

Article

A FORK IN THE ROYAL ROAD: ON “DEFINING” THE UNCONSCIOUS AND ITS STAKES FOR SOCIAL THEORY

Lynne Layton

Harvard University, MA, USA

Correspondence: Lynne Layton, Committee on Degrees in Social Studies, Harvard University, Hilles Library, 59 Shepard St., Cambridge, MA 02138, USA

Abstract

A debate between Lynne Segal and Juliet Mitchell is the starting point of this inquiry into different notions about the nature of the unconscious. The paper argues that unconscious conflict derives both from universal sources and from historical contingencies, but that it is largely the latter that is the origin of neurotic misery (as opposed to “common” human unhappiness). Using clinical examples, the paper elaborates a relational perspective on unconscious processes and analytic treatment, at the center of which is the repetition compulsion. After discussing different theories about the relation between the psychic and the social, the paper proposes that the concept of normative unconscious processes provides a useful way to think about the link between social norms and subjective psychic reality.

Keywords

unconscious; repetition compulsion; normative unconscious; relational psychoanalysis; psychosocial theory

Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society (2004) 9, 33–51.

doi:10.1057/palgrave.pcs.2100001

For the most part, psychoanalytic practitioners and theorists write papers and give talks assuming that their view of the unconscious is the only, or at least the correct one. But every now and then either someone writes a paper that contrasts different views of the unconscious, or,



rarer still, we get to witness theorists from different schools engage in a debate that reveals the glaringly disparate assumptions that are entertained with regard to that elusive entity, the unconscious. It would be a very large project indeed to do a comparative study of different schools' ways of defining the unconscious and unconscious processes. I limit myself here to looking at a particular definitional struggle that has taken place among those who theorize the relation between psychoanalysis and the social world. Some engaged in this project believe that understanding the way the unconscious mind works is crucial to comprehending what transpires in the social world (for example, that we cannot understand ethnic conflicts without awareness of unconscious tendencies to split objects into good and evil or without understanding the death drive); others focus more on how what transpires in the social world, for example, changes in family structure, affects the way unconscious conflicts are lived. Others still are interested in what it is about fantasy and other psychic phenomena that makes us attach to or resist the status quo. In any case, one's understanding of the unconscious and unconscious processes ultimately determines the way one conceptualizes the relation between the psychic and the social. What I want to contrast here are two views of the unconscious that propose different sources of psychic pain, one based in the universal condition of subject formation, the other in historically contingent traumas. I argue that it is not the human condition itself, nor the general demands of "culture," but rather the way particular cultures manage the givens of the human condition that gives rise to the kind of unconscious conflicts that are most urgent to address both in psychoanalytic practice and in social theory.

The Segal–Mitchell debate

An exchange between Lynne Segal (2001) and Juliet Mitchell (2002) in *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* is my starting point; feminist theory, in fact, has been one important terrain on which struggles to define the unconscious have explicitly and implicitly taken place. In her piece, Segal, who writes from an object relational stance inflected by post-structuralism and feminism, criticizes Mitchell for adhering to a theoretical frame committed to the universal psychic effects of kinship structures: the Oedipus complex engendered by the heterosexual nuclear family; the Law of the Father; and, Mitchell's addition, the Law of the Mother: "You (the child) cannot be a mother now, but you, a girl, can grow up to be one, and you, a boy, cannot" (Segal, 2001, p. 334). Segal opposes Mitchell's theoretical commitments to those of Nancy Chodorow, Adrienne Harris, Virginia Goldner, and Jessica Benjamin (note the latter three are prominent members of the relational psychoanalytic school). As Segal puts it, Chodorow *et al* are theorists who understand gender and sexuality in a frame of historical contingency, theorists who have recognized that patriarchal structures are contingent and breaking down, have argued that mothers can

be agents of separation, and have theorized about the way that non-traditional family structures are producing new and different psychic conflicts and effects.

Mitchell replies that Segal has set up a binary opposition between a psychoanalysis rooted in universal law and a psychoanalysis rooted in historical contingency – and within this set-up she has consigned Mitchell to the more conservative preoccupation with universals, Chodorow *et al* to the more progressive preoccupation with historical contingency. But Mitchell counters that, in her view, the two preoccupations are not mutually exclusive; indeed, she protests that her project has always entailed looking at the interaction between the two. “Historical contingency,” Mitchell writes, “equates with family forms; kinship laws are connected with prohibitions” (p. 222). And here a claim about the true nature of the unconscious enters the argument. Chodorow *et al*, she continues, are doing psychosocial, not psychoanalytic work, and this distinction rests on Mitchell’s sense that psychosocial work involves conscious and preconscious processes, whereas psychoanalytic work involves the unconscious. In her view, the unconscious is a site formed by prohibitions on desire: “A dream or the symptoms of a neurosis such as hysteria or the ‘psychopathologies of everyday life’ have at their center a prohibition – it is because something is not allowed that it has been made unconscious and returns to overt expression in a transformed and unrecognizable form” (p. 223).

To illustrate the way she connects abstract universals and historical contingencies, Mitchell takes up Segal’s point that a mother’s interest may lie more in a cow than in her husband, part of Segal’s argument that to designate the agent of separation universally either as the biological father or as a “paternal metaphor” is to masculinize the separation process (and, although she does not say this, to consign the feminine – and women – to the realm of narcissistic lack of separateness). Mitchell retorts that what counts is

whether or not society endows that cow with the position from which its rules emanate. In other words, there are two possibilities: the cow can be a god, in which case one will offend only at the cost of a crime, perversion or neurosis; or it can be endowed with nothing more than its phenomenological form, in which case if, Titania-like, the mother is besotted with the cow, her baby will quite likely identify with some of its bovine features and will be teased at school for having done so unwittingly. We need to know both the more enduring, if very variable, rules of kinship and the historically specific family forms – but it is the former that relate to dynamically unconscious processes (pp. 223–224).

In other words, she sees the kind of work that Benjamin and Chodorow do – the work that, according to Mitchell, focuses largely on processes of identification – as non-psychoanalytic because not engaged with unconscious

processes. She agrees that processes of identification such as a girl's identification with the masculinity of her mother are unconscious in the sense that the subject is often not aware of having made them, but she says that such identifications are

descriptively unconscious, but ... not dynamically so; they can be reached without special psychoanalytic techniques and are best described as preconscious. This does not mean that they are not important, simply that they are not the same as those unconscious processes which have to do with laws, or what Segal dismisses as insignificant 'normative rules.' These latter, which I believe are still with us and, dare I say it, possibly always will be with us in all their diversity, relate to kinship rather than to the specifics of the particular family through which they will be expressed. (p. 223)

I cite these passages at length because I believe this debate between Segal and Mitchell is emblematic of a contemporary struggle for hegemony over the definition both of psychoanalysis and the unconscious. This is largely a struggle between drive theorists and theorists who no longer adhere to a drive model, for example, relational analytic clinicians and theorists. While drive theorists generally claim to know the proper realm and definition of the unconscious, relational theorists describe unconscious processes in their clinical articles but tend not to elaborate theoretically a definition of the unconscious. Yet, I believe their work has expanded our understanding of the sources and nature of dynamic unconscious conflict. Because relational theorists generally do not theorize the unconscious, the debate has often seemed to be a one-sided polemic, with drive theorists denigrating relational theorists. For example, I have frequently heard the work of relational analysts such as Benjamin, Stephen Mitchell, Irwin Hoffman, Lewis Aron, etc. critiqued by Kleinians, Lacanians, and others as not dealing with the unconscious. Indeed, my own work (Layton, 1998, 2002a) has been critiqued for collapsing the psychic into the social, and I imagine Mitchell would also feel that my work deals with preconscious rather than unconscious phenomena; Lacanians no doubt would view it as preoccupied with imaginary and symbolic identifications rather than with the unsymbolizable Real. What I would like to do here, then, is first to unravel some of the terms of the Segal–Mitchell debate to get clarity about what the differences are, and then try to elaborate a relational view of a dynamic unconscious.

Neurotic misery

In the debate with Segal, Mitchell does precisely what she criticizes Segal for doing: in claiming that the prohibitions of kinship are the sole cause of dynamic unconscious conflict, she, too, creates a false dichotomy between the psychic effects that arise from universal laws and those that arise from historical

contingencies. In fact, the distinctions drawn between universal and contingent become quite blurred in this debate. In the long quote cited above, for example, Mitchell seems to equate kinship with what Segal calls normative rules, a move that collapses two social entities that I would consider disparate. Both theorists oppose kinship structures to historical contingency, but when Mitchell equates kinship structures with normative rules or acknowledges that kinship structures are variable, the distinction between universality and historical contingency collapses. Mitchell may be correct that some form of kinship rules are necessary for any culture to function, but it might make sense to draw the lines between universality and historical contingency differently from the way they are drawn in this debate. Cultural universals might be defined not as kinship structures (which too easily become equated with the heterosexual, nuclear family) but as incest taboos, requirements to separate; psychic universals include anxiety, the facts of mortality, loss and limits (drive theorists would include sexual and aggressive instincts). On the other hand, historical contingency might be exemplified in such normative rules, to refer to a current debate, as whether or not same-sex couples are allowed to marry. To take another example, the particular way a culture handles the requirement to separate would be historically contingent; some societies cultivate dependency, others self-reliance (see Rothbaum *et al*, 2000). As we can see in my examples, neither historical contingencies nor universal “laws” have any monopoly over prohibition; prohibitions are inherent to both, and the source of prohibition is the same in both sets of conditions: the family stands between culture and child, mediating both universal and historically contingent prohibitions. While I certainly agree with Mitchell that the family’s location in a social structure is what gives its interventions prohibitive force, the particularities of the way the family mediates culture are all too often elided in social theory: what gets left out is the way that love, approval, prohibition and psychic givens such as anxiety and dependency intertwine to create unconscious conflict – and indeed, such conflict is often generated precisely through the identifications that Mitchell relegates to a realm outside of the dynamic unconscious.¹

We can see an example of the way psychosocial theories can elide important mediations between individual and culture in some of Žižek’s work. One of Žižek’s central arguments (see, for example, Wright and Wright, 1999) is that there is something about desire itself that makes capitalism, and the commodity fetishism that promises satisfaction with each new product, function so well. Compelling as they are, such arguments seem incomplete without some analysis of the way the actual treatment that children experience in cultural institutions such as the family, schools, media, religion, etc. mediate between desire and the rules of capital. There is something not only about desire, but about the way we are socialized, that makes us defensively substitute the desire for things for the desire for love, recognition, feelings of worth. And it is this more painful, more specific level of experience that most social theorists seem not to want to

examine. Interestingly, in *On Belief*, Žizek (2001) directly addresses the critique that Lacanian theory reduces historical traumas to the “transcendental” trauma of the founding of the subject. Here, he argues that historically contingent traumas such as the Holocaust occur precisely *because* of “endeavors to OBFUSCATE the quasi-transcendental constitutive lack” (pp. 157–158), but, again, such an argument seems to make the subject the only source of all its defensive operations, omitting the myriad mediations from the environment that affect the subject’s responses to it (for example, the culturally inflected projections that parents send their infants’ way from day one, indeed from conception – see Seligman, 1999).

Given the distinction I am drawing between universal and contingent, I want to make the claim that historical contingencies such as racism, sexism, homophobia; other unjust social circumstances and hierarchies that exploit and humiliate; trauma and its transgenerational transmission; early losses of loved ones, from death or divorce; and parental mistreatment of all types cause the kind of psychic pain that issues in dynamic unconscious conflicts and symptomatic effects every bit as intense and recalcitrant to treatment as those caused by prohibitions on incestuous desires. Indeed, I would reframe the dichotomy between the dynamic unconscious conflict that emanates from universal prohibitions and that which emanates from historically contingent norms not in terms of unconscious vs. preconscious, but in other Freudian terms: as a dichotomy between the conflicts of common human unhappiness and those proper to neurotic misery [see *Studies on Hysteria*, (Freud, 1893–1895, 1955), which concludes with Freud’s reply to the hysteric who doubts that psychoanalysis can help: “No doubt fate would find it easier than I do to relieve you of your illness. But you will be able to convince yourself that much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness.” (p. 305)]. Neurotic misery, I believe, is largely caused by the way historically contingent events are mediated and lived. And I would contend that what psychoanalytic treatment addresses, what it has always addressed, is neurotic misery (see Danto, 1998, 1999 for a glimpse into Freud’s early views on treatment). The common human unhappiness that remains after treatment does so because conflict is endemic to subjectivity, because much of what comes our way in life is not in our control, and because the painful universals of human existence are ineradicable: the inevitability of death and loss, the pain of separation and anxiety about abandonment, dependency, the fact of limits [that men can’t be pregnant, for example, that most of us get one set of genitals, that we are, as one writer put it (Fraser, 1987), all born into the third act of a four-act drama we had no hand in creating]. Only when specifically historicized, however, are universals drawn into the symptomatic sphere of what I am calling neurotic misery. Conflicts about dependency, a universal condition of infancy, for example, take their character and are more or less severe according to the way those in power in a particular

culture or subculture conceptualize/pathologize dependency, according to the opportunities that culture offers for what Fairbairn (1954) called mutual interdependence, according to the way those in power mandate the nature of one group's relation to another.²

It is only when neurotic misery is analyzed that the subject can begin fully to acknowledge and live with the limits set by universals. But it is not the limits of the universals that form the heart of a treatment. The heart of any psychoanalytic treatment involves understanding and working through the fantasies, affects, behaviors, and cognitions of a particular individual's repetition compulsion (which drive theorists often refer to as the death drive, a terminological choice that can function to elide the particulars of the family and historical contingency).³ Repetition compulsions derive from experienced traumas and are lived as character. They are incredibly resistant to change because they are formed from the way we internalize the traumas and disappointments that arise from interactions with our primary attachment figures, to whom we are tenaciously loyal – as loyal to the hurtful ones, if not more so, as to the loving ones. Repetition compulsions seem to me to have very little to do with any *innate* desire to make love to daddy, not separate from mommy, live forever. Nor do they have much to do with cultural incest taboos and requirements to separate. Rather, they have to do with (a) the way phenomena such as incest taboos and requirements to separate are constructed and transmitted by a particular culture's institutions and power structures (family, school, media, cf. Althusser, 1971) and (b) children's way of making meaning of the repeated but contingent difficulties that they experience. The repetition drama is the scenario the child creates to deal with the conflicts that arise from the clash between longings for love, approval, and affirmation and the restricted avenues open to the child to get the longings met. What I mean to say is that such phenomena as a psychic pull to remain unseparated arise not from original merger with the mother – as so many psychoanalytic theories presuppose – but from conscious and unconscious familial/cultural prohibitions. In fact, the weight Mitchell puts on prohibition is perhaps misleading. Conflicts about such things as separation more typically derive from mixed messages, now prohibiting, now demanding that the child separate; the same is true about the enactment of the incest taboo. The mixed messages themselves are likely the product of cultural prohibitions, but prohibition does not quite account for things such as abandonment anxiety and the defenses against it that also ensue in unconscious conflict.

The question, then, is not about whether or not Lacanians and Kleinians⁴ work with the unconscious and relational analysts work with the preconscious. The question is rather, are there different sources of dynamic unconscious conflict, how are the disparate sources related, and what kinds of conditions create neurotic misery as opposed to common human unhappiness? The birth of a sibling, for example, brings on psychic conflicts proper to the realm of

common human unhappiness; when parents consistently show signs that they prefer the new baby – because of gender, looks, similarities to the parent, or any unconscious reasons – the conditions are present for neurotic misery. The symptoms of self-sabotage that cause neurotic misery and bring most people into treatment arise from their subjective response to mistreatment from the familial and social surround, not from the laws that make us into subjects (Layton, 2000). Social theories that consistently look away from that micro-level enact, I believe, a rather dangerous form of denial, evading specificity by protecting the “parents.”

I construe mistreatment broadly to include anything from the more obvious physical or sexual abuse, to the more subtle prohibitions on what girls *vs* boys, black *vs* white people are allowed to be and do, to the perhaps even more subtle difficulties many parents have letting their children be different from what they want them, consciously and unconsciously, to be. Mistreatment can consist of completely unconscious but consistent intrusions into the child’s attempts to create his/her own agenda, consistent withdrawals or retaliations in the face of conflict (i.e., the inability to negotiate conflict that will stymie a child’s capacity for agency and generally give rise to an inability to negotiate conflict). Each of these forms of familial mistreatment, I believe, are tied in complex ways to social norms. Dynamic unconscious conflicts arise from the way individuals construe these kinds of mistreatment; they express themselves not only in symptoms but in dramas that repeatedly confirm their creator’s belief that there is only one possible way to live, one (or two, reversible) ways to relate to others. This is neurotic misery as I understand it.

The psychic and the social, part one: theorizing the gap

Mitchell claims that what relational theorists take to be unconscious is really preconscious. Citing Jessica Benjamin’s contention that psychoanalysis is about finding a way to “create the third position that is able to break up the reversible complementarities and hold in tension the polarities that underlie them” (Benjamin, 1998, p. xiv, cited in Mitchell, p. 226), Mitchell argues that Benjamin, though drawing on Winnicottian and Kleinian notions about our relations to objects, takes these notions in a direction that “moves ... away from psychic conflict, away from sexuality and destructiveness to give us a rich phenomenology of processes of recognition of sameness and difference in which the psychic world *reflects* the social world” (p. 226). In addition to this statement’s drive theory assumptions that sex and aggression are the primary constituents of the psyche and of unconscious conflict, we also find the assumption that relational (or intersubjective) theory collapses the psychic and the social.

Jacqueline Rose similarly sets up this dichotomy between unconscious and preconscious in one of her many dismissals of Chodorow’s work (Rose, 1986,

pp. 90–93), and also suggests that Chodorow collapses the psychic and the social. Urging left-wing feminists of the 1980s to re-evaluate their rejection of psychoanalysis, she critiques psychoanalytic feminists such as Chodorow for implying that psychoanalysis' proper sphere is to understand the way people internalize social norms and create identities from which they suffer. Chodorow, she argues, describes male and female identities that emerge from internalizations of sexist norms. And, to her mind, this view eliminates Freud's most radical notion, the unconscious. On the contrary, she writes, Freud's and Lacan's great insight was to point to the way that one always *fails* to consolidate an identity. Slips of the tongue, dreams, and other manifestations of the unconscious precisely reveal this failure to consolidate a coherent identity.

What distinguishes psychoanalysis from sociological accounts of gender (hence for me the fundamental impasse of Nancy Chodorow's work) is that whereas for the latter, the internalisation of norms is assumed roughly to work, the basic premise and indeed starting-point of psychoanalysis is that it does not. The unconscious constantly reveals the 'failure' of identity.

(p. 90)

Rose's larger concern in making this critique is that, historically, claims that psychic conflicts derive from oppression have harbored the dangerous fantasy that the end of oppression will end psychic conflict – a fantasy that eliminates the unconscious. She writes: "Each time the psychoanalytic description of internal conflict and psychic division is referred to its social conditions, the latter absorb the former, and the unconscious shifts – in that same moment – from the site of a division into the vision of an ideal unity to come" (p. 9). She wonders if the only two options are, as she puts it, between "The unconscious as ideology (its present oppressiveness), or as pleasure (its future emancipation) ..." (p. 12), and she hopes for a solution that "hovers uncomfortably in between" (p. 12).

It seems to me that Rose, like Mitchell, draws her distinctions here unfairly, putting Chodorow on the side of a psyche that internalizes social norms without resistance and opposing that to a psyche that purely contests social norms in dreams, slips of the tongue, and symptoms. For one thing, the relation between preconscious and unconscious is more slippery than her simple dichotomy suggests (see Haaken, 2003). Indeed, in the introduction to the same book, Rose is much more circumspect, arguing that the problem for a social psychoanalysis is to hold both views of psychic processes in tension (p. 7), to account both for the internalization of norms as well as for the resistance to such internalization. But it does seem that Rose aligns the unconscious with the latter and the ego with the former. When she speaks of the unconscious, she talks about slips of the tongue and dreams.

As I argued in the previous section, one way to respond to Rose's call to "hover uncomfortably in between" is to look more closely at the relation

between cultural norms and the individual's repetition compulsion. For what one finds in repetition compulsions is precisely unconscious conflict between the pressure to internalize the norm and a resistance to internalization. This is certainly what one sees clinically, a constant dialectical push-pull. I suppose one could say that the ego internalizes norms and the id resists, but the part of the ego that internalizes norms is the unconscious part; it thus perhaps makes better sense just to speak of the tension between two aspects of unconscious process (Layton, 2002a). I want to emphasize that the repetition compulsion, enacted both as a form of remembering that evades mourning and as a form of seeking a new solution to the original traumatic experiences, is both an individual and a cultural creation; it comes both from the outside and the inside and is not reducible to one or the other.

To argue further against the view that relational theory collapses the psychic and the social requires elaborating an idea of subjectivity that is not always explicit in relational theory but which I believe is implicit in its clinical descriptions. For Benjamin, major constituents of the psyche and of unconscious conflict derive from whatever it is that causes a breakdown in the assertion–recognition dialectic (Benjamin, 1988), and it is true that she sees these causes as emanating from historically contingent environmental failures. In *The Bonds of Love* (Benjamin, 1988), she traced certain of these to gender inequality. It is also true that her theory implies that particular social norms produce particular kinds of psychic conflicts – this is, in fact, consistent with arguments Freud (1908, 1959) made (cf., “Civilized” Sexual Misery). But it is a distortion to conclude from this that Benjamin sees a one-to-one correspondence between social causes and psychic effects, that we are blank screens through which norms are internalized; chapter one of *The Bonds of Love* argues the very opposite, that a subjective pull to differentiate exists from birth. Benjamin's (1988) and Chodorow's (1978) work is not about internalization of norms so much as about the unconscious conflicts surrounding attachment and agency that are fostered by middle class heterosexual familial arrangements in a patriarchal society. Social norms establish precisely the kinds of prohibitions that, mediated by the very important threat of loss of love, create repression or splitting and ensue in social symptoms such as anorexia, for example, as well as in more idiosyncratic individual symptoms. While all in a given culture may have to contend with some of the same norms and prohibitions, however, there is no way to predict how a given individual will make meaning from the obstacles s/he faces. No matter how compromised by symptoms one might be, the autonomy inherent in human subjectivity is at the heart of this indeterminacy, and it is this autonomy that analysts count on to make the analysis “work.”

What I am here calling the autonomy of the subject is that part of the subject that consciously and unconsciously resists being bent to the will of the other as well as that part of the subject that seeks mutuality in attachments. As I said

earlier, repetition compulsions are not simply motivated by the wish to repeat a trauma, a death wish; they are simultaneously motivated by the wish to find a way out of the trauma, a wish to find a new object that will not use the subject for its own ends.

Frankfurt School members and Lacanians alike have insisted that theory preserve the unbridgeable gap between the psychic and the social, the gap that ensures that the psyche will resist total colonization and domination by social norms, the gap that makes a subject more than his/her internalizations, more than his/her enchainment in symbolic networks. Lacanians locate this gap in that which is unsymbolizable in the subject, the traumatic, hard kernel of the Real (see, for example, Žižek, 1989). It does not seem plausible to me that unsymbolizability is the crucial variable that preserves the gap between the psychic and the social. Because, as argued previously, I do not believe that neurotic misery derives primarily from the fall into language, from being split subjects, I theorize the gap differently, finding it in what I am calling the autonomy of the subject, the gap between what comes at subjects from the outside and what each individual subject does with it. What makes the psychic and the social not collapsible one into the other is the very ways the psyche operates on what is given socially (see Chodorow, 1999, Chapter 1): first, psychic reality, formed from the anxiety, defenses, longings, fantasies that respond both to material reality and to the psychic reality of our parents and our culture; and second, the persistent demand that part of us makes to be a subject for another and not an object [see Benjamin's (1988) notion of the assertion–recognition dialectic]. The latter aspect of autonomy might be an innate property of subjectivity, but my sense is that the stronger that part of a person is, the more likely it is that the person had the kind of good enough parenting discussed by Winnicott and others. Good enough parenting allows for the development of the capacity to be alone (Winnicott, 1965), to be creative, to play (Winnicott, 1974). Even those of us who have had terrible parenting have often had some figure in our lives or some moments of parenting that have provided us with a sense of being loveable, a sense of worth, and a sense of separateness from the other's need and desire for us to be a certain way.

A patient's dream illustrates what I have said thus far about a relational view of neurotic misery and the subjective remainder. This particular patient had a horribly abusive childhood that included physical abuse, sexual abuse, and massive neglect. As a child, she at times fantasized stabbing her entire family and herself to death. In this nightmare, she has to jump out of a building onto a yellow line in the road. It is terribly dangerous. She chooses to jump across to another building, which is also dangerous, but less so. But it is not *right*, so she keeps having to do it over and over. She is very scared. Other people are playing this game, but she does not know who.

I can imagine a drive theorist arguing that what cannot be faced is the patient's own destructiveness, that she is not just a victim of familial abuse but

has enough rage in her to destroy an other. A relational interpretation would not deny her capacity to destroy, but would find the unconscious conflict in her loyalty to the abusive family and what that loyalty protects her from seeing. Staying clear of the yellow line might represent that loyalty; she is not yet ready to face in all its horror her parents' hatred and wish to destroy that spawned the abuse, and the hatred the abuse has spawned in her. Jumping the buildings, a dangerous but less dangerous repetition protects her from fully acknowledging the horror – yet, it keeps life scary. The yellow line that motivates the repetitions is perhaps the traumatic kernel of this patient's subjectivity. But it is not one that is unsymbolizable. So long as its meanings are obscure to the patient, however, the repetition goes on. And yet, there *is* a remainder here, a gap that points to a split subject and a split between the psychic and the social. Alongside the subject who keeps jumping the buildings is a subject who knows this solution is not right, and a subject who has yet to figure out who else is playing the game (her therapist? – who may be a new object but may be dangerous like the old ones). If the patient is at some point able to face the horror, will the gap between the psychic and the social close? No, because conflict is endemic to human life. For one thing, in the course of treatment, the conflicts of neurotic misery tend not so much to disappear as to recede in frequency, persistent intensity, and duration. They continue to emerge, given the “right” conditions. But when they do, they start to become recognizable, which gives the patient some choice about how to deal with them rather than feeling compelled to act in the same old way. (This rests, for example, on the development of more capacity to self-soothe; less of a propensity to be overwhelmed by raw emotional states that have to be discharged in compulsive action.) But the conflicts of neurotic misery can also be stirred up in all their old intensity if unforeseen life events, such as losses or other kinds of unbearable crises come the person's way. In the best of cases, analysis allows the analysand to contend with the conflicts of common human unhappiness instead of those of neurotic misery. Unattended to, the conflicts of neurotic misery become the kind we see in social symptoms.

The psychic and the social, part two: normative unconscious processes

In large measure, what analysis does is to allow patients to observe and to extricate themselves from the compulsive repetitions that their dynamic unconscious conflicts have engineered. All analytic schools recognize that the analyst's task is to bring thirdness into interactions that the patient's repetitions attempt to render dyadic. These dyadic dynamics often lock people into alternating patterns of self-destructive conformity or rebellion. In many contemporary analytic paradigms, this dilemma is understood to have its origin in an inability to tolerate ambivalence toward love objects and in an inability to mourn losses, which ensues in an inability to separate [see Sloan (1996) who locates the source of this inability in contemporary cultural arrangements].

Schools differ in the relative weight they attribute to the innate or the socially constructed and environmental causes of these difficulties, with the relational school placing the causal weight on one's history of object relations.

Benjamin's statement about analysis creating a third position (see Mitchell's quote above) is precisely her way of expressing that one wants to help the patient find a way out of operating primarily in the dyadic, paranoid-schizoid, imaginary realm and out of the doer-done to relations particular to this realm. A patient's desire only *begins* to come clear during the process of extricating him/herself from the dyadic doer-done to relations. Creating thirdness can be done in many ways; there is no reason to assume that the only valid way is to be silent, to focus only on signifiers, only to analyze defenses. Like the Kleinians, relational analysts tend to interpret to the analysand what seems to be going on between them at any given moment. When you interpret the position in which the patient is putting the two of you, and point to the pattern the patient has of creating similar scenes elsewhere, all the while elaborating an understanding of why and how it has come to be this way, you are also, in Lacanian terms, revealing the structure of the appeal the patient is making to the Other, revealing the patient's place in that structure.

Relational analysis assumes that acting out the repetition compulsion begins from the outset of treatment because the repetition compulsion is at the core of character. Symptoms of it are available in all kinds of mundane acts, such as how the patient enters the room, lies down, begins the hour (Kleinian analysis holds the same assumptions). One of the patient's primary unconscious agendas will be to engage the analyst in a repetition, an enactment; as Freud (1914, 1959) says, repeating is a way of remembering that has evaded the mourning process, and transference is a resistance to conscious remembering. Relational analysis also assumes that the analyst has unconscious conflicts that the patient intuits and that also enter into the enactments. Enactments take place in the realm of doer-done to, dyadic relations. Unraveling an enactment, then, means that the analyst must understand and take responsibility for his/her part (whether or not this awareness is shared with the patient). Finding the way out of enactments is one of the ways that thirdness – for example, the capacity to put rageful feelings into words rather than destructive actions, the capacity to observe – begins to emerge. As a patient recently said to me following several weeks of unraveling a painful, mutual enactment, “talking really helps.” When I asked how, she elaborated that it is because I was not defensive when she retaliated against a hurt I caused, because “you stand outside the struggle” as a point from which the struggle itself can be looked at, not continually re-enacted.

Few clinical analytic theorists, including relational ones, have much to say about the way culture inflects character. Exceptions, to whom my thoughts are greatly indebted, include Fromm (1941, 1962, particularly his view of social character), Altman (1995), Benjamin (1988), and Goldner (1991). In my own attempt to link the psychic and the social within a relational analytic frame,

I have introduced the idea of normative unconscious processes (Layton, 2002b). Social inequities take shape in hierarchies that differentiate male from female, rich from poor, straight from gay. They do so by defining what affects, attributes, behaviors, thoughts, and modes of attachment and agency are “proper” to each falsely split half of the pair. Within each pair in the hierarchy, a negative cultural valence is assigned to the attributes of the degraded identity, a positive valence to the dominant one. Thus, these identities are often lived as painful, conflictual, binary (either/or) structures. Normative unconscious conflict is created when one represses or splits off one’s feelings, behaviors, thoughts because they are deemed unacceptable to those on whom one depends for love, unacceptable because they conflict with particular social norms. For example, a female child might be faced with a conflict between continuing to develop in her own direction or conforming to her parents’ (perhaps contradictory) fantasies and projections about what a proper middle-class white daughter should be. She might repress some or all of her own urges. But what is repressed or split off is not static; as Freud (1915, 1964) says, what has been repressed “proliferates in the dark ... and takes on extreme forms of expression ...” (p. 149). It returns in a terrifying form – and the terror manifests both on the internal stage and in relational turmoil. Particular culturally demanded repressions create particular kinds of gendered, raced, sexed, and classed conflicts and characters. Repetitions will tend to preserve the binary splits, enacting one pole or the other but never finding the way out of either rebelling or conforming. Often enough, enactments in treatment involve an unconscious collusion in which patient and analyst, as members of the same culture subject to the same ideologically mandated splits, together shore up the very social norms that have brought about pain in the first place. The process, then, of internalizing social norms is quite complicated and conflictual. The notion of normative unconscious processes contributes to psychosocial theory a way to capture the unconscious and conflictual way that ideologies – considered conscious in many theories (for example, Althusser, 1971) – are lived.

An example that comes not from the clinic but from the psychopathology of everyday life illustrates how normative unconscious processes work and their connection to neurotic misery: a few years ago I was asked to write a brief piece on “men at mid-life” for a newsletter that goes out to analysts and analytic therapists. I began the piece by noting that we have to unpack the concept “men,” that masculinity is lived differently depending on race, class, sexuality, and other factors. I then went on to give some clinical examples of gay and straight midlife men and middle-class and working-class midlife men. In my text, I was trying to highlight the specificity of what these men were dealing with as they aged, what success meant to them, what living and dying meant to them, what relationships meant to them. I wrote that the gay men who had lost so many friends and lovers to AIDS felt successful to have lived to mid-life, and that some of those who survived experienced a great deal of (conscious) guilt about being alive.

The male analyst charged with editing the piece first objected that everybody already knows that masculinity is lived differently depending on social position. I was skeptical, as I had not seen too many clinicians incorporating this view into their work. Then I noticed the way he had edited the piece: in effect, his editing had taken out nearly every one of my attempts to establish specificity. For example, he placed the sentence about the gay man's losses from AIDS in a longer sentence that spoke of his loss of a parent and a straight client's loss of a parent, which made it seem that a loss is a loss is a loss. Consistently, his editing dehistoricized my text and made all men at mid-life sound as though they had the same conflicts and stresses.

How to understand a social symptom such as this, which I experienced as a kind of symbolic violence: a preconscious blind spot for difference or a dynamic unconscious conflict? I think it is the latter: whatever this man has had to split off to maintain the power that derives from his identity as a white, upper class, heterosexual male operates unconsciously to keep him keeping out anything that disturbs that identity. This is not just a cognitive, but an affective block that likely originates in the kind of splits produced by unmourned losses that Butler (1995) speaks of in her discussion of gender melancholy (unmourned because, Butler emphasizes, the prohibition on same-sex love prohibits even the mourning of its loss). Unchallenged, these are the kind of normative unconscious processes that keep damaging social norms in place.

Conclusion

I have written this paper because it is clear to me that one's way of thinking about the unconscious determines, among other things, one's way of understanding the relation between the psychic and the social. If one accepts early Freudian drive theory, one might relate universal drives to historical contingency by arguing, as Marcuse (1955) did, that since economic conditions in the developed world have conquered scarcity, culture no longer needs to demand "surplus repression" of libidinal drives. Many influenced by ego psychology, interpersonal psychoanalysis, self psychology, and object relations theory (e.g., Fromm, 1941; Lasch, 1979; Sloan, 1996) look for the connection between the psychic and the social in particular kinds of character structure. A Kleinian might analyze the paranoid-schizoid defenses that motor racism (Clarke, 2003) or sexism, placing hope perhaps in the collective mourning that might help a population to move to a depressive position. Like many object relations theorists, interpersonalists, and even certain drive theorists, I believe that anxiety about loss of love is the primary motivator of repression and of any other defensive maneuvers that are employed to keep conflictual ideas and feelings from becoming conscious [Freud (1913, 1955) says much the same thing in several places, for example, in *Totem and Taboo*, where he states that an external prohibition, such as a demand not to touch the genitals, is complied

with due to “the child’s loving relation to the authors of the prohibition,” p. 29]. Thus, I see the clash between desire and the fear of loss of love as the primary source of unconscious conflict, not prohibition itself. The fear of loss of love is what makes us vulnerable to compliance with the social norms mediated by our intimate others and our relations to them. *And the fear of loss of love makes prohibitions that come from contingent norms as likely to result in unconscious conflicts as those that come from universal law.*

Debates such as the one between Segal and Mitchell allow us to formulate the differences between various analytic schools’ understandings of the unconscious and of psychic conflict and pain – as well as the potential political stakes of those differences. Neurotic misery and common human unhappiness, I have argued, have different originating sources, and it is the former that derives, in large measure, from the way inequitable social circumstances are mediated by cultural institutions such as the family. The task for psychoanalytic social theory is to uncover the mediating links between social norms, family dynamics, and psychic life. Understanding more about the normative unconscious processes that are repeatedly enacted in everyday social situations, processes that derive from social inequities and the ideologies that sustain them, might provide one such link.

Acknowledgements

I thank Jean Wyatt, Neil Altman, Kareen Malone, Simon Clarke, and Lynne Segal for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.

About the author

Lynne Layton is on the faculty of the Massachusetts Institute for Psychoanalysis, and is Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School and Harvard University. She is the author of *Who’s That Girl? Who’s That Boy? Clinical Practice Meets Postmodern Gender Theory* and a co-editor of *Bringing the Plague. Toward a Postmodern Psychoanalysis*. She is an editor of *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* and is in private practice in Brookline, MA.

Notes

1 The debate in which I engage here bears more than a passing resemblance to the Marcuse–Fromm debate of 1955–1956 (Fromm, 1955, 1956, Marcuse, 1956), in which Marcuse accused Fromm of being a revisionist and a bourgeois apologist. Marcuse (1955) locates the unconscious in instinct theory; indeed, as had Freud, Marcuse argues that the instincts, as well as guilt, give rise to social institutions. Fromm abandons instinct theory because he feels that the more important determinants of the psyche have to do with the relational needs of the child and the way parents, as agents of culture and a particular social class, thwart the child’s desire. The Oedipus complex, for Fromm, has to do with the conflict between the child’s desire and the child’s need for love, approval, and social ties. Like Marcuse, Fromm envisions a realm of repression that does not kill spontaneity, but he argues that the hierarchical and exploitative relations of capitalism demand a kind of repression that does destroy spontaneity. Such repression engenders intense anxiety: the child is faced with the choice

between capitulation (one “escape from freedom,” Fromm, 1941) and isolation. Contemporary (that is, 1941) culture, he argues, offers only authoritarian and conformist solutions to that dilemma. Different social classes develop different characters because of their place in social and economic hierarchies, and social conditions are in turn created by the way these character structures develop. Unconscious conflicts are enacted in the repetition compulsions that keep social characters locked in the “choice” of unfreedom. My argument owes much to the early works of Fromm, but my concept of the unconscious is, I think, more dynamic.

- 2 Another way of conceptualizing the distinction I am making, using Kleinian terms, is to say that neurotic misery is marked by paranoid–schizoid anxieties, and normal human unhappiness by depressive anxieties. Although indebted to Klein, particularly in my theory about normative unconscious processes, I have not used a Kleinian framework throughout because I see the source of neurotic misery in historically contingent events; Kleinian clinicians, on the other hand, tend to see paranoid–schizoid anxieties as originating from innate destructive drives that are independent of the way the child is actually treated. In the Kleinian universe, a baby’s persecutory rage might emerge as easily from frustrations at not being fed when hungry as from actual mistreatment. I think that distinctions between these kinds of events need to be made. If the worst a well-cared for child experiences is that its needs are not always met on demand, that it has to endure the birth of siblings, etc., my sense is that this child will spend most of its life dealing with depressive, not paranoid–schizoid anxieties.
- 3 In a recent article, Siegel (2003) examines the theoretical dead end of the debate about whether or not traumatic memories are constructed or historically factual. Freud, he argues, never made it an either/or, and Siegel resolves the dead end by arguing that the central psychoanalytic fact, as I am arguing here, is the repetition compulsion, an amalgam of what happened to you and what you make of it. He proposes – and I agree – that reenactments form the very heart of treatment and that one can measure progress and change by looking at changes in the reenactments.
- 4 I put Kleinians and Lacanians together here not because their paradigms are at all compatible but because they have both criticized relational analysts for abandoning the unconscious.

References

- Althusser, L. (1971). Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. In Brewster B. (trans.) *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York and London: Monthly Review Press, pp. 127–186.
- Altman, N. (1995). *The Analyst in the Inner City*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Benjamin, J. (1988). *The Bonds of Love*. New York: Pantheon.
- Benjamin, J. (1998). *Shadow of the Other. Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1995). Melancholy Gender – Refused Identification. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 5, pp. 165–180.
- Chodorow, N.J. (1978). *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Chodorow, N.J. (1999). *The Power of Feelings*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Clarke, S. (2003). *Social Theory, Psychoanalysis and Racism*. London: Palgrave.
- Danto, E.A. (1998). The Ambulatorium: Freud’s Free Clinic in Vienna. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 79, pp. 287–300.
- Danto, E.A. (1999). The Berlin Polyklinik: Psychoanalytic Innovation in Weimar Germany. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 47 (4), pp. 1269–1292.
- Fairbairn, W.R.D. (1954). *An Object-Relations Theory of the Personality*. New York: Basic Books.

- Fraser, S. (1987). *In My Father's House. A Memoir of Incest and Healing*. Toronto: Doubleday.
- Freud, S. (1893–1895, 1955). The Psychotherapy of Hysteria. Chapter IV of Breuer, J. and Freud, S., *Studies on Hysteria*. In Strachey J. (ed.) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol 2. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 255–305.
- Freud, S. (1908, 1959). ‘Civilized’ Sexuality Morality and Modern Nervousness. In Jones E. (ed.) *Sigmund Freud. Collected Papers*, Vol 2. New York: Basic Books, pp. 76–99.
- Freud, S. (1913, 1955). *Totem and Taboo*. In Strachey J. (ed.) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol 13. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 1–161.
- Freud, S. (1914, 1959). Recollection, Repetition, and Working Through. In Jones E. (ed.) *Sigmund Freud. Collected Papers*, Vol 2. New York: Basic Books, pp. 366–376.
- Freud, S. (1915, 1964). Repression. In Strachey J. (ed.) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol 14. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 143–158.
- Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Fromm, E. (1955). The Human Implications of Instinctivistic ‘Radicalism’. *Dissent* 2 (4), pp. 342–349.
- Fromm, E. (1956). A Counter-Rebuttal. *Dissent* 3 (1), pp. 81–83.
- Fromm, E. (1962). *Beyond the Chains of Illusion. My Encounter With Marx and Freud*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Goldner, V. (1991). Toward a Critical Relational Theory of Gender. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 1 (3), pp. 249–272.
- Haaken, J. (2003). Smart, Dumb, or Culturally Challenged? A Social History of the Dynamic Unconscious. *Psychotherapy and Politics International* 1 (1), pp. 47–63.
- Lasch, C. (1979). *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Layton, L. (1998). *Who's That Girl? Who's That Boy? Clinical Practice Meets Postmodern Gender Theory*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Layton, L. (2000). On Subjection. *Journal of Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 5 (1), pp. 135–137.
- Layton, L. (2002a). Cultural Hierarchies, Splitting, and the Heterosexist Unconscious. In Fairfield S., Layton L. and Stack C. (eds.) *Bringing the Plague. Toward a Postmodern Psychoanalysis*. New York: Other Press.
- Layton, L. (2002b). Psychoanalysis and the “Free Individual”. *Journal of Psycho-Social Studies* 1 (1), [E-journal] http://www.btinternet.com/~psycho_social/Vol1/JPSS-LL1.htm.
- Marcuse, H. (1955). *Eros and Civilization*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Marcuse, H. (1956). A Reply to Erich Fromm. *Dissent* 3 (1), pp. 79–81.
- Mitchell, J. (2002). Response to Lynne Segal. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 3 (2), pp. 217–228.
- Rose, J. (1986). *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*. London: Verso.
- Rothbaum, F., Weisz, J., Pott, M., Miyake, K. and Morelli, G. (2000). Attachment and Culture. *American Psychologist* 55 (10), pp. 1093–1104.
- Segal, L. (2001). Psychoanalysis and Politics. Juliet Mitchell, Then and Now. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 2 (4), pp. 327–343.

- Seligman, S. (1999). Integrating Kleinian Theory and Intersubjective Infant Research: Observing Projective Identification. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 9 (2), pp. 129–159.
- Siegel, P.F. (2003). Dissociation and the Question of History: “What, Precisely, Are The Facts?”. *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 20 (1), pp. 67–83.
- Sloan, T. (1996). *Damaged Life*. New York: Routledge.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1965). The Capacity to be Alone. In *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*. Madison, CT: International Universities Press, pp. 29–36.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1974). *Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock.
- Wright, E. and Wright, E. (eds.) (1999). *The Zizek Reader*. Oxford, UK and Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Zizek, S. (1989). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso.
- Zizek, S. (2001). *On Belief*. New York: Routledge.