THERAPY CULTURE AND THE TRANSITIONAL ENVIRONMENT OF MEDIA AND THE INNER WORLD

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Abstract: The Media and the Inner World research network is an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded network that challenges academics, media practitioners and therapists to build an interdisciplinary approach towards popular culture. In this paper, I take the theme of the opening symposium, Therapy Culture, and reiterate the need for psychotherapists to engage with reflection on the dynamics of mass cultural life. Such engagement is vital for clinical work and also in order to offer an informed response to the outer world, not least, the critical work of the sociologist Frank Furedi. I contrast the picture of therapy drawn by Furedi with the actual theory and clinical practice of psychotherapists and analysts. Particular reference is made to the work of the child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. I emphasise an important distinction in Winnicott’s psychoanalysis, between the creative use of fantasy, which is fundamentally important for the development of mind, and fantasying which keeps the mind stultified and unable to fully engage in society.

As one of a number of professional psychoanalytic therapists and analysts on the advisory board of Media and the Inner World (MiW) during the first two years of its operation, I want to offer some comments on it from an analytic point of view. I first illustrate the general importance of psychoanalytic clinicians engaging with work concerning contemporary popular culture, and relate this to the Media and the Inner World network (www.miwnet.org). This need to engage, I go on to argue, is only reinforced by the influential but deeply misrepresentative contributions of the sociologist, Frank Furedi, on the topic of ‘Therapy Culture’. I contrast Furedi’s pastiche of therapeutic practice with what, in my view, are the real concerns and conceptions motivating therapists and their work. In doing so, I draw on relevant psychoanalytic theory, in particular the central theories of the child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Donald Woods Winnicott. I will conclude with some thoughts on the difference between imagination and ‘fantasying’ and how this relates to the media, contemporary analytic practice and the wider world.
Thinking about the mind and thinking about the media

Beginning with its opening symposium in March 2009, Media and the Inner World brought media practitioners and psychotherapists and analysts together with academics who were involved in using an object relations psychoanalytic approach towards culture and the media. Particular emphasis was brought to bear on the preoccupation with emotionality and therapy in contemporary society and how the media both reflects and creates what appears to the general public as accurate representations of contemporary psychotherapeutic principles and practice. For its directors, Dr. Caroline Bainbridge (Roehampton University) and Dr. Candida Yates (University of East London), this project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, required overcoming in-built prejudices against networking and knowledge exchange across three different professions.

As far as psychoanalysis is concerned, a substantial number of analytic writers have tended towards an orthodoxy, which has occasionally made them appear to be out of the contemporary cultural loop. It is not that they have been unconcerned with culture per se, but the focus has been very much on the creative outpourings of an intellectual, philosophical, artistic and often deceased elite. Reflecting on the work of, for example, Tolstoy (Symington, 1993), Mozart (Berman, 1987), Blake (Milner, 1988), Shakespeare (Williams and Waddell, 1991), Dostoyevsky (Boyers, 2008), Proust (Bacon, 1995), Hegel (Arvanitakis, 1998) and Kant (Alford, 2000) has certainly been valuable, but an engagement with modern popular culture and the media, and their implications for psychotherapy, has been relatively peripheral. Hoffman (2000: 365), writing at the turn of the century, proposes that:

By openly communicating with media, psychoanalysts have an opportunity to demonstrate the value of a psychoanalytic education. We can demonstrate how a well-trained psychoanalyst has an intellectual and emotional openness toward understanding the full complexity of the human mind, including people’s psychological distress.

But he goes on to comment that:

Psychoanalysts have been slow to learn that their active efforts can increase the positive representation of psychoanalysis in the media, as well as in other aspects of public life. This positive public representation has enormous ramifications in the
positive self-predictations of psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic organizations. (ibid.: 367)

Fortunately, the last decade or so has seen a significant number of Freudian and Jungian analysts and psychotherapists engaging with the media in terms of interviews and articles in the press. The Media and the Inner World network furthers this development and offers a platform for increasing debate and exchange with other disciplines that helps to promote the view of psychoanalysis as a discipline that continues to offer highly effective approaches to engaging with contemporary issues. Of course, the investigation of the mysteries and irrationalities of emotionally expressed unconscious processes, and how they help to mould everyday human cultural experience, has always been a concern of psychoanalysis’s radical venture. This was something that Freud (Freud, 2002) was profoundly interested in, and confirms that psychoanalytic reflection on culture and wider society is a project that needs pursuing. As the analyst T.A. Kohut (2003: 235) writes:

Clinically, ignorance of the historically determined environment will cause analysts to miss crucial cultural influences on their analysands and, as a result, to misunderstand them. Creatively, a gaze that is focused exclusively on the clinical situation will cause analysts to overlook a vital source for understanding human beings. Just as theory exposes the clinician to a large number of patients and to the knowledge and experience of colleagues past and present who have worked with them, so knowledge of history and culture exposes the psychoanalyst to the vast psychological universe beyond the consulting room, the world where people actually live out their lives.

Media and the Inner World: Symposia and seminars, March 2009 – February 2011
Such sentiments have underpinned the Media and the Inner World project, and its opening symposium in March 2009 focused on the premise that today’s culture is, among other things, a ‘therapy culture’. The suggestion here is that we are in an age that is increasingly dominated by cultural representations of psychoanalysis, therapy and explorations of human emotional life. The media provides an almost constant diet through a variety of forms such as films, drama series, reality TV, self help programmes and a range of radio and TV counselling, therapeutic documentaries, talks and phone-ins. On top of this, there are
numerous magazine and newspaper articles that feature what appears to be a growing preoccupation with all that is emotional and therapeutic. By co-incidence, the MiW Symposium happened at the same time as the tabloid circus regarding the final days of the former Big Brother participant, Jade Goody, was reaching fever pitch. Putting together the themes of media and ‘therapy culture’ was impossible without putting the media’s handling of the death of Jade centre stage.

Following the opening symposium, the project comprised a series of nine seminars, each hosted in a setting chosen to reflect the media ‘container’ that was being explored. There were seminars, for example, in a cinema on the emotional work of films; in a theatre on the concepts of comedy, dread and loss; in a university setting on transitional space; at the UK’s leading trade and professional body on advertising, to explore disappointment and desire; at a media agency to discuss ‘Web 2.0’ and narcissism. Each seminar had speakers representing the worlds of media, academia and psychoanalysis or therapy.

What the directors of MiW provided, together with a web network, was a collaborative research endeavour mounted in a number of evocative creative environments – a Winnicotian transitional space perhaps – out of which some new thinking could occur that took in a number of different and informed perspectives. This special edition of *Free Associations* is just one of the many successful products of this collaboration.¹

All the events demonstrated a particular style of thoughtfulness and creativity and became increasingly a forum for lively debate and offshoot projects. The desire for a genuine exchange is apparent in the way the organization of Media and the Inner World is run: there appears to be considerable practical knowledge and interest in the reality of the inner world and in making a clear distinction between current therapeutic practice and mass media headlines. However, I think future events may well benefit from a slightly different format: each seminar was arranged along traditional academic lines, with a number of ‘expert’ guest speakers who often talked beyond their allotted time, leaving very little space for the invited professional audience to fully engage. This caused audience frustration on a number of occasions. Future events might usefully be informed by methods used for exploration in both media arts and therapy that set a high importance on dialogue because this encouragingly foregrounds the value of not knowing and not being an expert in order to ‘wait for shreds of meaning to emerge’. In other words, there is need for engagement that leaves more room for audience participation and unconscious process. My hope would be for some small group and large group open discussions and explorations in future, alongside expert input.
Therapy Culture and the work of Frank Furedi

It is impossible, as an analyst, to engage in such discourse regarding culture without considering Frank Furedi’s (2004) *Therapy Culture: Cultivating vulnerability in an uncertain age*. This work has been at the forefront of academic debate for the last decade and sets out to demonstrate that ‘the therapeutic imperative is not so much towards the realisation of self-fulfilment as the promotion of self-limitation. It posits the self in distinctly fragile and feeble form and insists that the management of life requires the continuous intervention of therapeutic expertise’ (ibid.: 21), arguing that an ‘anti-intellectual emotional stance seems integral to therapeutic culture today’ (ibid.: 159).

No one should suggest that Furedi’s observations about culture and therapy are baseless, and his work has been instrumental in provoking much useful discussion and debate on these important features of contemporary society. The mass media do play a great part in fanning the idea of an indulgent ‘therapy culture’ that at its worst condones and encourages mindless pleasure-seeking and rife consumerism. This threatens to divorce us from the realities of unemployment, economic hardship, and a seriously weakened health and education system. We are looking here at a version of Freud’s ‘Pleasure Principle’ (1920) and how it tends to work against a muscular and resilient sense of independence. This regressive state works in opposition to the ‘Reality Principle’ and therefore, if not contained sufficiently by ego strength, robs the individual and society of the hardships and joys of real experience and the participation in politics, culture and community life that is a necessary part of being a citizen.

However, while certain motivating goals for Furedi’s work may be valued, the degree to which he misrepresents the practice of therapy as well as many other targets of his critique is hard to overstate. Blake Morrison’s critical review, published in *The Guardian* (2003), notes that:

> though terrier-like in pursuit of evidence to support his case, Furedi has no interest in clinical practice and has nothing to say about therapists themselves. His is a cartoon world of ‘therapeutic activists’ greedily demanding more resources for their projects; of clients being placed in a state of permanent ‘recovery’ rather than being cured.
Of course, Furedi purports to justify his lack of engagement with therapeutic theory and practice on the grounds that he is, ‘interested in therapy as a cultural phenomenon rather than as a clinical technique’, but it should be obvious that these cannot be disentangled. Furedi demonstrates this by his comments on many different aspects of clinical work in terms of the different ways that ‘therapeutics’ have played a part in times of social hardship, unrest and contemporary moments of disaster such as 9/11. So, as Morrison’s criticism suggests, Furedi ends up indicting therapists and therapeutic practice extensively but on the basis of a tragically impoverished understanding of their actual work or thought, fuelled by shallow and selective research. Interestingly, I could find no examples in Therapy Culture regarding the terrorist bombing in London in July 2005. One wonders whether this is because the therapeutic response proved so effective in this instance, as lessons had been well learnt from the King’s Cross fire of 1987. Instead of counsellors automatically attending victims as happened then and at 9/11, counselling and therapy was offered only on request, with highly beneficial recorded results.

Furedi’s lack of respect for other professionals is sometimes breath-taking. An article in The Sunday Times (Furedi, 2009a), in which he questions government plans to offer psychotherapy to people with problems arising from the economic crisis, is entitled, ‘A quack’s way to build the recovery’. It is hard to imagine a collaborative dialogue with such an approach. Furedi feels entitled to dismiss out of hand a variety of therapeutic projects much as he similarly indicts health experts, poverty researchers and trauma specialists. To do this on the basis of the scantest understanding of or engagement with their work is surely deeply unprofessional. His brashly sketched image of his targets contrasts with statements from real life working professionals. Professor Simon Wesseley, a leading PTSD² specialist at the Institute of Psychiatry, argues against the tendency to pathologise suffering:

*normal people are pretty resilient. They have their own resources; they can maximize their social support. You don’t immediately need to involve pointy-headed people like me with our white coats and couches. People are usually the best judges of what they need and when. (Linklater, ‘06)*

*It seems something of an irony that Furedi, in striving to counter what he sees as the mythological guarantees and visions produced by ‘therapy culture’, has bought into that very myth regarding what therapy promises and consists of. And while I do not deny the tendency*
in current society towards general and often highly sentimental forms of emotionalism, my experience as a clinician over many years has shown that this is due not to an overvaluation of emotional intelligence as Furedi suggests, but rather to a lack of it. Authentic emotional intelligence is about the ability to ‘mentalize’ emotional experience i.e. to be able to put emotion-filled experience into realistic thought, rather than projecting emotional states onto others.

Furedi openly criticises a couple of recent incentives that I have some professional knowledge about. Babies and their mothers, who are not relating to each other to a serious degree, can be helped to form the natural relationship that has not occurred. Treatment offering such help has been set up through a number of NHS and charity-based programmes across the UK. This treatment is offered specifically and not generally, as Furedi suggests, and is about addressing difficulties that have a proven impact on a baby’s developing brain and later life (Gerhardt, 2004). It is a joy to watch some of the work that has been recorded and see individual mothers and babies in need moving from a bleak and disconnected relationship where the baby will not look at their mother to the sort of playful and loving togetherness that I will come back to later, when I turn to the work of Winnicott. Furedi also uses a number of isolated quotes from the literature of the charity, Antidote, which, among other things, sends psychologists and therapists into schools that have bullying problems. Antidote works with children on verbalising and mentalizing their emotional states and on developing different options to deal with bullying and being bullied. Furedi quotes an Antidote psychologist saying ‘we can think of a citizenry who, as feminism has long argued, want to talk about politics and act politically in a coherent way, based on good information – and with feeling.’ (Furedi, 2004:161) He states that this sentiment represents the opposite of Plato’s words ‘to train our mind by curing our hurts and rectifying our mistakes as soon as we can’ (Plato, 1955: 388). But, knowing something of Antidote’s work, I can testify that what is being championed here is the same sentiment as that of Plato’s: that the mature use of feeling as part of an articulated thinking process brings the whole human experience to bear on matters of importance. This is in contrast to using emotion indulgently and holding onto hurts and grudges in a child-like manner or cutting oneself off from emotional understanding with an intellectual word-filled defence. By being able to know about, suffer and ‘contain’ our feelings rather than projecting them onto others, as a child must do before their mental capacity is developed, we provide ourselves with the raw materials for the highest forms of mental functioning. All being well, this happens as a natural progression of life. This fact has
been recently confirmed through neuroscience research that has established the importance of right hemisphere, emotion-based functioning as the basis of symbolic and reflective brain performance (Wilkinson, 2006).

It is important for professionals involved in psychotherapy to have a response to Furedi’s views and to the ways our work is understood culturally – particularly through the powerful forces of the media and academia. I see Media and the Inner World providing an arena for that response to be articulated and discussed. Maybe one of the things to be highlighted is a need to understand the different ways we use language in our professional work so that we might better understand each other.

**The links between emotion and the mind**

So what does the psychoanalytic understanding of ‘emotional intelligence’ actually consist of, in contrast to the presentations of Furedi and, I suspect, a number of cultural institutions? The psychoanalyst Meltzer makes it clear that it is only authentic emotional relationships that enable the growth of the mind:

> Our passions are the meaning of our intimate relations, and our relationships at the contractual and casual levels, are really relationships that contribute nothing to our growth and development. It is only in our intimate relationships, where our passions are engaged, that we can experience the conflicts of emotional meaning which contribute to the growth of the mind. (1981: 183)

It is in this area that Donald Winnicott’s work is particularly insightful and relevant. For readers that may not be familiar with the details of his work, it will be helpful to use some of this paper to briefly summarise his major concepts.

**Fantasy, Imagination and the Work of Donald Winnicott**

In order to enjoy and participate authentically and thoughtfully in culture of any kind, we have to have successfully negotiated the emotional conflicts pertaining to the loss of our most primitive unconscious beliefs about being ‘the only real one in the world’. In other words, we have to have overcome to some extent our feelings of omnipotence: that our truth is the only truth. If this psychological growth has not occurred, thinking remains two-dimensional and lacks flexibility. It is dominated by black and white judgements and a conviction that
something is fundamentally wrong if things don’t go the way we wish them to. Winnicott’s preoccupation was how we move from a primitive emotional ‘God-like’ ruthlessness to a sense of having an authentic separate self in a world of separate ‘others’ while still retaining a connection with our most basic and enlivening impulses. He suggested that this is originally achieved, in the ‘transitional’ and playful psychic space between mother/central carer and child that right from the beginning starts to form a to and fro relationship between external and internal reality (Winnicott, 1953).

Winnicott’s ‘good enough mother’ naturally waits for and responds to her child’s own impulses rather than destroying them with too much of her own agenda. She takes her time. She participates in an unfolding relationship with her child rather than dominating it with her own narcissistic desires. This promotes authentic psychic growth for both parties that enables a manageable degree of separation and a growing sense of ‘reality’ in the infant and also in the mother. Using her own internal emotional connections, the ‘good enough mother’ is able to empathise with the depth of what is going on within her child and facilitates her infant’s loss in tolerable amounts without being punitive. She is ‘good enough’ to cope with disappointing her child at times without becoming sentimental. Dimensionalized thinking, where a number of different perspectives and options can be contained within the mind, is becoming possible.

By being able to cross the psychological bridge from total dependency on mother to the sense of ownership of ‘a first possession’ (a piece of blanket or a fluffy toy that is taken everywhere), the child is developing an internal mental space where the meeting with a bit of externality can be experienced as the illusion that it is either the child’s hallucination or a thing belonging to external reality (Winnicott, 1975). We are in a place that is neither the inner nor the outer world. The ‘first possession’ allows increasing possibilities for creative illusion that eventually allow this child to participate fully and imaginatively in all forms of cultural and collective experience through a not too rigid emphasis on sanity and reason: we ‘know’, for example, that the person in a film or a radio play is not exactly real but we can become involved in their story and their journey ‘as though it were real’, allowing the experience to become emotionally meaningful and growth promoting to us. We are also able to experience in imagination things that we may not wish to experience ‘in reality’. The ability to ‘play’ is essential in all forms of human endeavour. If one can regularly attain this mental and emotional state, there is little delight in sentimentality or ersatz emotionalism. Real life is much more immediate, interesting and inviting. This state, on the hinterland
between an inner and outer experience, can be felt very palpably at times in the silence of the consulting room – as long as there is not too much anxiety in the silence. The atmosphere is quiet, but it ‘sings’. I have come to see this as a state of oscillation necessary for life and rich living. It provides the space for growth and change.

This is very different from the all too easy use of unconscious fantasy connected to the pleasure principle where, for example, we come to believe that we really know about the emotional life of a TV celebrity and are in a similar position to being a personal friend because we have watched them regularly on the box, have read about them in the news and have decided to take an interest in them. In this respect, Winnicott writes about a kind of dead-end, delusional and repetitive ‘fantasying’ which ‘remains an isolated phenomenon, absorbing energy but not contributing-in to dreaming or living’ (Winnicott, 1991: 26). The psychoanalyst, John Steiner, refers to such phenomena as the ‘psychic retreat’ (Steiner, 1993). ‘Fantasying’ collapses the vital transitional space needed to enter a world where others and self can start to become separate and helpfully unknown. To deal with this is no small thing, particularly if it has not occurred sufficiently in childhood. It entails a huge emotional and mental shift from the feeling, the fantasy, that what we happen to think or feel about ourselves or others is true without any real effort or reality testing. To maintain this fantasy of omnipotence, we have to try to control others and ourselves to an alarming and mostly unconscious degree. This can lead to all manner of addictive and desperate solutions to cover feelings of meaninglessness and isolation precisely because we are resisting the experience of ‘the conflicts of emotional meaning which contribute to the growth of the mind’ (Meltzer, 1981:183).

**Media as a Promoter of Transitional Space**

When we look at the different sorts of media that exist and that relate to our inner worlds, it is clear that the less helpful aspects of mass media promote a fantasy of easy transformation rather than foster authentic emotional engagement along the lines that Meltzer suggests. They are replete with denial through a display of sentimentality, dramatic posturing, mania or omnipotent ‘fantasying’ that dissociates from the pain and struggle of ordinary living as already discussed. However, other forms of media promote the sort of ‘transitional space’ that is also an essential aspect of therapy practice. While valuing the need for stoicism and silent reflection when in pain, which is a recognised part of psychoanalytic and other therapy treatments, it has become possible, thank goodness, to talk about and think through inner
concerns in the outer world that for previous generations would have been impossible. Much of this is due to debates that have been set in motion with the help of the media.

The modern media, in its less salacious forms, have also allowed us respectfully to enter the world of the dying and the demented; have generated mature understanding and acceptance of differing sexualities and the concept of diversity on many fronts; and have highlighted unacceptable cruelty and prejudice towards children and minorities. All of these, I suggest, are signs of modern society becoming more emotionally mature. But, within the private world of the consulting room, this leads some patients to imagine that they can somehow get what they need from the therapist without any real engagement or emotional struggle. It is the job of the therapist to confront this tendency. Most people I see have tried the counsel of good friends and the local community that Furedi suggests instead of seeking professional help. Therapy for most people is a last resort. One patient, with considerable difficulties due to his bullying behaviour in relationships, was told by his desperate wife, ‘Get some proper help with this, or I’m leaving!’ He kept asking me, ‘Just give me a clue, what’s the trick?’ It took a long time for him to internalize the authentic nature of psychoanalytic work. By doing so, things started to change for him. He began to prefer the play involved in relating to a real and unknown ‘other’ rather than ‘fantasying’ that he was a supremely gifted person in a world of idiots. Another patient at first bemoaned the fact that he couldn’t have a ‘transactional’ relationship with me where he just paid me money and I did the work! Another patient chastised herself with how her regularly being late for everything seemed to have such a bad effect on her life. She moaned, ‘If a difficult child can sort out their timing problems in one week of Super Nanny, why can’t I?’ We both had to accept the reality that she was not a child any longer and I was not ‘Super Nanny’ with all the magical results that TV can seemingly achieve. Psychotherapy cannot offer these sorts of solutions. What therapy does offer is an environment for creative and flexible thinking about the unthinkable and an engagement with feelings that recognise the many disappointments and anxieties that occur as the fantasy of idealizations makes way for more realistic aims. This in turn promotes the vigour and creativity that comes from a more authentic and mindful response to life.

Final thoughts

The relationship between therapy and culture is complex, and contains both beneficial and problematic elements. Furedi is right to identify this as a field requiring critical reflection, but this cannot succeed while the majority of working therapists, academics and media
practitioners remain broadly ignorant of each other’s work, as I have tried to suggest. Rather than allowing ourselves to be placed, each in our own convenient and perhaps, at times, adversarial slots, my hope is that together we can help foster the bigger aim of promoting rather than undermining the very basic and fundamental human striving towards emotional and intellectual maturity necessary for meeting our collective challenges in the modern world.

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Notes
1 Other results include an established network that offers a pluralistic support base, an on going web presence including Facebook and Twitter sites and a wealth of unconscious connections and links that are much more difficult to evaluate.
2 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

References