



Psychosocial Reflexivity in Counseling Education

Nini Fang

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Abstract

Within recent years, counseling and psychotherapeutic training has become increasingly informed by postcolonial critiques and social justice movements toward more politically progressive teaching and therapeutic practice. This chapter contradicts the linear continuum of a better future by attending, instead, to the affective forces that “drag” us, the trainers and the trainees, the contemporary university, and its academic citizens, back into the grip of a perpetual present characterized by relational failings, antagonisms, and crises. By mobilizing the inside knowledge of the reflexive subject to elaborate on and critique these ethical struggles, including one’s own participation in them, we are in a better position to attend to the question of what these failures “know.” The critical potential of psychosocial reflexivity is further exemplified through the transformation of the psychoanalytic concept of “psychic retreat” into a psychosocial one. The former refers to the subject taking refuge in a particular narcissistic organization to avoid the humiliation of (not) being seen. The latter reconsiders this psychic mechanism as what may open up a space for “self-maintenance” which affords radical suspension of moral judgments against the self and others. In this space, the subject can better sit with the troubled knowledge about the self and resist the psy-complex which compels investments in an idealized identity. A psychosocial

N. Fang (✉)

School of Health in Social Science, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

e-mail: nfang@ed.ac.uk

articulation therefore recognizes the mutually constitutive relations between the psyche and the social. It allows us to attend to the many paradoxes and unrelenting complexities within our subjectivity, which are necessary for reinventing new, complex, and esthetic forms of lived experiences.

Keywords

Reflexivity · Psy-complex · Counseling education · Relational ethics · Decolonization

Counseling Education in the Times of “Psy-Complex”

Within recent years, counseling and psychotherapeutic training has become increasingly informed by postcolonial critiques and social justice movements toward more politically progressive training and practice. The continual maturation of psychosocial studies has generated frameworks of thinking that help to critically investigate ways in which histories and legacies of colonialism permeate everyday interactions. These have helped to reframe our thinking on human conditions, enabling us to see how the psyche and social world “[permeate] the other in ways that are not fully predictable” (Butler, 2016: ix). The accelerating incentives to decolonize counseling education raise the question of what it means and what it takes to generate real, enduring change that has the capacity to influence the future directions of training, therapeutic practice, and the training requirements set out by the regulatory bodies. Rephrased in Fanon’s terms, what do we need to do to become “actional” (1952) personally, professionally and collectively to reveal, destabilize and disrupt the pervasive status quo of power-hierarchies?

Becoming “actional” requires us not only to become conscious of where we are and what has come before, but also to problematize ongoing social practices which consign minority voices, perspectives, and forms of knowledge to oppression and misrepresentation. These include our struggles with complacency and half-heartedness which only serve to perpetuate the forces that we are attempting to resist. Half-hearted and complacent responses to deep-seated problems run against the grain of the work and keep us from moving forward. Such complacency, for example, is reflected in the tick-box address of “difference and diversity,” “inclusivity,” or “multiculturalism” in the professional frameworks and settings (Dalal, 2008; Fang, 2019; Pirrie & Fang, 2021); in/as defense against the castration anxiety that recognizing the social-political order might make us, the practitioners, feel less skilled in attending to the work (Samuels, 2006; Proctor, 2014); in the reproduction of colonial syntax by restricting conversations to closed groups thereby resisting plurality of views (Burman, 2021); in defensive attempts to take refuge in analytic neutrality (Frosh, 2007); and in one’s preoccupation with, and nostalgia for, the cultural ideal of whiteness (Hook, 2012, 2017; Morgan, 2021). Before attending to how psychosocial reflexivity might address these interrelated forms of resistance, it

seems worthwhile to consider the sociopolitical contexts which might sustain and reproduce them.

In the UK, while we revel in having arrived at yet another critical juncture as ushered by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that renders the decolonization project harder to sideline than ever, we have also seen the rise of the “culture war” which mobilizes and weaponizes clear-cut differences between the self and the other (Cammaerts, 2022). In the public sphere, strategic instigations of moral panics are routinely invoked in punishment or repression of those seen as politically deviant from the “common good,” thus demarcating the symbolic boundaries that set us against one another. These observations work in tandem with Ian Parker’s critique of the “psy-complex” which, as he observes, has become increasingly powerful in regulating how we think and talk about ethics. The psy-complex functions as a governmental mental apparatus and subjects us to a “moralizing of behaviour and subjectivity” (p. 374) at the cost of our capacity to engage with ethical thinking.

Differentiating ethics from morality, Parker points out that:

If morality is concerned with a system of moral codes, sets of rules governing how we should live, and corresponding images of the self that should enable us to aspire to adhering to those moral codes, ethics properly speaking concerns the reflexive position the human subject takes in relation to rules or to *images of the self*. (p. 370; italics added)

The psy-complex compels us to act in conformity with the commonsense notion of what is good as set out by the broader systems of cultural rhetoric around us. In exchange, it allows us to cement a self-imagery that harmonizes with the cultural ideal of what it means to be a good person or to live a moral life. Embedded in larger systems of power and dominance, the psy-complex renders us susceptible to forms of virtue-signaling and performative allyship and so to the unconscious disavowals of feelings and thought processes at odds with the “signifier of the Good” (p. 377) to which we should aspire.

In line with the context outlined above, this chapter shows how the domain of counseling education and the pedagogical relations within are not immune from the pervasive influences of what goes on “outside.” Approaching reflexivity as a psychosocial task of relational ethics, this chapter is written with both the counseling trainees and the trainers in mind to reflect what can be best described by Layton (2009, 2015) as our “mutual implication.” Mutual implication articulates the group dynamics of opposition that is psychically maintained to allow individuals to take up and *invest* in a particular identity position vis-à-vis “the other.” In Layton’s example, people who have the need to process and express an unresolved sense of injustice tend to do so by inhabiting the position of “unfairly treated victim” and “accusing the other” (2009, p. 112) of having lower moral standards. Working in tandem with the psy-complex, the sustained effort to invest in a particular identity position spawns polarities of us/them, right/wrong, and doer/done-to, affirming both our self-identity and our difference from those whom we seek out as the other – the bad object whom we believe to constitute and contain all that is opposite to us. In counseling education, trainers and trainees are bound together into intersubjective relations in

ways that are similar to the therapeutic dyad, so that what is stirred up in the trainer or trainer group may reflect the complex, collective working of disturbing affects that have been repressed and disavowed by the trainee group. Mutual implication opens us up to examine the group relations, or more accurately the *social relations in a group*. Moreover, it attunes us to the unconscious ways we are implicated in each other's suffering.

The Question of Suffering in Counseling Education

For many, counseling training is an excruciating journey. The psychologically demanding nature of the training is well documented by those who have gone through it. Stewart and Thomas (2020), for example, describe their training experiences to be “trigger after trigger” (p. 557) in dealing with painful feelings re-evoked by the training components. Folkes-Skinner et al. (2010) document the first-hand experience of a trainee who found their identity, confidence, and initial hopes for a future career as a counselor crushed by the struggles to cope with the relentless emotional storms brought about by client work at the earlier phases of counseling practice: “It’s been a baptism of fire, there is no way to prepare you for what that feels like” (p. 89). Inevitable experiences of rejection by clients who do not return as well as growing issues with placement precarity amid the shortage of funding available for local, charitable provision of counseling all compound the emotional labor on the training journey. Moreover, these emotional stresses find little solace on the training program when met with the critical gaze of the training requirements often projected onto the trainers who have the ethical responsibility to assess a trainee’s professional competency, levels of reflexivity, and ethical understanding toward becoming qualified. As what is being observed concerns one’s capacity to engage with others relationally and ethically, it is almost impossible to affectively distance oneself from any negative feedback which can feel like an attack on the self deep down. Pressure to meet these highly individuated aspects of assessment may also intersect with other wider psychosocial forms of suffering such as various forms of discrimination, e.g., feeling inadequate on racial grounds. Reading through the trainees’ accounts, powerful expressions such as “survival,” “distress,” “overwhelm,” and “damage” accentuate the refrain of internal crises with which trainees are expected to cope to satisfy the requirements for fitness for practice. In surviving these powerful anxieties provoked by the training environment, most energies and effort must be directed toward strengthening the self in ways similar to the developmental process of “omnipotence” (Winnicott, 2016 [1956]).

In the context of these various forms of “suffering,” moving beyond the preoccupation with the self to consider the needs of the other begins to sound unlikely. For herein lies the paradox of the decolonial project – of desiring progressive social change yet being unable to fully reconcile that objective with what is required and commit oneself fully to it. To what extent can we really care for the suffering of someone else when we perceive ourselves to be at stake? It is this paradox which renders the decolonial approach easier said than done in counseling education. For

the approach, which is rooted in social justice and historical truth, demands complex and affectively strenuous questioning of how the colonial legacies are not a product of the past but are constantly re-enacted in the here and now of social relations. For those who have privileged from the colonial systems, the suffering in the other not only brings into sharp focus the idea of our contribution to the suffering of the other, but it also, fundamentally, confronts us with our desire to maintain self-identity, our collective legacy, privileges, and material conditions (see also Yates and MacRury's (2021) discussions on the Remainers/Leavers divide during and in the wake of Brexit).

In what follows, I will elaborate on psychosocial reflexivity as a critical thinking apparatus that is closely intersected with the Fanonian "ethics of failure." This entails foregrounding reflexive insights which can only emerge when we relate to failures as both the instrument and object of psychosocial inquiry. To bring this to light, two fictively reconstructed vignettes¹ of real-world encounters and interpersonal settings at a particular moment of the training will be discussed. These are intertwined with my own experience and observation as a Woman of Color (WoC) trainer to explore how these encounters constitute sites of conflicting pulses and ambivalent longings not only as triggered by the prospect of change, but also as "problem spaces" (Scott, 2004). This is a site of knowledge that demands us to change not how we respond but how we question.

Counseling Education As Problem Spaces: Two Vignettes and Some Thoughts

At 3 p.m. I announce that it is time for the large unstructured group to begin. This rushes a few distant footsteps to join the circle and brings to a rapid end the giggling and chattering, the lingering enjoyment of phones, coffee, or snacks. The 'group o'clock' is still strange after only a couple of weeks on the training. Heads down, as if deep in private ruminations, students seem complicit in an agreement that to meet the curious eyes of a tutor now would be a fatal mistake: it would herald the need to speak. This opening silence is not unusual. Resting myself in the thought that what needs to happen will happen in the group, I retrieve my wandering gaze and glance down at my loosely clasped hands. We did not have to wait long.

Ruth, an outspoken (white) member of the group, breaks the silence: 'I know you said you didn't want to bring it here, Ayesha, so I am only speaking for myself. I am disturbed by what is going on for you. It is not right. It is racist in my view!' The word 'racist' has us anticipating what is to come with bated breath. All eyes are now on Ayesha whose gaze remains firmly fixed on the floor, as if she is seeing something that no one else can. She neither looks up, nor responds. Ruth continues, in a tone more agitated than before, 'sorry to say but it is racist. To say what he has said to you – we should be doing something about it!' Ruth seems to have started the group, stirring a mixture of excitement, confusion, and

¹Careful work has been done to fictively rearrange the settings of the events and foreground the affective, relational dimensions of the encounters from a subjective stance, leaving out any factual elaborations on the individual circumstances for confidentiality. All names are pseudonyms.

astonishment in the room. Discordant chatters rise and fall from each side of the room. I listen, nervously.

I think I know what this is about.

Last week after the session of skill training, Ayesha, who is in a different practice group, came up to me as I was just leaving for my break. She asked to speak with me privately and that's that we did.

She said, in a grievous tone, that she had been given a comment on her listening practice by her practice mentor, Rick, that she felt was unfair. According to her account, Ayesha had asked to clarify with Rick on how she could improve her practice. The response was that she should 'leave religion out of her practice' and find a more 'non-directive' stance in her approach to listening. For her, this, coming from a white tutor, felt like an attack on her identity which is closely intertwined with her Islamic faith. Feeling slightly caught off guard by the nature of the revelation and not knowing the context, I resorted to the standard, 'safe' response: I invited Ayesha to arrange a meeting with Rick to communicate her concern directly, in case there has been any miscommunications. I could see this was not what Ayesha had in mind, that she expected more of me, the only WoC trainer on the course, whom she had chosen to approach rather than anyone else. The same WoC trainer who has been banging on about the 'psychosocial' since day one!

I close my eyes, struggling to remain in the present as the encounter with Ayesha replays itself in my head. My co-facilitator comes to the rescue. 'The group seems aroused by something that has happened outside the group, something that feels problematic? I am curious what is going on here and how this is impacting us all?'

'Oh, we are disturbed. A tutor on this course is potentially racist!', another (white) member cries out. This sets off a further explosion of commentary, all of which bears expressions of resentment and disdain. 'I am really shocked to hear what's happened to you, Ayesha!' 'I don't feel like I can trust his assessment of our practice now!' 'Since when does religion have anything to do with it?' Line after line flowing in an intensifying cadence. For those in the same practice group as Ayesha, this feels like just the moment to declare due solidarity. For those who are not, the torrents of fragmentary soundbites form highly evocative fantasies of what has actually taken place between Ayesha and the tutor.

Ayesha gently lifts her head and adjusts herself into a cross-legged posture. She turns towards me and says: 'I don't want to put anyone on the spot, but I can't help but notice that a tutor has been very quiet.'

With all eyes on me, I grow red in the face and take a few deep breaths.

'I am sorry I have been so quiet. There are strong emotions being expressed towards the idea that Ayesha is being treated unfairly by a tutor. Perhaps this causes concerns around whether tutors are able to treat us all fairly.' What I said agitates the group even further and I notice a disapproving frown settling on Ayesha's face. 'Sorry, can you clarify what you mean by "idea"? Are you saying that Ayesha is not telling the truth?' someone cuts in. 'That's it, there's no point in discussing this further here. We should take this to the Student Union. A petition signed by all of us will give him a lesson!' I feel misunderstood and have an urge to clarify my position, but before I can do so, another member flashes a bayonet, stopping me from uttering another word: 'I think we should go to the press; I have a few contacts who will be very interested in covering this story.'

Within weeks, Rick was gone. No one seems to know the details, except Ayesha, who declares in the group that 'justice has been served', adding that she is not permitted to disclose anything further. The ambiguity fuels fantasies about what has happened to the 'racist' tutor. There are invocations of 'the courtroom', 'packing boxes', 'the boot' and 'the Vice Chancellor's office'. There is also a suspicion that tutors know the full story. How can they not know if they work for the university? The fact that Rick is expelled so soon appears to have significantly strengthened the morale of the trainees and reinforced their trust in the institution to do what is right. Forget about the tutors. They are an ineffectual bunch, talking

the talk and not walking the walk. If you want to get things done you go to the Higher-Ups. To be spoken about in ways as though one is not in the room is quite disorientating.

How did we get to this? With this question weighing on me, I cannot help but feel I have let the group down.

On hearing a fellow trainee from an ethnic minority background suffering the humiliation of potential racist discrimination, the group experiences a shock wave. This brings about various forms of directive communications (“the quiet tutor”) and retaliatory suggestions (“petition”; “go to the press”). These directly implicate the tutors as the ones who should behave ethically but fail to, who should intervene but fail to, and who should know better but fail to. The implication of tutors as “the other” immediately demarcates an unbreachable division between the trainees and the trainers, activating a radical separation of self and others that renders each side “psychologically inextricable” from each other (Layton, 2015, p. 173). What ensues is the conflict over power and dominance as rage flares up across the trainee group against the unethical, “racist” tutor as well as the indifferent, “quiet” tutor who fails to act. An attitude of inquiry that may broaden the spectrum of understanding of what racial suffering feels like and means for the group, as invited by the cofacilitator’s question, gives way to the unambiguous knowledge that what we know is all that there is to be known. Foreclosure of complex thinking and experiential processing invariably leads to casting those in the room as the “doer and the done-to” (Benjamin, 2018), a psychodynamics that implies that we, the tutors, not only cause the suffering, but also are indifferent to it.

Extending Freud’s notion of negation (Freud, 1925), Ilany Kogan (2011) proposes that the suffering that cannot yet be processed constitutes a “psychic hole” – an area of the mind marked by intolerable unknowingness that the subject seeks to fill through creating psychic representations based on what exists in the present. Creating psychic representations helps to retain access to the unthinkable, hence enabling the subject to keep hold of the split-off dimensions of the self and their unacknowledged suffering. Relating this to the vignette, we may also consider a twofold process taking place: First, the psychic hole of what is not there, namely, the allegedly “racist” tutor, becomes filled with the psychic representation of what is there, the “quiet” tutor who has done nothing in the face of racial suffering. Furthermore, the psychic hole relating to the mounting pressure of meeting listening competency criteria as a prerequisite for progressing onto placement remains undiscussable. Indeed, it may also have become suffused with the racial suffering of Ayesha. This permits a palpable link to the collective feelings of precarity and indignation that ensue when one perceives that one is at someone else’s mercy.

As the individuals are united into a homogenous whole, the *us*, the inevitability of antagonism based on envy over the power of tutors, can be externalized through the destructive wishes to bring them down. The heightened vulnerability in the face of a critical, “observing object” (Steiner, 2011) represented by the tutors can be disavowed. Furthermore, in the wake of a relational crisis, omnipotent feelings that the power resides in the group can be regained as a way of fending off the dread of being let down by the trainers. Through an absolute identification with the

group mentality, the group turns into a “primitive container” (Wieland, 2017) – a powerful and homogenized battalion which protects the group members from all external and internal threats. Difference, either inside or outside, such as nuanced expressions of views or feelings, threatens the imagined unity like a “deadly virus that will penetrate the perfect body of the group and contaminate it” (Layton, 2009, p. 144). Suffering that is unthinkable, yet kept alive in the psychic hole, becomes re-enacted through the powerful imageries contained within the “anti-racist” mobilizations. What cannot be held within the self finds an object outside the self against which the internal struggles can be waged, e.g., I am not one of “them,” I do not think or act like one of “them.” At a deeper level, negation also permits the redemptive function of facing one’s destructiveness against the other, by allowing us to distinguish ourselves as morally and psychologically superior and repudiating any unthinkable thoughts and intolerable feelings into the homogeneously construed “them.”

The capacity for complex thinking, for example, how the tutors may not be at all homogenous and may also be impacted by the event differently depending on their identity positions and suffer their own confusions, indignations, and limitations as part of the whole pales into insignificance. It is superseded by contentment with an oversimplified link between “who is suffering” to “who is responsible” that appears to work. In the following vignette, I will bring to light how this creates a temporal circuit whereby actions to redress the past violence lead us into a future and back again to something that has been before.

The second year of the training begins with a lecture on the politics of representation. We are joined by Stuart Hall and Edward Said whose texts on identity, representation and culture guide our thinking and prompt many ruminative nods in students as we go along. To help illustrate the psychosocial implications of their thinking, I have prepared a series of well-known movie posters which all have the elements of orientalism that portray the other as inferior, backward, eroticised or animalistic. Students seem to be enjoying these, grasping very quickly what the problem is with each image being presented to them. A few of them also notice that some of these productions are quite recent, and they confess they have not really questioned the implicit cultural hierarchies conveyed by each production until now. These revelations are once plain and profound, prompting further discussions on how our perception of the other has identity implications for the self and who gets seen as one of us. ‘We construct who we are by determining what we are not, as good old Freud would say on “negation”’, I respond, feeling encouraged by the discussions.

‘But, isn’t it also a case that some of these films portray a version of the reality?’ Ruth, who has been quiet up until this point, poses the question with a tone of hesitancy in her voice. Sensing that this is somehow at odds with where the discussion is going, she further adds: ‘Slumdog Millionaire, for example. I have seen the film, and I know many scenes were filmed in the real slums.’ The class falls silent as if waiting for a detonating device on a timebomb to explode. Sensing that the class is waiting to see how I would respond before venturing an opinion, I decide to come in: ‘I think that is a valid point you’ve raised, Ruth, and I am glad that you’ve raised it. You are helping us think about how certain reality comes into being and, in this case, poverty in India. This is what Said would call the “contrapuntal reading”, a way of studying the connections between the past and the present by thinking about why things are the way they are.’ I pause, gauging the reaction from the class. Ruth seems thoughtful for a moment before commenting: ‘but, my point is, why is one way of perceiving the reality seen as less valid than the other?’ This seems to have finally set the

bomb off. A few students from the minority backgrounds now look furious. Triya, a student from India, who barely speaks in the class, blurts out: 'are you suggesting British colonisation of India is not real?' Ruth seems startled to hear this from a usually quiet and gentle member of the group, but before she can speak, a white student comes to the rescue, 'I think Ruth is saying that just because the film is made that way it does not mean you need to read it that way. As far as I am concerned it is a feel-good film made to motivate people.' Ruth cuts in, 'Exactly, and a post-structuralist argument would be that the producer does not dictate what the audience wants to make of it. He is just portraying the reality as he sees it. That is the whole point about artistic creations: you make your own interpretations, and all interpretations are valid. In any case, I think it is a poorly chosen example. There are films specifically about the British Colonisation that can be used if that's the message we are supposed to learn.'

Feeling somehow under attack yet concerned about the potential effects of my keeping quiet any longer, I decide to brave the intensity of the glaring sun: 'Apart from what the film is about, if we can return to Said, I think there is still the question of what it can do to us when we are constantly being exposed to a particular representation or being represented in a particular way. It changes how we see others and how we see the self. Being exposed to images of poverty in India, for example, can create feelings of inferiority for people from the area compared to those from the West, perhaps?' I can see that by saying this I have lost Ruth and half of the class.

The large unstructured group which follows is filled with the chilling effects of Ruth's absence. Later the day, I receive an email from her requesting for a private meeting with me 'as soon as possible'. We meet the next day.

Ruth raises her concern with me over my 'insensitive handling' of the situation yesterday. She feels that as a tutor, my comment had the effect of side-lining different opinions such as hers in class, creating an uneven debate. I try to explain myself but only seems to make things worse. Sensing that an apology is not forthcoming from me, Ruth goes on: 'I feel completely marginalised by you in class. As a woman from a working-class background, I am disappointed that class representation was not discussed at all yesterday. Just so you know, I am considering resorting to the complaint procedure.' I lower my gaze, feeling sad for reasons I can't explain.

How did we get to this? With this question weighing on me, I cannot help but feel I have let the group down once again.

How do I keep failing and what do these failures "know"? Foregrounding my failures is less of a choice inspired by the Beckettian trope of learning from one's failures to "fail better" than by the Fanonian ethics of failure which entails a critical investigation of what it means to fail. An ethics of failure does not denote a position of arrogance or all-knowing omnipotence. Rather it requires that we relate to failures differently. For Fanon (1952), the black subject's desire for proximity to whiteness through colonial mastery of identity performance and linguistic perfection is doomed to be a failed venture, precisely as these efforts reinforce only further racial subjugation and alienation from the self. His emphasis on these fated-to-fail endeavors reveals the underlying project of the antiblack colonialism that succeeds to infiltrate, regulate, and moderate all aspects of the black subject's lived world. Failures, as an inherent part of working in a dilemmatic space, e.g., speaking one's mind often means offending the other, bring into question the relational limits (as well as possibilities) as posed by the preexisting social relations.

Interpreting Fanon's reference to his own failings, Lewis Gordon (2015) points out that Fanon adopts the French term "raté" rather than "echec" in nuancing his relation to failures,

Raté more properly refers to a misfire, missing the mark, or something backfiring, as in an old combustion engine, which explains Fanon's reference to engine failures. The word is also used, however, to refer to not measuring up, or failing to meet a standard, as in the expression raté de père, a man failing to meet the expectations or standards of fatherhood, a concept rich with psychoanalytic content. (p. 24)

In both vignettes, we can perhaps see how each failing presents the injustice of suffering as a familiar cast member in the theater of the collective imaginations of how one should act. Relating to my failures in the sense of "raté," my failure to respond in ways that met Ruth's expectations exposed me as an "engine failure." These failures also call us to witness the collective challenges to reach across divisive lines when those on the other side are cast as the culprit responsible for the suffering caused. If Ayesha's racial suffering marks the originary trauma that binds the trainees into a cohesive collective of the "us" against the tutors as the "them," these oppositional dynamics persist into a future that loops back to this earlier figuring of a time in which justice can be, and is perceived to have been, served. Rife with this "hauntedness" (Frosh, 2017) in the shared history, the trainee group imagines a possible future structured according to the same divisive line; the originary trauma that has not been sufficiently processed, worked through, and indeed mourned for makes ghostly returns that haunt the relations unfolding in the group. Reproduced as an action, the continual revolt reenacts the impending odds of dominance and subjugation against the other in a colonial syntax: The racialized trainer who has failed the white expectations must be subject to a position of punishment and impotence; what appears to be actional, when unreflexively sustained, lands us, again, in the zone of for-and-against mentality.

Psychic Retreats As a Space for Self-Maintenance

If the psy-complex coerces us to align the many varieties of our experiences, feelings, and understanding with the privileged moral syntax and forecloses any nuances within it, what might be the alternatives? To think this through, I will now turn to psychic retreats as a liminal space that merits investigation for its radical potential for psychosocial reflexivity.

Psychic retreats, in the original formulation, work as a psychic mechanism that shelters the individual tormented by feelings of inadequacy and shame from further psychic sufferings of degradation, guilt, and humiliation caused by an "observing" object (Steiner, 1993, 2006, 2011). The feelings of inadequacy are a direct result of falling under the perceived critical gaze of someone else who is experienced as superior yet punitive. Invoked spatially, psychic retreat provides the subject with a mental space, a "dream world" (Steiner, 2006) into which the subject can withdraw

to avoid further confrontation with reality that is felt to be charged with excessive criticality and humiliating encounters. In developmental terms, this dream world serves the child as an internal sanctuary that enables them to resist the external authority when it threatens to further injure the self or impose upon it a rational set of measures which are at odds with their own authentic expression. In other words, psychic retreat allows a temporary withdrawal from the outside world. This helps to mitigate further suffering from “seeing and being seen” (Steiner, 2011) as falling short of the expectations of the dominant others in the social world.

The original theory addresses the psychic retreat as a narcissistic defense and locates the pathology in the individual psyche. The process of change, therefore, is theorized as a dialectical movement between the inner and the outside world, between withdrawing into the psychic retreat and emerging from it. However, in the psychosocial, no basic distinction can be found between the inside and the outside, as the so-called “inner world” may not be as internal as it seems but is “produced and sustained by various manifestations of sociality, and vice versa” (Frosh, 2016, p. 3). The spatial transition between the inside and the outside, as though they were stable grounds, becomes disrupted, calling forth new ways of thinking.

Resituating my apparent failures psychosocially, we may consider how the contemporary university, which has become an anxiety machine through its various neoliberal technologies of workload surveillance, fetishization of student satisfaction, and performance management, abets forms of neocolonialism that reward conformity and oppress deviance (Pirrie & Fang, 2021). Underpinned by neoliberal performativity, these technologies imposed “from above” (Steiner, 2011, p. 47) can be seen as constituting an observing object who frames an institutional ego-ideal through which our understanding of good citizenship is refracted. Not measuring up or failing to meet the institutional ego-ideal implicates the failing subject at the mercy of the observing object who is ever present to provoke humiliation through a perpetual, critical gaze. The question of how to act becomes refracted through the lens of the observing object so that doing what is right, e.g., activism in/through education, is often out of sync with doing the right thing, e.g., achieving high student satisfaction or retention. If relational ethics, as Parker argues, requires reflexive vigilance in order to resist our deep compulsion to act upon the psy-complex to be seen as Good, then staying with our failures and pursuing our inquiry from a dilemmatic place have the potential to provide the subject with a reference point of who/what demands conformity and what is limiting and co-opting.

A psychosocial rendition of the psychic retreat requires us to consider how the movement between the inside and the outside is less of a spatial transition than a spatiotemporal one – of finding space inside to remain *in between* a traumatic past and an unknown future without attempting to rush to solutions or identity positionings. This might also look like taking the time to mull over a challenge or think through a difficulty before deciding how to respond or what to do. If the dominant temporality of our time is characterized by the neoliberal hegemonies of acceleration, productivity, and efficiency which structure and organize our experiences in and with the social world, then the time we take in psychic retreats, as a hiatus, holds

what falls outside, including the suspended times that fail to flow. While it might look as though nothing much is happening, for Lisa Baraitser (2016), this is an ethical praxis of self-maintenance which concerns suspending, enduring, and persisting in the “elongated present” (p. 183) as a counterpractice to the dominant sociopolitical enterprises that demand individuated solutions to collective problems. These nonlinear (queer) times are qualitatively distinct from the normative unfolding of the time “outside,” opposing the doctrinaire rhetoric of living productively – to be seen as always doing something, succeeding, and moving forward.

Psychosocial Reflexivity Through Psychic Retreats

In his autobiography titled *Familiar Stranger* (2017), Stuart Hall reflects on his perpetual failure to live out a singular identity that meets the colonial standards and to grasp reality from preexistent standpoints; these failures allow him to be in touch with his own estrangement from the dominant discourses and to speak from within. Enduring internally what fails to fit neatly into a narrative enables a more fluid awareness of the self. It enables the self to move across divided histories and subjectivities which, in turn, generate alternative interpretations, positions, and understandings. For Hall, this has the existential, liminal quality of “living on a hinge”:

In the imaginary it is possible to condense different persons in a single figure, to alter places, to substitute different time frames, or to slip *irrationally* between them, as dreams frequently do. Montage is its lifeblood. We have to work with such ways of telling and speaking, with no attempt to iron out the disruptions. . . . There are no alternative, direct routes. In historical reality, we cannot turn back the ever-onward flight path of time’s arrow. We can never go home again, and we need to fashion narrative forms able to catch the full complexities - the displacements, again - of this collective predicament. (p. 170; emphasis original)

Retreating inwardly does not denote passivity or resignation; rather it means facing something in the self that others would rather avoid: It means continual laboring to transcend one’s own repulsions against the internal and the external others so that one may consider the potential contradictions of desirable versus authentic, our own thoughts versus others’ thoughts, and ethical versus moral without rushing to actions or identification. Living on a hinge renders the self a “familiar stranger” and pushes against the demand of the psy-complex that relies on a logic of exclusivity of any identity positions, e.g., either the right or the wrong. This echoes with Layton’s reflexive subject who grows capable of being suspicious of personal investment in any identity positionings in order to be alert to the inherent moral-political descriptions that frame what it means to be seen in a certain way.

The vignettes illustrate how the psy-complex finds fertile ground in the state of internal hegemony, be it within the self or a group. It propels us to repudiate any internal contradictions in favor of a taken-for-granted understanding of “moral injunctions that you should be or should do this or that to be a moral being” (Parker, 2020, p. 375). I have shown how, at a deeper level, the psy-complex forecloses

reflexive thinking by rendering us vulnerable to essentialist representations of identity that recharge identity politics and revitalize, at each turn, oppressive forces against the other. Psychic retreats, reframed psychosocially, may afford a space of radical suspension through effecting a temporal fracturing of the synchronicity between the inside and the outside and, through this, the bond between parts of the self that are desirous of being seen in a particular way and the observing object that regulates identity frameworks according to its own desires. This suspension has *actional* potential; it entails a postponement within that permits us some distance from the observing object and how we would like to be seen by others. It allows us to attend to other minoritarian ways of experiencing and making sense of the self that fall short of the majoritarian understanding of being.

In the moments of failing, or seeing myself as such, I was tempted to rush to actions: to retaliate, to deny projections, and to apologize profusely. In other words, I was tempted to slip into the paranoid-schizoid position to feel better about myself by projecting the failings elsewhere, or else to fall into the depressive position through resorting to identification with the trainee group to alleviate the torments of guilt that I have let them down as one of “them” – the bad tutors. Either way, such action abets the defensive form of unity remodeled from the hegemonic mindset that normalizes the us/them split, (re)producing suffering in the other. Either way, it condenses the diversity of complexities and experiences within the self into a singular narrative, (re) producing commonsense moral judgments and everyday self-righteousness. Either way, “it other [s] us to ourselves” (Hall, 2017, p. 21).

Psychic retreat, as a *dream world*, is not about doing at all, nor is it about appearing in particular ways. Rather, it is about taking the time to find the space within in order to stay in the middle of things, in the middle of the tension of uncertainty, confusion, and humiliation. It is about turning inward to feel and to bear the “the overwhelming effect of the present-tense,” so we may come to know the nature of the unbearable (Baraitser, 2016, p. 183). It is in this sense that psychic retreats allow us “to bind, to neutralize, and to control primitive destructiveness whatever its source” (Steiner, 1993, p. 4). As Steiner (2011) later suggests, taking the retreat may be a way to “rebel against parental authority without resorting to a solution through identification” (p. 105). This has the capacity to move the subject from the moral dimension into the ethical one: It nuances our engagement with the observing object through a conscious “no” as opposed to too-ready a “yes.” Considering how failing to conform may be an active attempt to preserve something in the self that feels to be at stake, this act of rebelling against what others know may give rise to a renewed interest in what is going on in the self. I relate this also to the tasks of endurance and self-maintenance, both of which are necessary for the subject to hold back from the desire to perform ideal (ized) images of the self. This also means reflecting on the ways in which each and every psychological experience we have and interpret is refracted through wider networks of discourse and social practices which permeate us.

While depicting it as a “perverse state of mind,” Susan Long notes that a person taking the retreat “acknowledges reality, but also denies it. Reality threatens self-interest or previous certainty. This may be a special case of the both/and position. It

promises the creativity of holding opposites in mind, but their connection is illusory.” (2008, p. 33; italics added). In this chapter, I seek an alternative framing of the concept and argue that the capacity to hold oneself in this “both/and” position is an ethical task of endurance: “staying still, not immediately agreeing or disagreeing, not *acting in* or *acting out*, learning to be full of reverie oneself” (Frosh, 2015, p. 53; emphasis original). This is no easy task, especially in moments when we feel we have been “wronged.” As opposed to the “either/or” position, the “both/and” position permits us to be “living on a hinge”. It creates slippages in and out of the normative time and narrative frames so that we may “slip irrationally” between seemingly incompatible positions – and to conceive many more imaginative connections between truth and reality. In this light, Ayesha, Rick, Ruth, and Triya may each provide an existential snapshot into fringes of experiences, affects, and histories that refract the possibility of multiple positions of alterity that I may be capable of slipping into at any given moment – and undoubtedly have done so at various points during the turns of events when I felt “wronged.” This preoccupation with one’s ontological plurality which defies an overdetermined identification with the oppressor or the homogenously construed oppressed keeps us on our toes with our unrelenting complexities (Fang, 2020). Furthermore, it requires us to consider how each position we take produces a particular subjectivity that, when acted on, influences social relations as they unfold.

Experience is not something that is given to us. It is not something to be taken for granted. Bearing with one’s perpetual otherness without attempting to iron out the disruptions is what enables reflexive considerations of the multifaceted and self-contestatory nature of selfhood – so that “nothing can be taken for granted, not least the telling of a life” (Hall, 2017, p. 95). It may be that through displacing oneself from the omnipresent coercions of the psy-complex we come to find a reflexive position to reinvent new and esthetic forms of lived experience that unravel our many paradoxes. It may be that this familiar stranger will always render us an outsider to the dominant narrative as well as to who we would like to be and how we would like to be seen. But, as a site where multiple others are folded within a single figure, it may also be our best chance of engaging in critical and progressive forms of reflexivity. It is only thus that we will be able to traverse the fractured, diasporic, estranged territories of the mind – to disrupt identity as well as to delimit it.

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