OBJECT RELATIONS
AND
SOCIAL RELATIONS

The Implications of the Relational
Turn in Psychoanalysis

edited by

Simon Clarke, Herbert Hahn,
and Paul Hoggett

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ABOUT THE EDITORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

Simon Clarke is Professor of Psycho-Social Studies and Director of the Centre for Psycho-Social Studies at the University of the West of England. His research interests include the interface between sociological and psychoanalytic theory; emotions; Kleinian and post-Kleinian thinking; and the social application of psychoanalytic theory and practice. He has published numerous articles, essays, and reviews on the psychoanalytic understanding of racism, ethnic hatred, and social conflict. Simon is the author of Social Theory, Psychoanalysis and Racism (2003, London, Palgrave); From Enlightenment to Risk: Social Theory and Contemporary Society (2005, London, Palgrave); and Emotion, Politics and Society (2006), (co-edited with Hoggett and Thompson). Simon is a member of the board of directors of the Association for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society and Editor of Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society. He has recently completed a research project that forms part of the larger £4 Million ESRC “social identities” programme. The project looks at notions of home and identity in contemporary Britain.

Lynn Froggett is Reader in Psychosocial Welfare and Director of the UCLAN Psychosocial Research Unit. Her work is strongly
CHAPTER ONE

Relational thinking: from culture to couch and couch to culture

Lynne Layton

Introduction: history and key assumptions of relational analytic theory

At one point in my personal analysis, my analyst, whom I had chosen in part because the self psychology and object relations books on her shelf suggested that she was someone who would not bludgeon me with predictable oedipal and penis envy interpretations, told me that the reason she had forgotten to call me at the agreed upon time during her three-month maternity leave was that I appear self-sufficient and give the impression of having no needs. This touched a very sore spot in me and I went off to seek consultation—having parents whose mantra when they did something hurtful was always “You’re too sensitive,” the last thing I needed was an analyst who made a big blunder and blamed it on something about me. We worked it out. But I begin with this vignette because I think that it is my sensitivity to this issue that drew me to what has come to be known as relational psychoanalysis. Of the many schools of psychoanalysis, none besides relational analysis, so far as I know, holds as a central ethical principle not just awareness, but acknowledgement, of the
Stephen Mitchell wrote ships, internal and external. They considered Sullivan, founder of theories that posit that at the heart of psychic life are relationships, internal and external. They considered Sullivan, founder of interpersonal psychoanalysis, the primary progenitor of relational theories. Greenberg and Mitchell argued that although you cannot understand Sullivan without knowing Freud, you also cannot have it both ways: the drive model and the relational model's assumptions lead to radically different ideas about development, technique, motivation, unconscious process, and therapeutic action. As Merton Gill (1995) elaborated, “classical theory emphasizes defenses against drive, and relational theory emphasizes defenses against altering patterns of interpersonal relationships” (p. 93). Gill clarifies that the distinction here is innate vs. experiential, not intrapsychic vs. interpersonal. In fact, relational analysts are every bit as focused on dreams, fantasies, ucs process and other staples of the intrapsychic as are drive analysts. But for relational analysts, the intrapsychic is marked by the individual's idiosyncratic elaborations of actual relational experience. As a recent paper by the Boston Change Process Study Group (2007) argues, the interactive level has traditionally been seen as the mere instantiation of deeper forces and thus regarded as superficial. But, in a relational paradigm, the interactive process is primary, deep, “and generates the raw material from which we draw generalized abstractions that we term conflicts, defenses, and phantasy” (ibid., p. 16).

At the time that Mitchell and Greenberg’s book appeared, the dominant paradigm in psychoanalysis in the USA was ego psychology, but this paradigm was being challenged on several fronts, in particular, by the generation of interpersonalists that came after Sullivan, Homey, Fromm, and Thompson, primarily Edgar Levenson and Benjamin Wolstein, by Merton Gill, by the Balint-Winnicott wing of the British Independent Group; and by Kohut, founder of self psychology. When I trained in psychology in the 1980s, self psychology was clearly on its way to becoming the dominant paradigm, in part because increased awareness of the effects of trauma demanded theories that stressed what actually happened in one’s relational history. Although Mitchell (1988) went on to develop a version of what I will call the narrow definition of relational theory, his generous and intellectually curious spirit embraced all theorists who grounded their work in the ongoing effect of relational experience. So, in the broad sense, relational theory refers to any theory whose basic assumption is that development and unconscious phenomena are marked primarily by relationships, not by drives. This includes interpersonal, intersubjective, object relations, self psychology, and relational conflict models; indeed, conferences of the International Association of Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy, the organization Mitchell and others founded, often also include versions of Jungian, Lacanian, and Kleinian theory. But, even in their early work, Greenberg and Mitchell differentiated relational theories that are drive theories from relational and interpersonal models that “view relational configurations as derivative of actual experience with others . . .” (1983, p. 102). In these models, for example, pure pleasure seeking and pure rage are seen not as manifestations of drive, but of breakdown in relationships. Interpretations are not valued merely for the content they convey, but for the relational transformations the interpretive event triggers.

Having trained at the William Alanson White Institute in New York, Mitchell was greatly influenced by the interpersonal tradition. By Mitchell’s own account (2004, p. 532), Levenson was the “dominant intellectual influence at White” when Mitchell trained in the mid-1970s. Although others may not agree, I would place Levenson at the beginning of the relational tradition in its narrow sense, so I shall spend some time here elaborating the groundwork he laid. In 1972, Levenson wrote The Fallacy of Understanding, one thesis of which is that all concepts, including psychoanalytic ones, change in meaning over time, as does how we see patients and pathologies. Levenson calls the current age of psychoanalysis organismic, wherein the health of each part of the human system is considered to be dependent on the whole context in which we operate. Levenson uses the term perspectivism to describe the organism. In any given system, he argues, there are different realities operating and the perspective from which one sees things always makes sense to the person seeing it, that “within the organized totality of the
other person's world, his perceptions and behavior are coherent and appropriate" (ibid., p. 77). If this is the case, the analyst's job is not to show patients how they distort, and interpretation is neither the only nor even perhaps the primary tool in the analyst's toolkit; rather, understanding the sense it makes to the person is primary. On this, self psychology and the interpersonal school are in agreement. They diverge dramatically, however, on their view of the patient–analyst relationship and therapeutic action. Levenson's 'radicalism lies primarily in the way he elaborated on both Sullivan's idea of the analyst as participant observer and on the interpersonalist emphasis on the impact of culture. One thing that differentiates Levenson from most analysts in most schools is his view, derived from Fromm, Horney, Sullivan, and Thompson, that the family is only one of the systems that impacts the psyche; for Levenson, the culture is part of the psyche, too, and the 1972 book in fact includes an interesting study he did of adolescent dropouts. Levenson writes:

But if we also recognize the hierarchy of systems, the organization of systems, then it must also be recognized that... we belong to a network of hegemonic social structures, from our businesses or professions, through national and supernational networks. [ibid., p. 78]

Of course Levenson learned from Fromm, who wrote about the ways that particular social systems pull for particular kinds of social character. Levenson's focus is perhaps more indebted, however, to R. D. Laing, who tracked the way that people become part of the crazy systems in which they find themselves. "Enter a prison," Levenson says, "one is part of the prison system" (ibid., p. 165). Yet, Levenson's theory is not determinist: for interpersonalists, perceptions are shaped in interaction with others, not by the reactions of others. Levenson sustains the tension between an idiosyncratic subjectivity and interacting psyches permeated by social experience.

Perhaps Levenson's most important contribution to what has now become known as relational theory, however, was his development of a constructivist two-person vs. a one-person psychology. He says,

As psychotherapist, I cannot be sure that what I have said is heard as I said it, I cannot be sure that the perception of the patient, if different from mine, is any less appropriate, and I cannot be sure that I did not say what he thinks I said, rather than what I think I said. [ibid., p. 99]

Imagine, for a moment, what such a thought does to our traditional notions of transference and countertransference, projection and projective identification, neutrality and resistance. One could say, without too much exaggeration, that the pages of relational and interpersonal journals are currently filled with papers that elaborate the effects of Levenson's insight that every moment of the analytic encounter is shaped by the interaction between two unconscious minds, operating within power relations that are both symmetric and asymmetric (Aron, 1996). To return to my opening vignette, what Levenson means when he seeks a psychoanalysis that is "beyond understanding" is the acknowledgement of the analyst's complicity in what transpires in analysis. And this goes beyond postmodern and constructivist ideas of mere co-creation to the inevitability of what relational theorists call "mutual enactments". For Levenson, Freud's most important discovery has nothing to do with metapsychology or any particular contents of the mind; rather, the important discovery is that in talking, we recreate relational patterns. Levenson says,

It is not the therapist's uncoding of the dynamics that makes the therapy, not his "interpretations" of meaning and purpose, but, rather, his extended participation with the patient. It is not his ability to resist distortion by the patient (transference) or to resist his own temptation to interact irrationally with the patient (countertransference), but, rather, his ability to be trapped, immersed and participating in the system and then to work his way out. (1972, p. 183)

What distinguishes psychotherapy from psychoanalysis is that, in the latter, the continuous mutual enactments between patient and analyst are talked about and made explicit. As I shall discuss below, some of the most interesting contemporary relational and interpersonal analysts are trying to understand the nature of mutual enactments and how we get ourselves out of them.
Before leaving Levenson, I want to mention that because he sees analysis as primarily working "not because of what it says but how it proceeds" (1983, p. 111), because every interpretation is, for him, primarily an interaction, he describes the goal of analysis as "an expansion of awareness, an enrichment of pattern" (ibid., p. 31)—not, as classical analysis might argue, a relinquishing of infantile wishes or a correction of distortion.

Stephen Mitchell, as I said earlier, trained at White and was a student of Levenson's. In the 1980s, some members of the interpersonal/humanistic track faculty at the New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis invited Mitchell to teach object relations theory (Mitchell, 2004, p. 535). As I have heard it, however, some key interpersonalists in authority were opposed to teaching object relations in that track. In 1989, after some years of political power struggles between the interpersonal/humanistic track and the Freudian track, the "quasi-independent" (ibid.) relational track at NYU Postdoc was born. In that track, Mitchell worked with Emmanuel Gheft, Lew Aron, Jessica Benjamin, Neil Altman, and many of the other clinicians who would become the face of relational psychoanalysis. Meanwhile, analysts such as Jay Greenberg, Darlene Ehrenberg, Phillip Bromberg, and Donnel Stern, assuming both interpersonal and relational identities, have developed their own integrated versions of interpersonal analysis at William Alanson White and in the pages of their journal, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*. For example, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* published Irwin Hoffman's foundational relational paper, "The patient as interpreter of the analyst's experience" in 1983, the same year Greenberg and Mitchell's book came out. In 1991, Mitchell founded *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, the high quality of which brought relational theory into the US mainstream.

Before moving on to elaborate the way I use relational theory in my own work, I want to mention briefly four emphases of relational theory that appear to me to mark the way this school differs from other psychoanalytic schools: development, the unconscious, mutual enactments, and the pleasures of attunement. With regard to development, Hirsch (1998) has persuasively argued that a primary difference between even those who consider themselves relational in the narrow sense is whether or not they attribute psychopathology to developmental arrest (as self psychologists do) or to unconscious conflict. Mitchell disagrees with developmental models that privilege early over later experience, and he critiques the developmental arrest model because it figures the subject as a stuck baby and not as an active weaver of the loom of his/her experience (1988, p. 274). Both models tend, however, to ground human motivation in the "striving for safety and security of self and for loved others" (Hirsch, 1998, p. 518). This premise derives from Sullivan and Fromm, as well as from Fairbairnian object relations theory and attachment theory. If we recall Levenson's suggestion that all psychoanalytic theories and diagnostic categories are historical, we might wonder about the current dominance of relational theories in the USA: does their dominance suggest that we live in a historical moment in which the anxiety about security is more salient than anxiety about sex and aggression?

Personally, I am more drawn to a conflict model such as the one elaborated by Mitchell, who suggests that the way we respond to the unique relational matrices in which we develop, our relational history, makes us who we are. In his developmental theory, psychosexual stages, Oedipus complexes, dichotomies between the pre-oedipal and oedipal are subordinate to the relational contexts in which they occur. Mitchell’s thesis is that what is deep in the psyche, what is intrapsychic, is a result of childhood experiences of separation, physical illness and pain, sibling comparison and competition, childhood dependency. These, he says,

and other travails of early life are certain to make childhood at least intermittently stormy, and early relationships inevitably somewhat insecure... One is always, in some ultimate sense, at the mercy of adults, [and the child has to] design himself within the spaces provided by the contours of parental character... [1988, pp. 275-276]

So, sources of conflict derive from the pull to mould oneself to parental and cultural demands, to negotiate union vs. separateness, from the demand on the child to work out how to accommodate simultaneously to mother and father when the rules for accommodation conflict. Development is not about shifting zones, but about shifting relational needs that grow in complexity and intimacy (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983, pp. 102-103).
Most critiques of relational theory focus on what appears to other schools to be its emphasis on surface and its abandonment of unconscious process. Relational theorists are only fairly recently beginning to elaborate the theory of unconscious process that has been implicit in many of their clinical descriptions. One such elaboration grounds unconscious process in dissociation of relational experience rather than repression of unacceptable impulses. A cornerstone of Sullivan’s (1953) theory, elaborated by Fromm, was the idea (borrowed from George Herbert Mead’s model of self) that the slings and arrows of early relational experience lead to splits between what a person considers me and not-me. Children intuit from the beginning what self states are and are not responded to, what the parent finds acceptable and unacceptable, and often the unacceptable parts of self and modes of relating are dissociated. Bromberg (2003) writes about the undramatic but highly painful traumas of living day in and day out in a family that systematically disavows the existence of a child’s subjective experience and discredits the validity of that child’s emotional states. Traumas of all kinds make a person hypervigilant for a repeat, always screening for danger; the screening itself makes it very hard to have new experience that would contest the old.

A key premise of relational analysis is that mutual enactments are at the heart of treatment, not just the dramatic enactments exemplified by my opening vignette, but the sometimes hard to work out ongoing impasses that make a treatment feel dead or hostile or otherwise stuck. Like contemporary Kleinians, relational analysts follow the moment-to-moment conscious and unconscious interactions in treatment, assessing effects of interpretations and other interventions, tracking affective shifts, looking for what Betty Joseph (1985) calls the total transference: that is, the way in which what the patient talks about is enacted in the entire session. In tracking affect and patient responses, however, relational analysts, unlike contemporary Kleinians, believe that the patient is simultaneously tracking the analyst, picking up on shifts of affect, empathic failures, body language, defensiveness. Some contemporary Bionians, such as Antonino Ferro (2002), similarly track the analyst’s effect on the patient and, like Bion, emphasize the importance of tolerating uncertainty, but relational analysts differ in that they not only track effects but stress the importance of being willing to be open about the way their own unconscious process may have entered into the mix. They often do not keep the data in their own heads the way Ferro does, and they do not necessarily try to “correct” their stance if the patient reacts with anxiety to an intervention. Rather, the data is considered crucial to both the patient’s and the analyst’s understandings of the system that they have formed. As Irwin Hirsch has put it, the interpersonal/relational idea of therapeutic action is “highlighted by becoming confused, transformed, and lost in unwitting enactments, living out old repetitions before arriving at new interactional experience” (1998, p. 512).

Donnell Stern (2004) offers a compelling interpersonal/relational view of mutual enactments, which he defines in the narrower sense of breakdowns in the relation between analyst and patient. Many relational analysts assume that we are made up of multiple and often conflicting self-states that emerge from the variety of relational experiences we have had. Stern (1997, 2004) distinguishes between bad-me and good-me states, which reveal themselves in treatment through inconsistencies and contradictions, and me and not-me states that are only available through enactment because, in his view, they have never been formulated and never been conscious. For Stern (2004), “Enactment is the interpersonalization of dissociation: the conflict that cannot be experienced within one mind is experienced between or across two minds” (p. 213, see also, Bromberg, 2003). A major difference between Kleinian views of projective identification and relational views of enactment, then, is that relational theorists see the analyst as complicit, as a co-initiator. In Stern’s view, mutual enactments involve mutual or reciprocal dissociations:

When the analyst participates in an enactment, it is because she dissociates; and when she dissociates, it is because she finds herself in circumstances that make her vulnerable in a way she can manage, for the time being, only by dissociating. . . . The patient cannot provoke such a dissociation if the analyst is not vulnerable to it. . . . The analyst’s role is not defined by invulnerability . . . but by a special (though inconsistent) willingness, and a practiced (though imperfect) capacity, to accept and deal forthrightly with her vulnerability. [Stern, 2004, p. 216]
Stern, following Levenson, suggests that the way out of an enactment occurs when either analyst or patient perceives what is going on in a different way and can either experience the two states that make up the enactment as an internal conflict or can suddenly see the other in an empathic rather than an adversarial light. Only then can the pair reflect on what has happened; only then can the patient experience an internal conflict rather than a dissociated state. Not all relational theorists agree with Stern (and Bromberg’s) views on the primacy of dissociation; conflict models of unconscious process are more prominent for other theorists. But enactment and resolving impasse are central themes in contemporary relational theorizing.

Finally, a major premise of relational theory derives from Jessica Benjamin’s (1988) elaboration of the pleasures of attunement—whereas most analytic theories did and do posit an originary merger between baby and mother, Benjamin, drawing on the infant research of Daniel Stern (1985), Louis Sander (1983), and others, posits a baby and mother system centred on mutual regulation of affect and self states. The baby, Stern argued, is never in a merged or symbiotic phase, but rather has subjectivity from the outset. Based on contemporary research, Stern and the other members of the Boston Change Process Study Group (2007) argue that humans have an innate capacity and need to intuit the intentions of others with whom they engage, and this capacity temporally precedes capacities for symbolization. By the age of ten months, co-created mutual accommodations and attunements become a source of the baby’s pleasure. Benjamin counters centuries of Western philosophy and decades of analytic theory by arguing that the Other is not necessarily a hostile presence bent on limiting my freedom. Rather, by insisting on the mother’s subjectivity—not the ground against which a boy baby develops but a figure in relation with boy and girl babies—Benjamin accents the pleasures of affective, verbal, and body attunement between self and other. Writing within a second wave feminist tradition, which includes, as Susie Orbach’s chapter in this volume elaborates, the work of the Women’s Therapy Centre Institute (see, for example, Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1983), Benjamin’s developmental theory puts connection on an equal footing with autonomy, countering centuries of political, philosophical, and psychological theories that exact and ideologically enforce the split between agency and connection, and devalue connection—a split that works so well for capitalism and patriarchy.

Benjamin (2004) places the striving for mutual recognition at the heart of analysis, a developmental achievement that she erects into an ethical principle of psychoanalysis. But equally important, both for clinical work and for social theory, are her contributions on the ways that this striving inevitably breaks down into what she calls doer-done to relations. Indeed, the most intractable problems patients have, and the kind of dramatic enactments that often lead to impasse in analysis, occur when recognition fails, interactions are locked into patterns of dominance and submission, and patient and analyst treat each other as objects rather than subjects. Benjamin (1988, 1990, 2004) emphasizes a developmental line of intersubjective experience that is built from histories of mutual attunement and from surviving inevitable relational cycles of rupture and repair. We might state her psychoanalytic ethics as follows: where doer-done to relations were, there mutual recognition between subjects shall be. (In her 1990 paper, Benjamin argues that the contribution that relational theory makes to existent analytic theories and practices that elide real others with their internal representation is to insist that “where objects were, subjects must be” [p. 34].)

To conclude this section on the history and key assumptions of relational analysis, I want to emphasize that both Levenson’s work and relational analytic theory have clearly been influenced not just by their analytic forebears (Sullivan, Fromm, Ferenczi, and Fairbairn), by structuralism, systems theory, and any number of other paradigms, but most profoundly by the new social movements of the 1950s through the 1970s in the USA. Even where there is no acknowledgement of the importance of the cultural surround—a regression, to my mind, from early interpersonal insights—the challenge relational theory poses to the analyst’s authority and omniscience is unthinkable without taking into account the period in which US relational theorists came of age, a “question authority” era of civil rights, Marxist activism, Vietnam, Watergate, feminism, and gay liberation. The third issue of the inaugural 1991 volume of Dialogues highlighted a feminist relational rethinking of gender. A left flank of relational psychoanalysts has done groundbreaking work on the ways class, race, gender, and politics inflect clinical
practice (see, among others, Altman, 1995; Benjamin, 1988; Corbett, 2001; Dimen, 2003; Domenici & Lesser, 1995; Goldner, 1991; Harris, 2005; Layton, 1998; Leary, 1997).

From culture to couch

My own work on gender and other identity categories is informed by Benjamin’s psychoanalytic ethics. In my 1998 book, Who’s That Girl? Who’s That Boy? Clinical Practice Meets Postmodern Gender Theory, I proposed a model for thinking about gender identity that I thought could account both for the narcissistic wounds incurred from living in a sexist culture and for the kinds of gendered experience we all have that make us feel good about being men or women or something in between. I called it a negotiation model (a term elaborated by Pizer, 1998), because I wanted to capture the way we constantly negotiate gender identity both from doer-done to relations—where we are treated as objects—and from relations of intersubjective mutuality, where we are treated as subjects. Gender negotiations include those between the often conflicting gender fantasies, desires, and norms of one’s parents, culture, and subculture. In my own family, for example, there were clear messages about what girls could and couldn’t do, and I do not think my 1950s lower middle-class white family was unique in endorsing gender norms in which males had agency and women were to subordinate their agentic capacities to what Dorothy Diimerstein (1976) once described as women’s monstrously overdeveloped capacity for unreciprocated empathy. At the same time, those clear messages were undercut by unconscious ones and by mother messages and father messages that were in conflict. My mother, for example, was the resentful breadwinner who felt that it was men’s role to be the breadwinner. Circumstances made her unable to enact the gender norms proper to her class, norms that organized her desire and whose very function was to distinguish her from white and black working-class females who had to work. My father was a nurturer who was rarely home because of the constraints of work. Further, I knew from playing with my girlfriends that my body could give itself over to fantastic flights of exuberance no matter what anyone said about being ladylike, and I knew, too, that I could be truly aggressive and mean. But many of these experiences went underground, split off as not-me or bad-me when the time came to be ladylike and nice enough to get adult and male approval, and when the time came to make sure my developing body would not invite dangerous assault. As Benjamin (1988) described it, my desires for agency did not disappear, but rather were projected on to the males who were to play subject to my object, and they were distorted into covert ways of getting what I wanted, for example, nagging. Towards the end of my analysis, I was describing to a friend the way that I felt I had given over my agency to men and then hated them for their selfish display, and how that was changing now that I had begun to reclaim agency and rework the way I related to others—she responded by sending me a card that showed a weeping cartoon woman and a caption that read: “Oh my God! I think I’m becoming the man I wanted to marry!”

My book was in part written “against” postmodern theories that suggest that identity categories are necessarily coercive and oppressive, that no version of racial or gender identity is healthy. I wrote about the way gender and other categories can facilitate growth and transformation, how feminism and gay liberation redeployed categories built on splitting into categories that differentiated without splitting. At the same time, I wanted to give the coercive aspect of identities their due, because so often psychoanalytic theory ignores the psychic effects of the power hierarchies in which we live. To better understand the regressive and foreclosing use of identity categories, I began elaborating the concept of “normative unconscious processes” (2002, 2004, 2006a,b). With this term, I refer to the psychological consequences of living in a culture in which many of the norms serve the dominant ideological purpose of maintaining power inequities. More particularly, I have investigated the consequences of living within particular class, race, sex, and gender hierarchies. My assumption is that these hierarchies, which confer power and exist for the benefit of those with power, tend not only to idealize certain subject positions and devalue others, but tend to do so by splitting human capacities and attributes and giving them class or race or gender assignations. To be proper subjects, members of the dominant group are pulled to split off what the norm disavows and project it on to abject subordinate groups. Thus do psychological structures such as dependency,
reason, vulnerability, and emotion become gendered, raced, classed, and sexed. In my book, I noted, as have many feminists, that sexism and capitalism aligned in the nineteenth century to split the public from the private sphere and to gender the former masculine and the latter feminine. In so doing, human capacities that belong together, agentic capacities and relational capacities, were torn asunder, and we still treat the psychic consequences of that split. Indeed, I believe that this split produces two subtypes of narcissism that we have come to call traditional masculinity and femininity: in the one, embeddedness in relation is split off, which results in a version of autonomy based in grandiosity, devaluation of the other, and needs to distance. In the other, agentic capacities are split off, which results in a version of relatedness in which self-deprecation, idealization of the other, and longings for merger predominate.

As my autobiographical gender example suggests, norms are rarely internalized without conflict. Because the hierarchies split and categorize human attributes and capacities, we find in the clinic and in our lives unceasing conflict between those unconscious processes that seek to maintain the splits and those that refuse them. The ones that seek to maintain the splits are those that I call “normative unconscious processes”. So, normative unconscious processes are those unconscious processes that pull to repeat affect/behaviour/cognition patterns that uphold the very social norms that cause psychic distress in the first place. For example, I said above that traditional gender norms split capacities for connection and dependence from capacities for agency and independence, and gender the former female and the latter male. Adherence to those norms brings about the very symptoms we treat: conforming to the norms of femininity can make and has made women feel “unfemale” and hurtful to others when they pursue their own interests, and conforming to masculine norms can make men feel “feminine” when they cry or express vulnerability. What is unconscious and conflictual is produced from the way a culture or subculture’s norms psychologically constitute dependence and independence. People tend to have no idea that what they suffer from is the way they have split the two, why it is so difficult to feel like a man when feeling vulnerable, why it is so hard simultaneously to accomplish a sense of competence and a sense of connection.

Normative unconscious processes, then, are one of the psychic forces that push to consolidate the “right” kind of identity and to obfuscate the workings of unequal power hierarchies. They protect the psychic splits that cultural norms mandate, and they do so because the risk of contesting them is loss of love and social approval. But let us not forget that the result of splitting is to keep what has been split off near. Repetition compulsions are the very place where the struggle between coercive normative unconscious processes and counter-normative unconscious processes are enacted. And, since all identities are relational, these repetitions are stirred up and played out in relation. In the clinic then, we are likely to find patient and analyst engaging all the time in enactments of normative unconscious processes, enactments in which the therapist is either unconsciously pulled by the same norms as those pulling the patient, or is herself pulled by oppressive norms.

I have elsewhere discussed a range of such enactments (Layton, 2002, 2006a,b). In a psychotherapy with an Asian American gay male patient who tended to stereotype Westerners and Asians rather rigidly, I found myself unconsciously supporting dominant racial and gender norms by feminizing him (Layton, 2006a). Over time, he had described several situations in which he thought Westerners reacted differently from the way he did. In some instances, he felt superior to Westerners; in others, he felt inferior. For instance, he told me that when people were walking towards him on the street, he always stepped aside. His white Western boyfriend had pointed that out to him in a way that suggested he was not assertive enough. He was confused, because to him this felt polite. But he wondered if he was being a doormat in this and other situations. At one point, I told him I was struggling to understand this dilemma. I said that I recognized in part what he described had to do with norms of politeness that he preferred to what he called Western rudeness, but that I also recognized in what he was describing the position of female subordination to men that feminists such as Benjamin have written about. As it turned out, the latter part of what was meant to be an empathic comment seems to have reignited wounds that undoubtedly derive from the way Asian males are feminized in white Western culture and with the way gay males are feminized in heterosexual culture. Something unconscious in my own history, an area of my own gender and
sexual vulnerability, made me humiliate him; and, towards the end of the session, he retaliated by telling me he was thinking of ending therapy, and then associating to the younger, more beautiful female therapist he had seen before he began his work with me. Moments such as these illustrate a relational perspective on identity, revealing the way that our own identity investments can consciously and unconsciously work to repudiate the investments of others. As Bourdieu (1984) might say, we secure our “distinction” as we defend against vulnerability.

In another moment of the same treatment, I colluded with him in upholding a fantasy that I, like all of the white boyfriends he chose, held the invulnerable position of whiteness. He longed for a position in which he would be immune from gender, racial, and other slights, and he associated that position with whiteness. I suppose I, too, longed for a superior position in which I might be invulnerable, so I unconsciously accepted that interpellation. Once I realized that I was performing “whiteness” to his inferior non-whiteness, I began to ask different questions of him than I had been asking, trying then to deconstruct whiteness and figure out what were the vulnerable parts of himself that he hated and how whiteness had both wounded him and become for him a fantasy guarantee that he would never again feel the pain of inferiority and humiliation.

In a paper titled “Attacks on linking: the unconscious pull to dissociate individuals from their social context” (2006b), I wrote about the way I frequently enact in treatment professional norms that dictate that we separate the psychic from the social. One of my patients reported a political dream and, as we explored the dream, I found myself struggling against reducing totally drama her civic passion about what had become of her beloved American ideals. She, too, felt that what she was talking about was not proper therapy talk. Only when I resisted making reductive interpretations was she able to explore what Andrew Samuels (1993) has called the political psyche, and this experience taught me that we ought to add the capacity for civic passion and action to Freud’s two criteria for health, the ability to love well and to work well. Finally, in “Cultural hierarchies, splitting, and the heterosexist unconscious” (2002), I discussed an enactment in which a lesbian client’s desire for me led me to “reassure” her, but really me, that we would not be sexual together. She was complaining that her partner never touches her in the right way, and for several days before that she had been telling me about elaborate sexual fantasies that she was having about me. Only vaguely aware of my anxiety, I said that here she did not have to worry about me touching her in the wrong way, since here we would not become sexual. She felt shamed and she stopped talking about her sexual desire immediately. Over the course of the next months, she began to experiment with “girly” things, clothes, manicures, that she had never tried before. Analysing this sequence later, I thought about the way psychoanalytic developmental theories have made identification and desire either/or, and the way this either/or supports compulsory heterosexuality (see O’Connor & Ryan, 1993), as the developmental norm is to identify with the same-sexed parent and desire the opposite-sexed parent. I surmised that my comment, which had clearly stemmed from my own anxiety, had perhaps “heterosexualized” her in just the way heterosexualization might happen developmentally—where, for example, a mother’s anxiety about her daughter’s desire for her might cause the child to repress desire and replace it with a non-erotic form of identification, if such there is (Layton, 2000). Had I dealt with my own erotic feelings, I might have sustained with her the ambiguities of sexual desire; instead, I sustained a straight-gay split, and, in so doing, upheld the heterosexual norm. In this case that meant shaming the gay patient, precisely what the enforcement of heterosexual norms is designed to do. Fearing arousal of my own homosexual desire, I shut sexuality down.

These examples all reveal one way that culture crashes into the clinic, and the way relational perspectives on enactment, mutuality, and complicity engage socially constructed unconscious processes.

From couch to culture

Earlier, I mentioned Mitchell’s insight that “one is always in some sense at the mercy of adults” (1988, pp. 275–276). In her 2004 book, Precarious Life, Judith Butler takes this crucial insight from relational thinking in an important political direction. In the book’s chapter, “Violence, mourning, politics”, first published in the primarily relational analytic journal, Studies in Gender & Sexuality, Butler argues
that the self is constituted by relations with actual others from the outset, others to whom we are vulnerable and on whom we depend. Vulnerability is thus a key attribute of being human. Personal experiences of loss, grief, and desire all reveal to us the ways that we are in “thrall” to our others; they reveal that relationships can turn our lives upside down; transform us, and make us lose the sense of boundedness that usually governs our self-perceptions. The self constituted in relationships can thus not know in any clear way where I end and the other begins. Moving to the terrain of ethics, Butler argues that it is not the Other itself, but rather the Other’s vulnerability and precariousness that call on me to take care of the other. Given these premises, Butler begins to define a new kind of politics: alongside a politics that presumes an autonomous, bounded individual, a necessary presumption, Butler feels, for a politics of sexual, racial, and abortion rights, she argues for a politics grounded in the fact that we are all born vulnerable to and dependent on others.¹

“Loss,” Butler says, “has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all” (2004, p. 20). She herself is clearly wrecked by the losses incurred from AIDS, from 9/11, from the Iraq and Afghan wars, from Palestinian suicide bombers and Israeli occupiers. One of her agendas in the book is to reveal the way that public discourses authorize some losses to be grieved while others remain invisible and thus ungrievable. The Iraqi dead, for example, are nowhere represented in the USA.

Benjamin, too, formulates a politics based on the ways we are tied to one another. Rather than privilege loss and grief, however, she privileges the development of mutual recognition, which, as I said above, grows out of the mutual attunements co-created by parent and child. Thus, the pleasures of attunement and what Benjamin (2004) will call “surrender”, a “certain letting go of the self” that lets us take in the point of view of the other, have a lawfulness quite different in kind from oedipal law. Where oedipal law prohibits, erects boundaries, instantiates the nom du père, the pleasures of attunement and mutual recognition exist in a Winnicottian potential space in which self and other are able to sustain difference while remaining connected.

Both Benjamin and Butler complicate analytic and political work on the concept of recognition by stressing that societies have norms of recognition, norms that dictate who will be recognized as human and how they will be recognized. As Butler puts it, “The ‘I’ who cannot come into being without a ‘you’ is also fundamentally dependent on a set of norms of recognition that originated neither with the ‘I’ nor with the ‘you’” (2004, p. 45).

Butler draws our attention, then, to the misuses of the other’s vulnerability, citing two of Levinas’s assertions that I feel need to be thought together rather than separately: the first is that “ethics is precisely a struggle to keep fear and anxiety from turning into murderous action” (xviii). The second is Levinas’s assertion that the fact that the other dies calls on me not to be indifferent to his/her death. These assertions, it seems to me, resonate with what I earlier spoke of as Benjamin’s psychoanalytic ethics: where doer-done to relations were, there mutual recognition between subjects shall be. In “Retaliatory discourse. The politics of attack and withdrawal” (Layton, 2006c), I discussed my experience with patients who repeatedly re-create doer-done to relational configurations because of their shame about their vulnerability, which they construe as “weakness”. Repeated relational traumas have made them despise their own vulnerability, dependency, and need for the other. They feel it is their fault that their vulnerability was misused. While they struggle to feel safe with others, in fact they keep staging experiences in which they are either the perpetrator or the victim, in which they either attack the other or angrily withdraw.

Extrapolating—cautiously—to the political realm, I think that what we see in the USA currently is a politics of attack and withdrawal that is based on stoking fear and anxiety and simultaneously making it shameful to be fearful and anxious. We see a politics of attack on the part of an odd coalition of Republican neo-conservatives and neo-liberals, whose policies have brought about economic insecurity for just about everyone, in league with Christian and non-Christian social conservatives engaged in a backlash operation against gays, women, blacks, Muslims, immigrants, and many other categories traditionally labelled Other. And we see a politics of withdrawal on the part of the Democratic Party, liberal elites, and even many progressives who feel helpless in the face of
global corporate power, media consolidation, and a right-wing government that takes pride in waging pre-emptive war abroad and destroying social services and safety nets at home. (Between the time I wrote this paper and the time of preparing it for publication, there has been some change in US politics. In November 2006, Democrats won a majority in the House and a very slim majority in the Senate. There have been some legislative attempts to question the Bush administration’s encroachments on civil liberties and to curb or halt the Iraq War, although Bush has vetoed the Iraq legislation to date. Yet, there is truth to the Democrats’ rhetoric that they were elected to end the war, and Bush’s incredibly low poll ratings, 28% at this writing, suggest that the public supports neither his foreign nor his domestic policies.) In both the politics of attack and the politics of withdrawal, vulnerability is defended against and ties to the vulnerability of others are denied.

In thinking about this political impasse, I have found helpful Jessica Benjamin’s (2004) elaboration of a relational concept of “thirdness”, which focuses on the way the analyst inevitably becomes complicit in the repetition of doer-done to dynamics and must continually find a space outside those dynamics so patients can find their way out. Thirdness, she says, is constituted in “early, presymbolic experiences of accommodation, mutuality, and the intention to recognize and be recognized by the other . . .” (p. 19).

When patient and analyst are caught in those inevitable impasses in which each feels done to by the other, Benjamin calls for the analyst to act as a moral third, “to sustain the tension of difference between my needs and yours while still being attuned to you” (p. 13). The analyst is called upon to break the deadlock of mutual helplessness by saying “I’ll go first”, by making a gesture that ends the cycle of shame and blame (p. 33). The analyst surrenders to an awareness of reciprocal influence (p. 11), where surrender “implies freedom from any intent to control or coerce” (p. 8). Such surrender creates what she calls symbolic or interpersonal thirdness.

Who will take this first step on the political stage? Who will say, “I’ll go first?”

There has been much talk of political Third Ways, talk that too often issues from centrist governments that pose no real challenge to free market ideologies. A real third way, given the state of affairs in the USA at the moment, would require a media and government that takes Levinas’s and Benjamin’s psychoanalytic ethical stance seriously, that provides containment for fear and anxiety rather than stoking it either to murderous rage or selfish, save your own skin withdrawal. Butler’s relational suggestion that we make vulnerability the ground of a politics that might get us outside of doer-done to retaliatory discourse takes us in the right direction. Were the powerful in the USA able to tolerate their vulnerability and truly recognize our interdependence with others in the world, we might see different economic, environmental, and arms policies, and we might see a re-establishment of the social safety net that made all too brief an appearance on the stage of US history. But money and privilege allow the powerful to protect themselves against feeling vulnerable. The 2006 US Senate and House elections suggest, however, that the disaffected and angry population may be preparing to “go first”. Battered as we are by anxieties about being able to hang on to what we have, distracted as we are by “infotainment”, we are perhaps beginning the process of questioning the fantasies of glory we have been seduced by, and beginning to deal with our shame about vulnerability. Perhaps we are in the process of connecting our own vulnerability to that of those we have sent to fight our wars and die; perhaps we are ready to emerge from our state of helpless withdrawal and take to the streets.

I hope to have shown some of the possibilities, for both individuals and groups, of a relational understanding of identity, connection, autonomy, and interdependence, as well as of impasse and struggle. To return to my opening vignette, I reiterate that what relational psychoanalytic thinking offers, both for individual treatment and for political process, is a counter-cultural discourse on vulnerability, interdependence, and the need to acknowledge our inevitable complicity in the suffering of others.

Note

1. I find Butler’s argument elegant and persuasive. But I wonder if she cedes too much to the bounded self of individualism when she accepts the dualism of two kinds of self and two kinds of politics. It seems to me that a politics of rights can also be grounded in a relational understanding of selfhood, and, if it were, different narratives might serve to express, for example, a woman’s right to choose abortion. Indeed,
perhaps some of the politically divisive problems to which rights-based theories give rise are due to their grounding in a bounded self. Nancy Fraser (1997) discusses some of these problems, for example, the way that rights discourses, in demanding recognition of difference, can in fact rigidify difference, minimize similarity, and create greater tension between groups.

References
CHAPTER TWO

Democratizing psychoanalysis

Susie Orbach

From the 1930s to the 1970s, there was an extraordinary intellectual flowering within psychoanalysis. The Balints, object relations theory, Winnicott, Fairbairn, Guntrip, Bowlby and attachment theory, the work of R. D. Laing and his colleagues, the anti-psychiatry movement, all attempted to resituate and recast what psychoanalysis had turned into. Then, Independents such as Bolas and Rycroft, contemporary Freudians such as the Sandlers and Fonagy, the clinical and theoretical innovations of The Women’s Therapy Centre, Nafsyat and other equally radical therapy initiatives, all these different tendencies focused on the actual experience of patients, their history, and the ways in which intrapsychic development was an outcome of the internalizations of relationships they had experienced from the earliest moment of their entry into the world.

This emphasis on the actual, has swept through nearly all psychoanalytic schools: Jungian, Object Relations, contemporary Freudian, Kohutian. It was always the basis, in the USA, of the work of the Interpersonalists, the Intersubjectivists, and of latterly...