



## The Neuroscience of Human Relationships: An Interview with Louis Cozolino, PhD

By Nancy Eichhorn, PhD

**Scanning the book list for a doctoral class several years ago,** I noted the title, *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy*, by Louis Cozolino, PhD. I felt intimidated—it sounded intense, dense. Then I opened the book. Lou’s ability to impart scientific data within a user-friendly framework wooed me. As a reader, I have a tendency to develop a vision of the author responsible for the text. From Lou’s voice—his presence on the page—I sensed he was serious, focused, and highly intelligent with a technical vocabulary easily accessed but not necessarily his first choice. I read with a sincere interest in the content, a desire to learn and understand the concepts, and to get a feel for their application in a therapeutic setting.

**When I received notification** that he had updated *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy* and more recently, *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships*, I wanted to talk with him about his writing (he has also authored *The Healthy Aging Brain*, *The Social Neuroscience of Education*, and *The Making of a Therapist*), his teaching (he is a professor at Pepperdine University), his work (he is a private practitioner in Los Angeles, California), and how he blends the different aspects of his career and personal life to make time for writing.

**The day of our telephone interview,** Lou was a few minutes late. He returned my call, apologized, and explained he was picking up his new old Porsche, a 1977.

The sound of his voice—casual, personal, warm, caring—didn’t fit the character created solely in my mind from reading his books. I joked and said if I had just bought a new Porsche I would be out driving it, not sitting for an interview. He laughed, and in true form of a scholar noted that his responsibilities were important, too. I liked this man from the outset, and our conversation flowed smoothly about his work and his writing, with sprinklings of family stories highlighting humorous and loving moments.

**Within this article,** I hope to share a glimpse of Louis Cozolino as a clinician, a researcher, a psychologist, a teacher, and for me, most importantly an author who is

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easy to connect with and learn from. His writings are an outreach of his immense background in the fields of neuroscience and psychology and provide another avenue for him to teach outside of the university setting.

### **On Writing and Publication**

**“Writing saved my life,”** Lou says. “As a kid I discovered books. Other people shared a world view, another way of thinking. I didn’t grow up in an academic environment. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t discover books and the community of readers and writers that I felt at home in.”

**Lou started writing** in his twenties. He shares that he was pretty “bad at it,” but he knew that he had something to say. With time and revision, he learned that he did indeed have something of value to say and that people were interested in reading what he wrote.

**“I had been friends** with Dan Siegel for 11 or 12 years before I published my first book. I was involved in reading all his manuscripts as he discovered his voice. He was forging the way, making connections, and he eventually founded the Norton series.

**“When I start writing,** the whole thing is chaotic,” Lou continues. “I write the proposal and stories come out like a Scrabble board. I rewrite every chapter 20 times until it becomes a coherent narrative. I want the voice to be conversational, and I want to pack in science. I am getting better at organizing the science in charts now—they don’t disrupt the narrative. I alternate between therapy and science. I include case studies, and I work it until I feel at home with it. Working with the draft is like molding clay; I continue to mold until I have a finished product.”

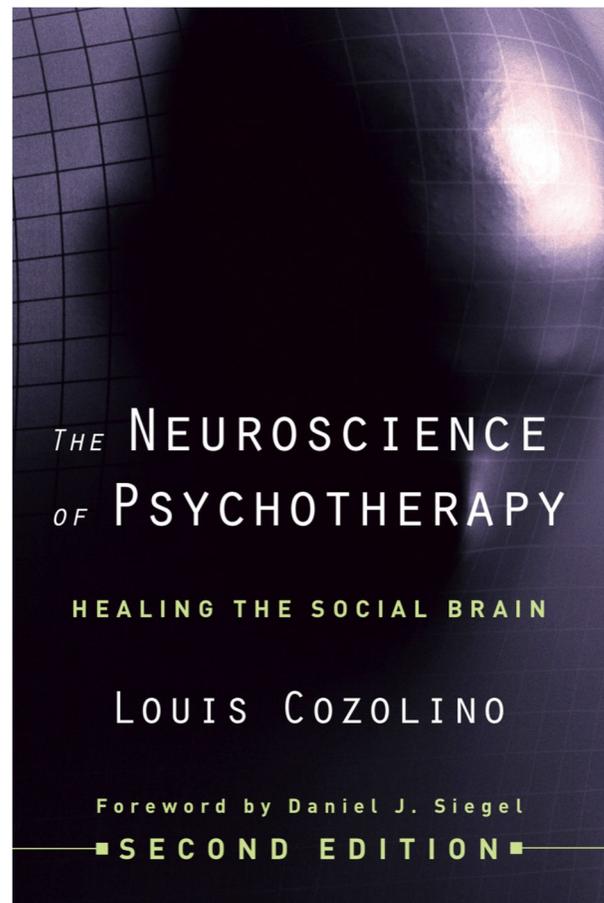
**Discussing** the second edition of *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships*, Lou says, “It’s an exciting time. I could rewrite the book every three months with the amount of research coming out, but I don’t want to overwhelm readers.”

**“My primary goal** in writing the first edition was to encourage readers to include knowledge of the brain in

their understanding of human growth and development. The first edition of *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy* was 75,000 words; the second is 125,000 words, containing almost twice as much material. *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships* initially grew out of the chapter on attachment written for the first edition of *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy*. The chapter was getting bigger and bigger, so I held onto some materials and started another book.”

### **Writing about the Brain as a Social Organ**

**With a degree in philosophy** and another in theology from Harvard University, as well as a doctoral degree in clinical psychology from UCLA, Lou’s history includes empirical research in schizophrenia and research into the long term impact of stress. He actually started his career studying psychiatry and neuroscience in the 1970s. During his studies and early research, he noted the vital



connection between the brain and mind and realized that, in a general sense, their relationship was not accepted in the mainstream. He has spent his career exploring the interface between the two. Today, he says, more people are accepting of the brain/mind relationship with supportive evidence coming from a variety of fields including epigenetics, anthropology, and psychoneuroimmunology.

**“The brain** is a social organ,” says Lou, explaining that the emergence of self-awareness occurs in the context of relationship. “Our sense of self emerges from our relationships with others - others come first, and later, we discover (or create) a self.”

**“I teach** many students who are required to take my class, not because they want to. My challenge is to bring them in, introduce them to the concepts, and inspire them to continue exploring mind-brain relationships. It’s a challenge that forces me to make the material interesting and relevant.”

**“I feel committed** to writing academic books,” Lou continues. “So many people are either writing pop books that soon fade away or psychoanalytically oriented books that few people understand. I’m attempting to reach young academics, students in masters and doctoral programs who will be able to move the science forward in the years to come.”

### **Writing for a Wider Audience**

**“I also write for** a general population of therapists so I explain and define everything in the books. Anyone can read this material and understand it. Most people who become therapists chose psychotherapy because they are anti-intellectual—they are insecure about their own intelligence and are drawn

to the touchy feely area, away from science. “In the early 1990s, even the 1980s, experienced therapists were not going to change the way they do therapy. Much like people in a religious cult who come under the influence of their teacher, young students are overwhelmed by the complexity of the field and grab onto something like Somatic Experiencing or EMDR in order to give them a sense of certainty. But single perspectives becomes self-limiting; these approaches offer tools to do

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therapy yet therapy is much bigger than any tool. I have received many cases from UCLA that were considered failures, but the therapists there only used one tool—cognitive behavioral therapy—and treatment failures are attributed to resistant clients as opposed to limited treatments.

**“I learned** in my early training at Harvard from Carl Rogers and his students that the relationship is central and that therapists can get lost in mechanistic and technological approaches.

**“I caution people** who focus too

much on thinking and say pay attention to feeling. If they are focused on feeling, I say pay more attention to the body. If their focus is on the body, I say pay attention to thinking. I want therapists to expand the way they think about the work, to shuttle between various ways they process and share information and not give one priority over the other. “Some therapists may choose talk therapy or somatic therapy. They may integrate key words such as think, feel, behave, and sense, but I don’t want them to become enamored with one perspective.

### **Psychotherapy and Neuronal Changes**

**According to Lou,** any change in thoughts, feelings, or behavior by definition is a neuronal change. Mind. Body. The experience is no different.

**“Everything is neuronal growth,** even watching a television show,” Lou says. “People are impressed with the fact that dualism is not reality. Meditation can change the brain; PTSD can change the brain. Our brain is always changing at any given time. The brain evolved to connect with other brains. When people feel something, we feel it too. Our early model of relationships is based on a foundation of attunement and empathy.”

### **Psychotherapy, Cartesian Dualism, and the Brain**

**Cartesian dualism**—a view that the mind and body are essentially separate entities with the brain viewed as an object separate from the body and relationship—founded the early philosophical theory regarding the nature of human beings. However, those beliefs are changing as new understandings in social neuroscience support the premise that emotion and relationship are one and the same, there is no separation.

“We understand one another in the context of bodies, and we understand bodies in the context of relationships with other bodies,” Lou says. “In the context of healing and learning, the social brain is the quality of the relationship in connections with health and wellbeing.”

### Why Neuroscience and Psychotherapy?

A **neuroscientific perspective** on psychotherapy is relevant to the extent that the relationship between the therapist and patient does result in changes in neural circuits. The brain’s architecture is related to problems, passions, and human aspirations while the brain’s inner workings—the basic neuronal building blocks—are responsible for our complex system of memory, language, and organization of experience. Psychotherapy is truly a subjective human experience, and it has the power of relationships to change the mind.

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**Dr. Louis Cozolino** has diverse clinical and research interests and hold degrees in philosophy, theology, and clinical psychology. His current interests are in the areas of the synthesis of neuroscience with psychotherapy, education, management, and leadership. He is the author of six books *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy*, *The Social Neuroscience of Education*, *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships*, *The Healthy Aging Brain*, *Attachment-Based Teaching* and *The Making of a Therapist*. He has also authored and co-authored research articles and book chapters on child abuse, schizophrenia, language and cognition. Dr. Cozolino lectures around the world on brain development, evolution, and psychotherapy and maintains and clinical and consulting practice in Los Angeles.

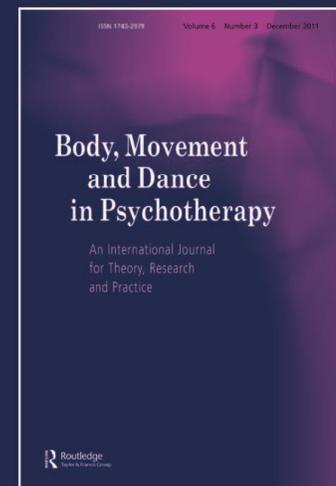
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