

# Subject Relations theory and the Dialectics of Difference: the Necessity for an Interpersonal Psychoanalytic ‘Language of Subjectivity?’

Harriet Jackson

University of Essex

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to explore the question of whether the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas’ theory of Subject Relations can provide us with a new conceptual psycho-social ‘language’ of subjectivity. The purpose of this is to provide us with a psychoanalytic understanding of the unconscious processes by which individuals within groups subjectively experience, construct and symbolically represent the Other in the dialectics of Difference. It’s argued that the subjectivity of the individual and the role of the Other in the formation of individual identity and relationships has been underemphasised in psychoanalytic Object relations theory resulting in an ‘Other Blindness’ wherein there is the danger of homogenising the Other/difference. The consequences of this are the existence of certain gaps in our understanding of how society – a composition of inter-subjective relations between peoples - works. This has manifested in a Winnicottian ‘False Self’ identity in language and practice of psychoanalysis. Suggested counter-measures against the objectification of the individual might be the development of a new conceptual ‘language of subjectivity’ or ‘Subject Relations’ theory in psychoanalysis alongside use of heuristic, reflexive and phenomenological methods which focus on the experiential and subjective dimensions of both the interpreter and the subject’s reality. In doing so, it facilitates the examination of underlying prejudices, stereotypes and power dynamics within psychoanalysis that are unconsciously communicated through language thereby re-claiming a ‘democratization of psychoanalytic knowledge’ and the birth of a ‘true self’ psychoanalysis that acknowledges its own inherent ambiguities.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis; Subject relations; psychosocial language.

## **Introduction**

In the first part of the paper, I will outline the question of Subjectivity in psychoanalytic theory and critique some of the psychoanalytic writings in this field. In the second part, I will examine how Bollas' theory of Subject Relations might enable us to understand from a psychoanalytic perspective the articulation of subjectivity and difference in I/you relations. To conclude, I put forward the notion of a new Interpersonal Language of Subjectivity in Psychoanalytic Object Relations theory with specific reference to Bollas' theory of Subject Relations.

Questions concerning the nature of human experience and subjectivity have been the pre-occupation of philosophical enquiry which has in turn influenced psychoanalytic thinking. Thus, Heidegger (1927) was concerned with the question of what exactly the Essence of Being is and what its experience actually entails. Also, the founder of phenomenology, the philosopher Husserl (1931) endeavoured to understand human interaction by developing a phenomenological methodology whose aim was to 'bracket human experience' i.e. study human interaction as an object in itself to be observed in its minutiae independent of the environment.

Indeed, Bollas refers to the word 'phenomenology' several times in his writing and puts forward a theory of the individual within the context of inter-subjective relationships. This might be described as a psychoanalytic 'phenomenology of being' with the distinction of an emphasis on the uniqueness of the subjective internal experiences individuals have through social interaction within inter-subjective relationships.

## **A critique of psychoanalytic language in classical psychoanalysis and the move towards a 'subjective turn'**

The theorization of Subjectivity or Subject relations in Psychoanalysis<sup>1</sup> is by no means new and has been popularized with the emergence of the perspective of Inter-subjectivity and its emphasis on interpersonal relations and triangularity. Subject Relations Theory has been widely written about,

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<sup>1</sup> Other psychoanalytic authors who have written on 'Subject Relations' include Roger Kennedy (1998); James Grotstein (2000); Thomas Ogden (1994) and Jessica Benjamin (1995)

especially in the USA, as noted in the writings of Thomas Ogden (1994); Stephen Mitchell (1988, 1993); James Grotstein (2000), Jessica Benjamin (1995) and Christopher Bollas (1987). Inter-subjectivity and Subject Relations theory in psychoanalysis has been advocated in lieu of what has been argued to be a neglect of this aspect of the human psyche in Classical Psychoanalysis and Object Relations theory (Grotstein, 2000). The former has tended to focus on the drives whilst the latter has tended to concentrate on the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship but at the expense of other equally important aspects of the therapeutic relationship. These include: firstly, the private inner world of the individual, as Roger Kennedy observes ‘...there is still not enough attention paid in Object Relations theory to the subjective side of the analytic encounter (Kennedy, 1998:9); secondly, the actual underlying social mores, prejudices and politics that also contribute to shaping the respective psyches and subjective worlds of the analyst and patient and thirdly, the subjective elements of the ‘present moment’ as it is experienced in the now (Stern, 2004).

Another criticism that might be directed at Object Relations theory, is that of reductionism i.e. its tendency to focus on the individual to the exclusion of the external influences of society – a kind of ‘closed off individualism’ that omits contemporary social influences.

In addition, there is a dearth of literature on the role of individual agency in Object Relations theory. The individual is theorised as being primarily motivated by and subject to the determinants of Instinctual Drives (Freudian theory); Defense Mechanisms (Klein) or the role of the Environmental Mother on the infant’s development (Winnicott). There is an element of the individual being dis-empowered, of his/her being stripped of his/her own ‘uniqueness’ and in turn, of human relations being reduced to unconscious factors alone and deleting the ‘I-ness’ and ‘You-ness’ qualities that we experience in our day to day interpersonal relationships.

Hitherto, traditional psychoanalytic Object Relations theory has tended to use a highly neutral and objective style of psychoanalytic language. This has been in the supposed interests of keeping the discipline neutral and scientifically unbiased. However, this has led to a clinical and cold approach to analysing the intimacies, experiences and subjectivities of the subject in analysis and everyday life. There is a distinct lack of colour, richness or texture that captures the subject’s experience of human interaction with the Other. This has led to a ‘top down’ detached approach in psychoanalysis which attempts to describe the individual’s reality without taking into consideration how the individual subjectively sees or experiences this reality: this in effect is dis-empowering. In addition,

there has been an implicit homogenization of difference in psychoanalysis – whereby differences of race, ethnicity and class are under-emphasised. It might be argued that Classical Psychoanalysis and Object Relations theory developed some kind of Winnicottian 'False Self' that sought to standardise and repress the nuances and subtleties of difference and subjectivity of the individual in the name of psychoanalysis as a discipline aiming for scientific standardisation and its use of a homogenising language reflected this. In contrast, a 'True Self' Subjectivist Psychoanalysis might encompass difference and Otherness by developing a psychoanalytic language that reflects the subjective ambiguities and complexities of the self and Other. I will return to this in the final part of the paper.

The need for the introduction of a new language of Subject Relations that both empowers the individual and inserts the 'personal', the 'human' and the 'subjective' back into Object Relations theory cannot be understated. In order to understand both the Self and the Other we need to develop a psychoanalytic language of Subject Relations that describes the 'richness' and 'textuality' of the subjective 'I-ness' and 'you-ness' that are experienced in our relations with others. Thus, we need to develop a subjective 'personalised' psychoanalytic discourse that captures the textual experience of the dialectics of difference that are experienced by each of us in human inter-action.

Indeed, in addressing the individual and human relationships in psychoanalysis we need to take a psycho-social approach that also incorporates the subjective and experiential. It might be asked: What defines the uniqueness of the 'I' and difference of the 'You/Other'? What is the relationship between the micro (psychological) and macro (social/political) variables and the role of human agency in both shaping our experiential subjective worlds, our attitudes and subjective relations with the Other and how do they manifest in a Dialectics of Difference? How can psychoanalysis sensitise itself to the subtle nuances that colour our respective subjective everyday life worlds and, in turn, our interaction with the Other?

### **Bollas' theory of Subject Relations**

In his first book, 'The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known,' Bollas (1987) asks a series of questions which seem to set the theme to his theory of Subject Relations. Thus, he states:

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“I am particularly concerned to emphasise the necessity of asking how each person relates to himself as an object within intra-subjective space. Who is speaking? What part of the self is speaking and what part of the self is being addressed? What is the nature of this object relation? Is it a good enough object relation? Is instinct permitted representation? In what way? As a demand? Or are instinctual needs elaborated into the wish so that they become part of the subject’s range of desire? Is desire represented in coherent ways so as to be syntonic with the other parts of the self, or is it sexually communicated in a persecutory manner, perhaps through the structure of the perverse, which could constitute a breakdown in the intra-subjective object relation?...Each person who possesses a capacity for intra-subjective relating is an object of his own self management, and the nature of how the self is handled as an object of one’s own management is worth of scrutiny.” (Bollas, 1987:44-45)

Here, Bollas’ argues for a self-object relation that emphasises the importance of internal self examination and heuristic reflexivity.

Bollas uses the term ‘Subject Relations’ Theory as applied to the relationship between the therapist and client and differentiates it to object Relations theory when he states:

“...analysis is the interplay of two subjectivities...any analytic session is a dialectic between two subjectivities, and although they will form and project internal mental representations of one another, the understanding of which we term object relations theory, they will also act in a successional interplay of idiom<sup>2</sup> elements, which I think we should say is more of Subject Relations theory.” (Bollas, 1989:108)

Bollas goes on to distinguish Subject Relations Theory as follows:

“If object relations theory attends to the formation and projection of self and object representations, subject relations theory attends to the interplay of two human sensibilities, who together create environments unique to their cohabitation. The concepts of interplay, interrelating, intersubjectivity, have as much use in a subject relations theory as in an object relations theory.” (Bollas, 1989:108)

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<sup>2</sup> When Bollas uses the term the ‘idiom’ of a person he refers to ‘...the unique nucleus of each individual...which under favorable circumstances can evolve and articulate; ‘idiom is the defining essence of each subject...’ (Bollas, 1989: 212).

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Bollas highlights the role of the analyst’s and patient’s subjectivity in establishing a ‘dialectics of difference’ between them. He argues that self identity is continuously constructed through an unconscious interaction with the Other through a ‘...dialectics of two subjectivities’ within an ‘intermediate area of experiencing’ (ibid, 1989:108-9). This might begin with the infant’s experience of the mother and her personal idiom<sup>3</sup>, but later refer to the transmission of a ‘generational’ culture (ibid, 1992:274) and its associative values to the infant. Of the therapeutic dyad itself, Bollas refers to how a dialectics of difference ‘...constitutes a particular relation to subjectivity, in which the analyst uses the fact of subjective idiom to his [sic] and his [sic] patient’s psychoanalytic advantage’ (ibid, 1989:71).

Bollas purports that the presence and experience of the Other is crucial to the formation of our self identity when he argues that:

‘Through the experience of being the other’s object, which we internalise, we establish a sense of two-ness in our being, and this subject-object paradigm further allows us to address our inherited disposition, or true self, as other. We use the structure of the mothers’ imagining and handling of our self to objectify and manage our true self.’ (Bollas, 1987:51)

The author likens the relationship between Winnicott’s concepts of a false self and a true self to a ‘phenomenology of relations to the self as an object’ (Bollas, 1987: 51). He continues, ‘The false self is derived from the mother’s communication of her assumptions about existence while the true self, the object of this care, is the historical kernel of the infant’s instinctual and ego dispositions’ (Bollas, 1987:51).

Here, it seems that Bollas is making the following points: first, through experiencing a reciprocal relationship with the Other we have our first experience of the true self; second, that the false self and true self are inherent parts of the unconscious identity; third, that the false self and true self constitute an internal dialectic conflict of the unconscious that is a core part of the unconscious identity; fourth, that their dialectical relationship of conflict actually creates an internal phenomenology of the self as an object, a ‘self-object’<sup>4</sup> – how it relates to itself; fifth, that the false

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<sup>3</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>4</sup> Heinz Kohut (1971) the founder of Self Psychology also uses the term ‘self-object’.

self is that part of the identity that is initially culturally transmitted by the mother whilst the true self is the natural authentic biological and ego-centred aspect of the self/unconscious; sixth and above all, by suggesting that there is a phenomenological relationship to the self as object via the dialectics of the false self and the true self, Bollas seems to be portraying a picture of the unconscious that is dynamic, conflicted, multi-faceted and in constant motion and motivated and defined by the presence of the Other<sup>5</sup>.

The implications of this for the question of the Other for psychoanalysis as a discipline are clear: Bollas is suggesting that the existence/inclusion of the Other is a core part of unconscious identity which is embodied in the false self and true self aspects of the un-conscious identity; that the experience of the Other is essential for facilitating the experience of the true self. The false self is the external self that inherits the cultural values of the mother and society and the true self is the authentic genetic and egoistic self. It might be deemed that the fostering of prejudices against Differences in the Other whether these be of class, gender, age, race, etc. are learnt from either the mother or society that nurtures the individual and comes to constitute the ‘false self’ of the individual whilst the true self<sup>6</sup> is that authentic self that is the biological ego self that comes prior to inheriting the host cultures values and norms.

### **The possibility of a new democratic psychoanalytic language of subjectivity**

Thus, it’s argued that the notion of a new democratic subjective language of psychoanalysis needs to be developed that addresses the individual’s personalised day-to-day experiences. It’s asked, has the psychoanalytic theory of Inter-subjectivity<sup>7</sup> adequately developed a psychoanalytic language of Subjectivity that enables us to gain greater insight in the individual’s personal and inter-personal worlds?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Bollas seems to have been influenced by Kohut’s (1971) ‘Self Psychology’ in his reference to the ideas of a conflicted internal self and an ego-based True Self.

<sup>6</sup> Bollas seems to acknowledge the Other as a part of the True Self when he states: ‘There is no pure culture of the true self...’ and that ‘any ego operation in adult life will inevitably be some kind of mix of true self and true self’s negotiation with the [outside] world’ (ibid, 1989:17).

<sup>7</sup> Psychoanalytic Inter-subjective Theory is prominent in the United States as a critique of the classical psychoanalytic model’s traditional positivistic approach,

<sup>8</sup> A fully comprehensive in-depth answer to this question cannot be given here given space limitations in this paper and only an overview can be given here.

Thus, what the perspective of Inter-subjectivity has done for psychoanalysis, as highlighted in writings such as Stephen Mitchell (1988, 1993); Christopher Bollas (1987, 1989); Thomas Ogden (1968; 1994); Jessica Benjamin, 1995) and James Grotstein (2000), is widen the parameters of psychoanalysis and its conceptual language so that it now conceives the individual within the interpersonal matrix. The psyche, from the inter-subjective perspective, is considered not as an isolated entity but contextually in terms of race, culture, gender and other environmental influences. For example, in analysis, greater consideration can be given to the therapist's own subjectivity, which might in turn, effect the patient's inner experience. Moreover, in this context, the counter-transference is seen as the interactive totality of both the patient's and therapists' subjective mind states, rather than the analyst being seen as a blank slate onto which the patient projects on to, nor is the patient being a tabula rasa for the analysts' interpretations. Rather the analytic dyad is considered as an interpersonal matrix of two dialectic subjectivities<sup>9</sup> that when studied can unmask the unconscious dynamics of this complex relationship. Bollas (1987) adds to this how the analyst relives aspects of his own childhood in the analytic relationship and how interpretation derives from a worked through subjectivity and scrupulous monitoring of feelings as opposed to any notion of authoritative knowledge. Benjamin (1995) argues that the dialectics of inter-subjective relations is grounded in a dialectics of difference that begins in the intra-subjectivity primary mother-child relationship that lays the foundation for other relationships extended throughout life. She suggests that as the child makes the transition from dependence to independence, there is a crucial recognition of difference, of the m/other's distinction from the self. Thus, primary inter-subjectivity in the mother-child relationship emphasizes a mutual recognition of 'otherness', of different respective subjectivities that define our relationships into adulthood and beyond. The expansion of the analytic frame and its ensuing psychoanalytic language to incorporate notions of difference, environmental context and mutual inter-subjectivity has profound ramifications in terms of it encompassing developmentally areas such as class, gender, race, age etc. As a relatively young discipline, Psychoanalysis, is a subject that is continually developing and evolving alongside the external changes of society in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This includes the continual

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<sup>9</sup> Ogden (1994) refers to this as the 'inter-subjective analytic third.'



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expansion of the conceptual language of psychoanalysis to address the changing nuances of subjective and inter-subjective realities of human social worlds. The evolution of non-classical Subjectivist psychoanalytic perspectives such as Subject Relations and Inter-subjectivity have widened the scope of psychoanalysis and prompted the ongoing development of the discipline's language to encompass greater reflexivity and cultural sensitivity.

Thus, Bollas' theory of Subject Relations can contribute the following to psychoanalysis and the perspective of Intersubjectivity:

- The development of a new empowering democratic language of Subjectivity that incorporates the subtleties and textual nuances of subjective experience of both the Self and its dialectical interaction with the Other.
- A de-construction of existing psychoanalytic language – its inherent unconscious assumptions, prejudices and 'silences' concerning Difference/the Other and to the subsequent tendency to 'split' accordingly.
- Applied to clinical practice: (i) the heuristic reflexive intra-subjective study of the self in relation to the Other – in particular, that the therapist studies himself and is aware of the internal conflicts, ambiguities and prejudices towards the Other that might constitute his /her identity; (ii) the psycho-phenomenological study of the inter-subjective interactions between therapist and patient's and how the unconscious processes, prejudices and assumptions of 'Othering' are built up in the discourse and dialectics of therapy and in everyday life.
- In taking on such a project, psychoanalysis might experience discover it's unconscious true self/identity – an unconscious self that embodies the ambiguities and conflicts concerning the existence 'difference' embodied the Other with its own psychoanalytic conceptual language, as opposed to a hitherto historically defended 'false self' that denies the existence of the Other through an emphasis on a cross-culturally homogeneous unconscious.
- That such a new democratic subjective language of psychoanalysis is 'psycho-social' and is not afraid of acknowledging the political.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed Christopher Bollas' idea of a new 'Language of Subjectivity' as applied to the development of a heuristic and reflexive psychoanalytic understanding of 'Subject Relations' as experienced between the Self and the Other in an inter-subjective 'Dialectics of Difference'. I have discussed how Bollas highlights the inclusion of the Other as a key aspect of subjective self identity and experience. Additionally, I have suggested the need for a new method of psychoanalytic phenomenology which focuses on the 'experiential' dimension of psychoanalytic language as it is used and experienced both academically and subjectively in the therapeutic dyad.

There are a number of questions that are left open from this paper that I suggest need further investigation and in-depth research: exactly what are the subjective and psycho-social phenomenological processes that take place in the construction of the Other between individuals and groups and where do they begin? How do we observe these in the clinic, in groups and in everyday life? Can the process of 'Subjective Relations' and the Dialectics of Difference be psycho-phenomenologically 'bracketed' and studied a similar way that the phenomenologist Husserl (1954) suggested? Or will its study require new conceptual tools and methods of analysis?

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