Book Review

TIPS

The Social Unconscious: Selected Papers. By Earl Hopper. International Library of Group Analysis 22. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003; 223pp, £18.95.

How do we come to be the people that we are? This question, and variants of it, has occupied and divided psychoanalytically informed thinkers for the past century. From classical theory through object relations to attachment theory and intersubjectivity, ideas of how we develop and how we establish a sense of identity or sense of self have broadened and are increasingly interpersonal in nature. The volume under review will no doubt be viewed by some as extreme in its perspective but it seeks to harness the depth of psychoanalysis and the breadth of the social : not 'either or' but 'both and'. Although not an original idea, it is the fullest elaboration to date and an idea whose time has come.

The timing of this publication is perhaps not entirely coincidental. History demonstrates that there have always been natural disasters, transmigrations of peoples, religious hatreds, terrorist attacks and so on – what is new, with modern telecommunications, is that, if/when these events happen today, they will be on our television screens this evening, inescapably so. Likewise, in observing contemporary European politics and national positioning, historians rejoice in pointing out how we are witnessing a re-enactment of life in the Middle Ages. The Make Poverty History campaign inevitably draws attention to social trauma, to the afterlife of imperialism and to disadvantage based on race. The interrelatedness and interconnectedness of all our fortunes is underscored at every turn.

Back in 1948, the psycho-analyst and group-analyst, S.H. Foulkes wrote:

> Through (psycho-analysis') concept of conflict as of paramount pathogenic importance, conflict, that is, between innate impulsive instinct and restricting authority and limiting reality, it has allowed for the basic nature of man as a social animal … the 'outer' world becomes internalised … man's inner dynamic world is a microcosmic reflection of the whole world, at least his whole world. It has, in fact, allowed man's social nature to be represented in man's innermost structure. (Foulkes 1948, 10)

Adding to this later, he wrote:

> … Man' s social behaviour (is) basic to him and individuals emerge as the result of developments in the community, just as in psycho-analysis individual personality is viewed as emerging from and formed by his family.

Conceiving the social behaviour of man as basic does not deny or reduce the importance of the sexual instinct in the sense of psycho-analysis, nor of the aggressive instinct (Foulkes, 1964, 109).

> … The group-analytic situation, while dealing intensively with the unconscious in the Freudian sense, brings into operation and perspective a totally different area of which the individual is equally unaware … One might speak of a social or interpersonal unconscious.
> (Foulkes, 1964, 52)

Now, more than 50 years after Foulkes' earlier statement on this subject, comes this selection of papers by the psychoanalyst and group-analyst, Earl Hopper. By professional training, Hopper is a sociologist, group analyst and psychoanalyst. (He is a past Chairman of the Group of Independent Psychoanalysts of the British Psycho-Analytical Society and a past President of the International Association of Group Psychotherapy.)

This collection comprises eight papers, in chronological order, written between 1965 and the late 1990s – some of them being in a second or third iteration. (A fascinating subtext of the book lies in articulating 'the making of a psychoanalyst/group analyst'. In a seven-page 'acknowledgements' section, the author traces his own professional development and his thinking about this along the way.)

In Chapter 7 (subtitled 'A study of the social unconscious and counter-transference in group analysis') and in the service of understanding the clinical work, the author is unusually self-revealing with regard to personal, family and professional data. He writes that:

> Clinical data about counter-transference processes are rarely presented. It often believed that information about an analyst limits his patients' scope for fantasy, and, therefore, their ability to understand communications primarily in terms of unconscious meanings …

The constraints of the social unconscious on the counter-transference are only barely understood. Virtually nothing has been written about how an analyst uses insight into the origins and maintenance of his social identity in order to better understand his patients. It is likely that he has been taught that an interest in social identity is defensive against anxieties associated with impulses and fantasies that are 'unconscious' in the usual sense of the term (pp. 162–3).

An illustration of his thinking is provided in the following example. His response to a psychoanalyst in a public lecture is instructive when the latter suggested that

> young black men in Brixton were unable to trust older white men in positions of authority because they have failed to work through the anxieties inherent in the paranoid-schizoid position, and that they were poor and unemployed because they were unable to make healthy introjections of the opportunities available, or in other words, that unemployment rates in excess of 30 % over a decade was due to the experience which the males (but apparently not the females) had at 'the breast' during their first few months of their life.
>   … Unless we can acknowledge the reality of the helplessness that confronts these people we will be unable to help them, filter out their accurate perceptions of reality from their fantastic distortions of them: unless we can acknowledge our own feelings of guilt, we will be unable to help our patients find the most effective and efficient forms of instrumental adjustment available to them; and … unless we can help them endure the pain inherent in feeling helpless, we may have to accept that paranoid fantasies and their attendant consequences are, inevitably, the only defensive solution available to them. (pp. 121–2)

With the papers covering a nearly 40-year period, the development of a clear line of thought is discernible – the incorporation of psychoanalysis and social psychology. The opening two papers are from the author's period as an academic – the first examining supervisory styles in industry and the second offering a sociological view of large groups. These are followed by two papers on a 'Survivor Syndrome Workshop' (1979). The next three papers focus on clinical technique in group-analytic psychotherapy, with particular reference to utilisation of the counter-transference, while the final paper is a reflection 'on the nature of hope'. Throughout all these, there is detailed reference to clinical material (and material from other group situations) with very honest commentary by the author as to how he made sense of this material, how this and his understanding of his own counter-transference informed his interventions and what followed from that.

Towards the end of the recent film *Broken Flowers* (Jim Jarmusch, 2005) – a film much given to musing on existential concerns – there is a moment when a young man says to a much older man 'can you give me any philosophical tips?' (referring to the young man's efforts to find his way in life). Haltingly, the older man responds 'well, the past is gone … the future, whatever it brings, isn't here yet so all there is is now … ' This is a long-established compartmentalization, with which most people will be familiar (and which psychodynamic psychotherapists will discount) but it does not conform to experience. Hopper is particularly clear on this. Emphasizing his commonality of approach with Foulkes and others in that tradition, he underscores the importance of Bion's observation that the basic assumption group knows no time and knows no space (Bion, 1961). This goes far beyond the counter-part distinction, often heard in reference to therapeutic work, of 'here and now' or 'there and then'. Indeed Hopper proposes a general frame of reference which sets, alongside these two dimensions, the further dimensions of 'here and then' and 'there and now' (pp. 130–40) and offers clinical illustrations to demonstrate how he might delineate between the various dimensions, with great attention to detail.

As noted above, *The Social Unconscious* represents a line of thinking whose time has come. From bullying and youth violence in schools, to bombings in our cities, to anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim activities and other race or religious hatred, to anxieties, well founded or otherwise, about immigration – wherever we live, all of us are touched and shaped by these events. The incorrect and infamous assertion that 'there is no such thing as society' is no longer influential. The notion of 'individual' and the notion of 'group' have all too frequently been posited as an either/or. In fact, of course, we need to keep both these notions in mind and be alert to the dynamic interaction between the two. In this text, Earl Hopper has made a major contribution to the understanding of the depth and breadth of individuals and how we might help them to know more of their patterns of relatedness with others, inter-personally, socially and culturally. Of particular note is the open, honest manner of his consideration of his counter-transference and these can be clearly observed in the abundance of pertinent vignettes. This book draws attention to theory and practice in relation to a side of therapeutic work insufficiently attended to and will reward readers at all stages of professional development. It is written in a clear, accessible style and manages to convey complex ideas in a readily comprehensible manner.

Bion WR (1961) *Experiences in Groups.* London: Tavistock.

Foulkes SH (1948) *Introduction to Group-Analytic Psychotherapy.* London: Heinemann (republished in 1983 by Karnac Books).

Foulkes, SH (1964) *Therapeutic Group Analysis.* London: Allen & Unwin.

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