

INTERNATIONAL FORUM PAPER

In what sort of position is a psychoanalyst to speculate about the future impact of social, political, and technological change on human relationships? A pretty good one, I'd say. Of course, it would be really important not to get carried away: human experience, both individually and socially, is extraordinarily complex. It is impossible enough to speak about what is going on right now without being wildly selective and reductive. The past and the future are easier to talk about because we have less data and are therefore freer to make things up. Yet, I think psychoanalysts have learned quite a bit about human relationships, about the relational nature of human experience, in recent years, and that might serve if not as a sure-fire guide to the future, nevertheless as a reasonable basis for predicting what some of the basic issues might be.

For starters, I think we can say two things with great confidence: First, interpersonal and social relationships will never become unimportant to people, no matter how powerful their computers become. There is ample evidence from many different sources that our very essence as creatures, the way we are biologically constituted and neurophysiologically wired draws us very powerfully into relations with each other. And second, each of us will be involved, in our own particular fashion, in constructing a



personal, subjective world our of the relational matrix we live in.

There are certain fundamental tensions in our very nature as human beings that generate contradictions and paradoxes, the mysteries that have occupied generations of philosophers, theologians, psychologists, and psychoanalysts as well. We have evolved within the natural world; yet our bodies generate minds that have the capacity for culture and spirituality. Our brains are material substance; yet they generate minds that experience joy and sadness, sexuality and hatred, psychological states that in turn alter the very substance of our brains. We are thoroughly social and linguistic creatures, with psyches that cannot possibly develop in isolation; yet those same psyches construct internal worlds of subjective experiences that are profoundly personal and immutably private. These contradictions have been explored in many ways, from many different angles, and it is difficult to imagine a time when human beings will ever feel that their mysteries have been fully plumbed, their complexities fully clarified.

One of the fundamental projects of earlier generations of psychoanalytic theorizing was the exploration of the tension between our dual existence as biological and cultural creatures. Freud lived and worked in the wake of the Darwinian revolution, and he struggled throughout his long, extraordinarily creative career, to understand how



biology and culture converge, clash, and become reconciled in the human psyche.

A different, although not unrelated project (perhaps a radical reframing of Freud's project) has emerged within many areas of psychoanalytic theorizing of recent decades: an exploration of our dual existence as both social and personal creatures. We emerge out of and are saturated with relations with others, yet we organize our experience into selves with sacred, inviolable interiors, with boundaries, partly negotiable and partly non-negotiable. We have been struggling to grasp the complexities of the deep significance in our experience of the tension between the personal and the relational, between "oneness" and "twoness." (By twoness I am referring not to a singular other, but to the place of others, of "alterity" in general.)

One of my favorite metaphors for thinking about the paradoxes of human experience is Richard Hofstadter's image (in his remarkable book, GOEDEL, ESCHER, BACH) of the "crazy loop," which he demonstrates is fundamental to the "incompleteness theorem" of Godel's mathematics, the dizzying visual images of Escher, and the fugal structure developed by Bach. In crazy loops, basic processes generate results which circle back to alter the original processes from which they emerged. On Escher's stairs, for example, the climbers seem to ascend, step by step, only to discover themselves once again where they began, having completed the



journey yet starting over at the same time. The central feature of the human mind, Hofstadter argues, is a crazy loop in which the material substrate of the brain, our ``hardware'' (some people call it ``wetware'') generates mental processes, our ``software,'' that loop back to change the ``hardware'' in our brains which generates different programs, or processes that in turn change our brains in different ways. We are, in the language of Hofstadter's world of artificial intelligence, self-programming computers.

Hofstadter's crazy loops are vertical: lower generates higher which circles around to alter lower. But I would like you to imagine a horizontal crazy loop as a conceptual device for thinking about the relationship between oneness and twoness, the personal and the relational. In the beginning, we might say, is the relational, social, linguistic matrix in which we discover ourselves, or, as Heidegger put it, into which we are ``thrown.'' Within that matrix are formed, precipitated out, individual psyches with subjectively experienced interior spaces. Those subjective spaces begin as microcosms of the relational field, in which macrocosmic interpersonal relationships are internalized and transformed into a distinctly personal experience; and those personal experiences are, in turn, regulated and transformed, generating new interpersonal forms that alter macrocosmic patterns of interaction. Interpersonal relational processes generate intrapsychic relational



processes which reshape interpersonal processes reshaping intrapsychic processes, on and on in a self-generating crazy loop, an endless Mobius Strip in which internal and external are perpetually regenerating and transforming themselves and each other.

The shift in the center of gravity in psychoanalytic thought in recent decades from the biology/culture dialectic to the oneness/twoness dialectic is apparent in the ways in which that fundamental psychoanalytic premise - the unconscious - is now employed, both in theory and in clinical practice. In Freud's time and in Freud's way of thinking, the unconscious was dangerous because of its primitivity. The narcissistic blow we suffered with the discovery of the unconscious was, Freud suggested, the horrible truth that we are not masters in our own house. Who are the masters of the psyche? instinctual impulses and defenses against instinctual impulses, in all their complex derivatives and compromises. The unconscious, and resistances to the unconscious, were understood in terms of, to use Schafer's phrase, the narrative of the beast, the emergence of phylogenetic remnants in the life of culture, the power of biology to destabilize civilization.

This way of thinking about the unconscious surely has enduring relevance for us. But in our time, and in our ways of thinking, the destabilizing power of the unconscious, both within our own experience and as a doctrine, is increasingly understood not so much in terms of biology, but



in terms of otherness or ``alterity'' - the ways in which oneness is limited by, in some sense constituted by, twoness. As Sullivan argued over sixty years ago, our minds are not static structures which we carry with us, to be displayed in different contexts. What we carry around with us are potentials for generating recurrent experiences which are actualized only in specific contexts, in interpersonal exchanges with others. Conversely, our very thought processes are composed of language and interiorized conversations with others. Therefore, we are embedded, to a great extent unconsciously, in interpersonal fields; and, interpersonal configurations are embedded, to a great extent unconsciously, in our individual psyches.

This relational reformulation of unconscious processes has been apparent in many different areas of contemporary psychoanalytic thought: in the Lacanian reinterpretation of Freud in linguistic rather than biological terms; in Laplanche's derivation of the unconscious in the dissociated affect of the mother; in Loewald's (1978) notion of internal object relations in terms of the developmental construction of the ``other in oneself'' (p.14); in the shift from deriving anxiety from the aggressive instinct in classical Kleinian theory to the centrality of (object-related) depressive anxiety in contemporary Kleinian literature; in the contention of Daniel Stern (1984) and other infant researchers of the omnipresence of others in the subjective experience of babies; in formulations (e.g. Davies) of a



``relational unconscious;'' in the radical intersubjectivity of Irwin Z. Hoffman's methodology of ``dialectical constructivism'' and Thomas Ogden's concept of the ``analytic third;'' in Jessica Benjamin's integrative perspective on the developmental trajectory of intersubjectivity, and more. In all of these accounts, the unconscious is understood as a powerful, potentially disruptive force within human experience; however, the nature of the unconscious is understood as comprised not of endogenous instinctual forces but of residues of alterity, remnants of complex interactions with other people through whose caregiving, whose affective presence, whose language, we become formed as persons.

There are some contemporary post-modern critics of object relations and attachment theories who argue that the relational turn in psychoanalysis, the establishment of relationality as a universal, fundamental feature of human development, is ethnocentric. Everything is culturally relative, the argument goes, including relationality and attachment. The fascinating thing about this critique of relational theory is that it takes for granted the very phenomenon it is critiquing. Why is everything culturally relative? It can only be because human beings are fundamentally, thoroughly cultural creatues. But why would culture be so important? It can only be because human beings become human beings through attachments to and internalizations of their caregivers and the particular



culture they embody. Thus, the postmodern critique of relationality as universal and fundamental depends upon the presumption of relationality as universal and fundamental.

People in the future will struggle, just as we do, with coming to self-awareness in a social, linguistic, interpersonal context that surrounds them and infuses them. They will struggle, just as we do, with sorting out and organizing their own sense of who they are. However, the changes in social and political structure, the innovations in technology, are bound to make a difference. Some of the recent innovations accompanying computers are suggestive of both the positive and negative impacts of those changes.

Sherry Turkle has been one of the most thoughtful students of the psychological impact of technological change, and I would like to mention a couple of examples she has explored.

Consider ELIZA, one of the first computer programs designed to simulate psychotherapy. ELIZA was programmed to respond to the ``patient's'' associations with mostly mirroring or questioning responses, the sort of thing that most actual therapists probably do most of the time. Different people got more or less out of this experience, but one of Turkle observations struck me as particularly fascinating. ``I often saw people trying to protect their relationships with ELIZA by avoiding situations that would provoke the program into making a predictable response. They didn't ask questions that they knew would `confuse' the



program, that would make it 'talk nonsense.' And they went out of their way to ask questions in a form that they believed would provoke a lifelike response. People wanted to maintain the illusion that ELIZA was able to respond to them." (Turkle, 1984, p.40) Consider the parallel here with Merton Gill's argument that a central project of most analyses is the patient's resistance to allowing themselves to become aware of what they perceive and believe about the analyst in order to preserve the illusion that their analyst is able to maximally respond to them.

More recently (199x) Turkle studied MUDS, "multi-user domains" on internet chat rooms, in which participants play on-going games in which they construct characters for themselves to be in interactions with other participants. Some of the players Turkle interviewed played in several different games, as different persona, and for some their game self or selves had become much more compelling to them than "RL" or their "real" life. These computer games facilitate a kind of dissociation, generating states of mind and self-organizations that can be quite different from one's ordinary self. Is this a good thing or a bad thing? Turkle found both results. Some players became lost in their self-creations and their lives seem to have become enormously depleted. Other players used the remove of virtual reality to explore areas of self-experience they never would have allowed themselves access to in other



circumstances: cross-gender identifications, overcoming social inhibitions, expressing themselves creatively, etc.

This double quality matches my experience of the entry into a kind of global community which the internet allows. Instant communications and discussions of psychoanalytic ideas are now possible, and sometimes that opens up connections, builds bridges. Yet, instant communication also makes possible more facile communication, typing before you think much. I find myself in these situations less interested in what some famous European analyst might say today, for example, about a paper we are both reading than what she might say about the issue if she gave herself several months to think and write about it.

What I am suggesting is that globalization, rapid communications systems, high-speed information processing, are both very likely to change the forms through which human beings interpenetrate, connect with, and disengage from each other, and are also unlikely to fundamentally change the basic features of the project of being human.

