

## Postmodern Contextualism, Meaning and the Theory of Social Character

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Democracy and the defense of human rights are the highest achievements of modern western civilization. They represent the peak of the human process of individuation. The lack of a profound sense of community life that was highly valued in ancient cultures engendered by the same system constitutes a fundamental source of human alienation (Gojman 1996). The "totalitarianism of the laws of the market" (Bellah, 1992), with its foolish and indulgent waste of the planet's non-renewable resources, and the human suffering fostered by the inequality and poverty it produces is the principal threat to its subsistence.

Only by the recognition of diversity can political liberalism legitimize the participation of plural non-totalitarian justice and its responsible awareness of democracy as an unending process in which dialogue must be meticulously pursued and permanently maintained. Postmodernism, as we will later explain, conceives this recognition as essential to the invention or creation of justice in each event. The liberalism vs. communitarianism debate in political thought has been a recurring and periodically corrective effort, which has deepened positions on either side: a sign of how talking about differences can enlighten and broaden opposing viewpoints.

The intimate quality of profound interpersonal relations and the dyadic process involved in responsive care (Ainsworth, 1978, Sroufe and Fleeson, 1986, Sroufe and Waters, 1977, Stern 1985) that are the basis for developing a "self in relation" have only recently been emphasized by women (Jordan et. al., 1991, Benjamin 1988). The importance of the transference-countertransference reproduction of it in the treatment process has fortunately been fully recognized by interpersonal and relational psychoanalytic schools (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1987, Hirsch 1998).

Erich Fromm formulated a socially-informed psychoanalytic perspective, one which recognizes context as a main source of unconscious processes and of the development of meaning. His concept of **social character** is an outstanding contribution to the social sciences, and creates a frame of reference for developing psychoanalytically-informed field research. A socially-rooted understanding of dynamic unconscious processes, developed through the assessment of character traits prevalent in diverse non-clinical populations, can on the other hand bring an experiential opportunity for analysts to gain critical insight on the psychoanalytic dialogue. Opening up a perspective on the social reality—both the patient's and the analyst's—(Millan, 1996) and the realization and understanding of different adaptive modes of relating can function as a resourceful and alternate internal supervision (Casement 1985) and foster a thoughtful comprehension on the multi-layered psychoanalytic process as it is imbricate with the social environment.

The concept of social character was originally postulated by Fromm (1930 in Fromm 1970) as the "character matrix common to all members of the group": "the drive structure, the libidinous and largely unconscious attitude of a group", the "character of a society" (1932 in Fromm 1970). Starting from the discovery of the dynamic concept of character—as one of Freud's greatest contributions to the science of man— the aim was to apply psychoanalytic categories to the study of



social groups. Common traits that "do not refer to the complete, highly individualized, in fact unique character structure as it exists in the individual, but to the character matrix, which has developed as an adaptation to the economic, social and cultural conditions common to that group" (Fromm and Maccoby 1996, 1970).

This concept explains how psychic energy in general is transformed into the specific form of psychic energy that every society needs to employ for its own functioning. "There is no 'society' in general" says Fromm in emphasizing diversity. "only specific social structures: each society and class demands different kinds of functioning from its members". Differing social contexts demand that its members relate differently to each other, i.e., to equals, superiors, or inferiors. The demands of the social role become "second nature", making the person want to do what he or she must do without being aware of the motivation. Society produces not only tools and machines but also the type of personality that employs energy voluntarily and unconsciously for the performance of a social role.

Recognizing the fundamental importance of childhood experiences as Freud did, Fromm's theoretical viewpoint concerning the essential influences in character formation is different, mainly implying a distinct viewpoint about the possibility of later change. Fromm points out that there is a certain sequence in the development of the child with regard to the stages that were postulated, although it does not seem to be as strict as Freud assumed. Clinical and social data suggest, he says, that the child starts out with all the potential modes, some stronger, others constitutionally weaker, and experiments with various character orientations. Eventually, the ones that become dominant are those most suited for adaptation to his or her particular environment. The importance of childhood experiences (very much mediated by the child's constitution) by no means excludes later changes in character.

Fromm's understanding of social character formation - which recognizes the need for human relatedness as a fundamental key for human growth (Millan 1996, p329)- is impressively coherent with what comes to be supported by attachment theory and the outcomes of its most sophisticated current methodological research. Preverbal early experiences may have special significance because they are not accessible to verbal recall; 'unconscious processes' are thus set in the initial phases, which are immensely important, but not absolutely determinant, to how experiences become interpreted later on. "Prior history is part of current context, playing a role in selection, engagement, and interpretation of subsequent experience and in the use of available environmental supports" (Sroufe, 1999 p1). Meaning does determine in a large part what is lived through the ways in which experiences become interpreted. Through these interpretations the subjects *become* involved in different experiences that can either close or open alternative modes of relation. Hope is a matter central to development and to human experience in general and to the clinical practice in particular (Fromm 1968). It is a consequence from being cared for in a responsive way. It becomes manifest through the child's expressions of its own needs and feelings (as if) expecting and thus propitiating-provoking the corresponding responses from others. Hope is based on consistent previous experience that promotes similar consistent future interactions.

Since the family to which the child dynamically adapts, continues to represent the spirit of the society into which the child enters, the same influences which have been the main determinants from the beginning continue to mold the adolescent's and adult's character structure. Institutions of schooling, work and leisure do not differ essentially from the way of life transmitted to the child in his family. This is constantly reinforced later in life, provided that the social circumstances do not change



drastically. But when circumstances do change in a significant way, the child, and even later on the adult, may bring forth orientations which have been latent, and which are more suited to the new circumstances. A shared "human nature" (Fromm 1962) allows us to know ourselves by recognizing and understanding the broad and real differences in how we humans live and construct our personally and socially-biased identities. If we as professionals come to know and empathize with what it is and was like to live in the various alternative circumstances different from our own, we can achieve the task of experiencing from within human feelings (Narvaez 1981) and events which are difficult to articulate. In similar fashion, we frequently come to understand the most disturbed patients' experiences and messages through their frequently repetitive and provocative acting-out and their subtle ways of communicating.

Recognizing the numerous alternatives, views and social identities developed from different positions in the social world is crucial to a complex and profound understanding of the human experience. We comprehend and witness not only the varied perspectives, under which we all live, but also the power structure and its effects. Reflexive thinking and self-monitoring, a continual revision of one's own points of view, can be enhanced as a pervasive analyst's practice that is necessary not only through the training phases but for the rest of one's life. This kind of flexibility is sorely needed in today's complex world of rapid, global communication where differences tend to be disregarded. Today more than ever, we as professionals run the risk of falling into one of two opposing extremes that isolates us and impede dialogue: on the one hand an absolute relativistic nihilism, and on the other, an absolutely rigid totalitarian fundamentalism.

Postmodernism is a word characterized by ambiguity. On the one hand it is seen to describe a historical period; on the other it describes a desire, a mood that looks to the future to redeem the present. In placing the laboring body at the interface between consciousness and material history, Marxism offered the necessary explanatory and critical correlative of a modern culture whose technology divided human knowledge or consciousness from human power or material history. The continuous revolutionary shifts within capitalism have obliged Marxism to undergo sweeping self-reflection. Marxism is said to already have taken "the linguistic turn", pursuing the emancipatory goals of Marxist theory and practice, under the revised rubric of "communicative action" (Habermas, 1996).

Most other formerly dominant philosophical trends have also come under suspicion and revision. From an economic perspective, by reconsidering the issues of growth and sustainable development, Feminism and deconstructivism have criticized the monolithic institutions of western thinking. There is a growing awareness of issues relating to post-colonialist cultures. Developed countries are beginning to question not only the desire of their less developed counterparts for the same levels of consumerist technology that they enjoy, but also their reliance upon non-renewable planetary resources. A new political pluralism has taken shape, precisely at the moment when technology has allowed multinational companies to homogenize their forms of control (Friedman, 1999).

Theory, like any critical practice that makes a philosophically -founded claim, has entered into crisis itself. Knowledge has not only become uncertain, but we have begun to ask even how we can legitimize certain forms of knowledge and certain contents of knowledge. No single satisfactory mode of epistemological legitimization is available. The very Subject of consciousness has been thrown into doubt, as a result of deconstructivism and psychoanalysis, as it was indeed postulated in Fromm's Freudian-Marxist thought (Fromm 1932 in Fromm 1970).

