

SOCIAL RUTS : EMERGENCE AND RESOLUTION OF INTRA-PSYCHIC CONFLICT

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SOCIAL CONTEXT OF INTRA-PSYCHIC CONFLICT:

Sociologists define culture as a set of symbols and ideas such as language, values, beliefs, standards, and expectations that are both created and transmitted by societal members. Culture and society would not be possible without our ability to use symbols that allow us to share common meanings. The sharing of meaning through language also allows us to reflect on and change our culture and its group standards and normative expectations. Individuals do create new cultural values and standards that allow us to reshape the ongoing direction of society, social interaction, and the self. Bensman and Lilienfeld (1979) speak of lost boundaries or the self as a result of being caught between public and private roles, between our needs as individuals and demands placed upon us by society and state. The dilemma of retaining individuality in a world that creates excessive public contradictions and conflicts is great.

Such lack of concern over individuals' private lives and troubles, even though publicly generated, leaves the problem of individuals facing difficult life transitions and problems in relative isolation. Berger & Luckman (1966) identify another dilemma that modern men and women consistently face: the plurality of world views. Such plurality results from modernity in which the expansion of the area of human choice, options or decision is accompanied by the propensity to become vulnerable to change. It often appears easier to leave social relationships than deal with structural conditions and contradictions that strain relationships.

In modern societies identity becomes more fragile as modern consciousness moves from a situation of fate to choice or the multiplication of options (Berger 1971, 1974, 1980). The modern world easily confers identity but also provides many opportunities to change the world throughout one's life cycle. We often ignore the existence of a relatively wide range of contradictory values in American culture and how they often provide support for structures

that fragment us and cause personal pain. Social diversity often robs us of psychic energy because we fail to view social change and humanistic individual change together.

The nature of integrated consciousness requires an expansion of energy unleashed by social involvements and creative use of conflict. Enlarged role responsibilities actually allow the expansion of psychic and physical energy. Social involvement in numerous meaningful activities, where one is not caught in rigid role expectations, ruts and binds, actually allows creative energy to expand. The nature of meaning is socially constructed as is alienation, pain, stress, and meaninglessness (Berger, Luckman 1966; Bensman, Lilienfeld, 1978; Sennet, 1980).

Failure to recognize such a creative tension and pluralism in our social structures and value patterns results from our fear of conflict and tension within ourselves and in our relationships, communities and institutions. We thus reject or repress those certain aspects of ourselves often due to our failure to trust ourselves, our choices, and our ability to accept responsibility. Thus the rejection of diversity within and around us is sustained by devices which limit the development of a more tolerant, growing, or humanistic self.

We often exaggerate our fears of growth by blocking out, withdrawing, turning off, selectively perceiving, stereotyping, and projecting. We often invest energy in false assumptions, illusions, and expectations that deny our real perceptions, complexity, and wholeness. We somehow feel guilty when conflict inevitably arises within ourselves, or we feel betrayed when conflict arises in our relationships.

RUTS DEFINED

We experience many structural and cultural binds and ruts in American society that are basically value dilemmas, supported by certain institutions. A rut is a habitual pattern of response that is culturally learned and sanctioned, and which prevents us from acknowledging a wider range of possibilities in ourselves and our relationships. One can thus

speak of both cultural ruts and personal ruts. A rut involves a categorical mode of thinking and perceiving that leads us into win-lose games and double bind situations. The authors believe these ruts exist from the interaction between culture, social structure, and the self.

A rut often distorts our approaches to new situations, predetermining our response, as we repeat the same self destructive and undesirable behaviors. We often become so dependent on habitual responses we fail to integrate a broader perspective that might allow us to learn new ways of thinking, perceiving, or communicating. We feel frustrated and disappointed because a rut precludes enjoyment, feeling, and growth.

ENVIRONMENTAL VS. SELF SUPPORT

We habitually rely on external sources of support for our feeling of well being. We despise or fear any sense of insecurity of unpredictability. Sometimes we must suspend the external world in order to act on our own intuitive arrangement of reality. We must understand our growth and happiness often depend on self support and our own awareness of meaningful alternatives and possibilities.

THE SEX ROLE RUT:

Sex roles are defined as a pattern of behavioral expectations imposed upon a specific sex type. Sex role expectations have the tremendous power to both constrain behavior and define personal identities. All of us have, at one time or another, been forced to respond in culturally determined patterns simply because of our particular sex type.

Sex roles seem to range in intensity from *highly rigid to fluid* or *androgynous sex roles*. Sex roles are, to a certain degree, unavoidable. Sex roles become relationship ruts however when they are interpreted and responded to as rigid mandates for living. While sex roles are becoming more fluid, the strong, silent, unexpressive American macho male John Wayne stereotype continues to dominate the cultural media. Similarly, woman are socialized into objectified, passive and ornamental roles which deny their intellectual and creative abilities.

When couples respond to rigid role expectations that trap her in the kitchen and him in an aggressive career, the consequences are usu-

ally rut producing. Like all roles, sex roles require us to behave in ways which lack natural or spontaneous self creation. To that extent, it can be said that rigid sex roles force us to perform unnatural acts. For example, there is a tremendous difference between cooking a meal for the sheer joy it brings, and cooking a meal that is, has, and will continue to be expected as part of your role.

GROWTH INTERRUPTION RUT:

Interruptions in the process of growth usually result in confusion about the boundaries between the self, others, and the environment. (Perls 1973) refers to the "well integrated" person as one "who can live in concerned contact with his society, neither being swallowed up by it nor withdrawing from it completely."

The inability to maintain this balance leads to what Perls calls both "growth interruptions" and "neurotic disturbances." Unlike the classic definition of neuroses as a "functional nervous disorder," Perls (1973) explains neuroses as "a state of imbalance in the individual that arises when simultaneously he and the group of which he is a member experience different needs and the individual cannot tell which is dominant." Neuroses results in an "inadequate sense of identity" due to "inadequate self support." Perls delineates four "neurotic mechanisms" which lead to growth interruptions: (1) *introjection*, (2) *projection*, (3) *retrojection*, and (4) *confluence*.

INTROJECTION:

Introjections are facts, standards of behavior, feelings, evaluations, or ways of acting that an individual has added to the behavioral repertoire without assimilation. The process of assimilation occurs when one properly examines or de-structures novel or foreign knowledge that is forced or imposed and *selectively* integrates all, part, or none of the knowledge, depending one's own needs at that time.

"There should not be conflict in a good relationship," or "marriages should last forever," are two examples of introjects. The individual operates according to these standards, even though they may directly contradict his experience, without ever stopping to evaluate them. "When the introjector says, "I think," he usually means, "they think."

PROJECTION:

A projection is the opposite of introjection. Projections are feelings, beliefs, or desires that originate in the individual but are attributed to other individuals or objects in the environment. Since the individual fails to recognize his/her beliefs or feelings, they are perceived as originating in others. The other is then perceived as directing the content of the projection toward the projector him/herself. Essentially what the projector is doing is making others responsible for that which resides in him/herself.

A man unaware of his desire to relate to many women sexually will believe that a lot of women wish to relate to him sexually. An individual unaware of acting negatively towards others complains of others behaving negatively towards him/her. "When the projector says "it" or "they" he usually means "I"."

RETROFLECTION:

Retroflection means "turning back sharply against." The retroflector will do to him/herself what s/he did or tried to do to others. The retroflector will become the target of behavior by substituting him/herself in place of the environment. Energy originally extended outward to the environment, for purposes of manipulation in order to satisfy one's own needs, will now be redirected (or retroflected) inward. For example, a conflict which once existed between the individual and the environment has now become an "inner conflict," either between two opposing behaviors or between two parts of the personality. "I can't let myself do that" or "I feel so angry at myself" are two examples of retroflection. The retroflector tends to see "I" and "myself" as two different people. Retroflection is apparent when the individual uses the reflective "myself."

CONFLUENCE:

When there is not a distinction between the self and others or between the self and the environment, the individual is said to be in confluence with it. If the individual is in confluence with others too much, s/he will lose all sense of him/herself.

Very often in relationships, the two partners become very much a "part" of each other. They share the same beliefs, likes and dislikes until they are no longer individuals, but instead, just

an extension of the other. If the confluence between the partners is carried to extremes, the individuals will not tolerate any differences and will demand likeness. When an individual says "we" it is difficult to determine who s/he is referring to, themselves or the rest of the world. The use of "we" makes it obvious that that individual is in a state of confluence.

A GESTALT VIEW OF INTRA-PSYCHIC CONFLICT RESOLUTION:

Gestalt theory presupposes an *organismic* basis to the process of intra-psychoic regulation. The holistic doctrine stands in direct contrast to "Cartesian dualism" which asserts an ontological split (such as mind—body) as well as a whole host of assorted cosmological dualities (such as natural—supernatural, worldly—other worldly, man—god, subject—object), (Speigleberg, 1969).

Holism postulates that man is a unified organism. Research into Eastern Mysticism and Yoga practices, Fire walking, the control of the heartbeat and blood pressure, have lent further empirical plausibility to the notion that the mind and body may function in concert. Discussions by Andrew Weil (1971) concerning the "higher conscious" control of the autonomic nervous system suggest that the "pathways" between consciousness and the body have always been available, yet have seldom been exercised.

CONSENSUS THEORY:

Gestalt's organismic emphasis suggests many parallels to consensus theories. Consensus theories include the more traditional psychology, balance theory, cognitive dissonance, and functionalism.

STRUCTURES AND FUNCTIONS:

Consensus theories loosely suggest that the organism is composed of interrelated *structures* or parts which *function* towards the maintenance, balance, equilibrium, or adjustment of the whole. Changes in one part necessarily effect other parts of the integrated system or organism.

Gestalt theory suggests a similar organismic adjustment is operative. Consensus theories, postulate practical or survival *functions* as the basic organizing principle. Gestalt theory asserts the necessity of maintaining

homeostasis via the process of integrating the conflicting aspects of the self, into awareness (Perls, 1969).

SELF REGULATION/SELF CREATION:

Perls et al (1977) distinguish between intrapsychic conflicts which are "*petty battles*" based upon "semantic mistakes" (i.e. misinterpretations of meanings), and conflicts which are "*deeply concerned*." More often than not, concerned conflicts arise when the "self-regulating," "spontaneous inner system" is upset by external introjected *stereotyped* social norms. Conflict of this type usually necessitates either ejection of the unowned prescriptions or alternatively the integration and digestion of the here-to-fore unowned "shoulds".

The attendant "pain" and "suffering" of intrapsychic emotional conflict is *not* to be avoided since such discomfort is the means of coming to a "self-creative solution." The suggestion is made that one all the contestants engaged in the conflict are in awareness and contact, then what follows is not therapy—but a subjective "hard decision" which must be made by the individual (Perls, 1977).

THE TAO:

In a further exposition of the conflict resolution, Perls (1977) draws upon teachings of the Tao to suggest a methodology for lessening the pain of unnecessary freak-outs during the process of renegotiating equilibrium. This method entails a form of detachment, to disengage oneself from preconceived notions of how things "ought" to turn out, and a detachment from allegiance to any specific warring contestant or part of oneself—this disengagement from the internal dialogue is described as a "creative impartiality". Again, *conflict* is not seen as a destructive fragmenting of the self, but rather a situation where each part of the self can exercise "reckless savagery" while actively engaged in the creative process of *finding* (and strengthening) the self.

THERAPEUTIC LAISSEZ FAIRE

Perls et al (1977) warns of the dangers of *pre-mature pacification*, or a stopping of growth via "self conquest". Premature pacification entails a "truce" or "numbness" to avoid further conflicts which are deeply concerned. Usually what follows is a need to be one-up in

subsequent minor "petty battles;" as if to neutralize the "humiliation" of neurotic self conquest.

Self conquest becomes even more debilitating when the conflict was made unbearable by another person; that is, when pre-mature resignation was chosen out of fear of losing approval from that other person. Resignation creates a *void* in the conflict, which "self assertion" once occupied. That void is then filled by identifying with that other person.

SHUTTLE TECHNIQUE:

The individual shuttles between dialectically opposed parts of the self. S/he shuttles between verbalizations and body language or between thoughts (or fantasy) and action. This technique attempts to facilitate an awareness in the individual of his/her self as a unified organism. That two seemingly independent parts of the self are actually different expressions stemming from the same conflict.

We are all familiar with the separation of ourselves from physical illness during time of conflict (i.e. psychosomatic manifestations). "This dam headache, I wish it would go away," as if the headache were a foreign body invading the individual. This technique is grounded in holism which denies the mind/body dualism. This technique will help the individual become aware of the inseparable relationship between the symptom and the cause of the conflict.

PSYCHODRAMA:

In psychodrama, the individual switches from one role to another role. For instance, the oppressed wife and the oppressive husband. The psychodramatic technique facilitates an awareness of a split in the personality as a result of introjections. The wife becomes aware that in reality, her superego is her oppressive husband. She becomes aware that she is doing the oppressing and is being oppressed at the same time.

CONTACT BREATHING:

When an individual experiences an emotion whether it be excitement, anger, or sadness. the normal breathing process is usually interrupted. For example, when one is excited, the individual takes short, quick breaths, or when

portunity for culture. Cultural evolution has certainly greatly increased the pace of evolution in the broadest sense and ultimately created new possibilities for abstraction. Human cultural evolution occurs at a different level of abstraction than physical or biological evolution. The fast pace; the multiple directions; the ability to immediately project oneself backward or forward in time via consciousness; the increasingly sophisticated mechanisms for learning and technologies of the intellect (Goody, 1977). Analogies may be drawn between biological and cultural evolution but one must not reify metaphors and symbols. The study of social cultural evolution needs its own structures of explanation and theory.

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one is upset and on the verge of crying, the breath is usually held back for long periods. Staying in contact with and maintaining the breath during emotional experiences, especially during negative experiences, may serve to ease the discomfort.

Many eastern disciplines emphasize control of breathing. They believe that inherent in the air we breathe is a quality known as "prana" which is defined as "absolute energy," or "life force." Prana in the air we breathe is analogous to vitamins in the food we eat. Proper contact with and control of the breath at all times allows one to obtain prana. The cultivation of prana over time may result in one having better control over intra-psyche conflict.

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