 2020 [SOSA semester] - continue literature review as needed; complete Chapters 9 & 10; begin Chapter 11
 Summer 2020 - finish Chapter 11; finalize Section III; finalize entire manuscript.

Expected scholarly outcomes: My book is under contract with Routledge, the world's leading publisher of academic books and journals in the social sciences and humanities. The *Psychoanalysis in a New Key* series, of which the book will be a part, “creates a deliberate focus on innovative and unsettling clinical thinking” and “particularly encourages interdisciplinary studies.” Thus, it is an ideal outlet for my work. There are over 40 books in the series currently.

I became chair of the Psychology Department in Fall 2013. At the conclusion of my most recent SOSA award in Fall 2014, I was making steady progress on the book. Since that time, I have completed several projects related to the content of the book: one major paper (58 pages; accepted for publication pending revisions), two papers presented at peer-reviewed conferences; and three invited presentations to professional organizations. Progress on the book itself has been slower than I had hoped. With the end of my term as chair in Summer 2018, I am eager to reengage fully with this scholarly project, which I will be able to complete with a combination of this SOSA award and cessation of my chair duties.

Importance and significance of proposed scholarly activities to the applicant's discipline: If there are two types of scholars, I am the hedgehog type. With this book, I am burrowing ever deeper into the big thing I know about the importance of language in psychological development and in therapy. In this more ambitious undertaking, I bring together, elaborate, and deepen ideas I have presented through my journal publications and professional presentations. My work has been enthusiastically received by my colleagues. I hope the book will be similarly valued.

This book contributes to my field in two ways. First, it addresses an identified priority of the field to engage with other disciplines in ways that both ground psychoanalysis in scientific knowledge and reduce its isolation from related fields. In this book, as in my prior work, I attempt a sophisticated synthesis that is based in an extensive analysis of primary research and that respects both the value and the limits of the methods of different disciplines. Indeed, this work manifests a hallmark of my scholarly approach – deep engagement with the research literature with the aim of theory development. I am one of a small group of scholars conducting such work in psychoanalysis. Second, this book points toward resolution of a disruptive controversy within psychoanalysis regarding the role of language in the therapeutic action of psychoanalytic therapies, offering resolution of conflicts that have dogged psychoanalysis since its inception.