Erich Fromm and the intersubjective tradition

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Excluded from the psychoanalytic community because of his unorthodox approach to psychoanalysis, Fromm insisted, as early as the 1930s, on a relational revision of psychoanalytic theory and psychotherapeutic treatment which finds some acknowledgment, if somewhat late, in current developments. Not until “intersubjectivity” was introduced into the psychoanalytic discussion an alternate understanding of psychoanalysis, formulated decades ago, could receive the attention it deserves. The term “Intersubjectivity” designates a new psychoanalytic paradigm (cf. Altmeyer & Thomae, 2006), which sees the individual in the context of his prior relationship to others. It transcends a view that the individual is a self-sufficient being only secondarily related to others.

As enjoyable as the discussion over the intersubjective paradigm is, so it is surprising that there is such incomplete knowledge of intersubjective approaches, already formulated and clinically tested even before intersubjectivity was “discovered” by Robert Stolorow and George Atwood (1987) as a tool for understanding both psychoanalytic theory and therapeutic work. Michael Ermann (2010) is justified in indicating that both Harry Stack Sullivan’s interpersonal theory as well as relational psychoanalysis as formulated by Steven Mitchell (Mitchell & Greenberg, 1983; cf. Mitchell, 1987) already contained the core assumptions of the intersubjective paradigm. But neither Mitchell nor Stolorow and Atwood recognize Erich Fromm’s relational approach, developed as early as the 1930s, for its groundbreaking significance. Therefore, I want to take the opportunity here to recall this approach of Erich Fromm’s. In this, I concentrate on the theoretically relevant aspects. The extent to which Fromm practiced an intersubjective therapeutic technique is portrayed in the book The Clinical Erich Fromm (Funk, 2009) by authors who were trained or supervised by Fromm and by my paper “Direct Meeting” (Funk, 2009a).

What drives the Person: Psychoanalysis as theory and practice of relatedness

Like Freud, Erich Fromm was driven by the question of what drives the person internally. Only with this answer could a satisfactory answer be found as to why people think, feel and act irrationally, why they control their cognitive and affective strengths insufficiently, even counterproductively, and why they show dysfunctional behavior or become psychically ill.
Unlike Freud, who as physician treated the individual patient and drew on natural scientific patterns to explain psychic phenomena, Fromm the sociologist pursued psychic phenomena with primarily social psychological interest: he wanted to find out why many people behave irrationally in similar ways. This modified central interest entailed that Fromm also had to find an answer to the question of what the inner drives of the subjects had to do with their collective way of life, that is, with their economic relationships and societal demands.

With this, the question took hold from the very beginning of what role the requirements for social success play in the development of internal drives. I want to indicate with just a few lines how Fromm answered this question in the 1930s and how he thus came to a distinct psychoanalytic approach, with which he already developed a great deal conceptually that was interpreted 50 years later in relational and intersubjective psychoanalysis as a great paradigm shift.

Initially, it was unthinkable for Fromm to explain the drives of many individuals independent of Freudian drive theory. He thus concluded “that every society has its own distinctive libidinal structure, even as it has its own economic, social, political, and cultural structure” (Fromm, 1932/1970, p. 133). In 1930, Fromm still understood this libidinal structure as the result “of the influence of the individual’s life-situation on the development of his drives” (Fromm, 1930/1963, p. 7. – The original German text speaks of the “Einwirkung des Lebensschicksals auf die Triebentwicklung,” while the official English speaks “of the influence of the individual’s life-situation on his emotional development”). The more intensively Fromm occupied himself with contemporary, especially authoritarian social requirements and registered the cultural anthropological insights of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead and those of the work on matriarchy, the more questionable he found the Freudian understanding of drives upon which the environment and society could only act.

Thus Fromm writes on June 1, 1936 to a Lithuanian social psychologist named Pernik: “The task seems to me to be to understand character and drive structure as an adaptation to the existing social conditions, and not to attribute it to the erogenous zones” (Fromm Archive, Tuebingen). Suddenly the issue is adapting the drive structure to the environment, not the influence of the environment on drives. The environment does not influence drives, but the drive has to adjust to the environment, so that the environment is the demanding and driving force.

That it could come to this new theory certainly has something to do with the fact that from 1935 on, Fromm was in an intense exchange with Harry Stack Sullivan, who put the question of the adaptation of man to the environment at the core of his interpersonal psychoanalysis. The psychiatrist Sullivan saw the person’s main problem not in drives, but in his or her relatedness to reality. This different view about what drives a person internally, that is, the need for relatedness, fell on fertile ground with Fromm.

For Fromm, socialized as an orthodox Jew, the question of relatedness was a deeply existential one. Fromm grew up in a religious tradition that defined its identity from its demarcation from liberal Christianity as well as from a Judaism that was willing to assimilate to bourgeois society. To be a Jew meant for Fromm the child and teenager to cut himself off and to be isolated. In his 1922 dissertation (Fromm, 1989), he examined three groupings within diaspora Judaism and pursued the question of what enabled these diaspora Jews to survive without adapting their behavior to the society in which
they lived. That the question of social relatedness became a question of his own survival became clear no later than when Hitler seized power. Unlike a large part of his extended family, Fromm escaped extermination at the hands of the National Socialists by emigrating in 1934.

Sullivan’s focus in psychoanalysis on the question of interpersonal relatedness encouraged Fromm to understand a person’s need for relatedness as the core psychological problem and to revise Freud’s psychoanalytic theory accordingly. For Fromm, abandoning Freudian libido theory was unavoidable in this. This departure was already alluded to at the end of 1936 in a letter to Karl August Wittfogel, a colleague at the Institute for Social Research, to which Fromm belonged at the time:

I worked over my fundamental reexamination of Freud. The core of the argument is when I try to demonstrate that those urges which motivate social activities are not, as Freud supposes, sublimations of sexual instincts, rather products of social processes or, to be more precise, reactions to certain circumstances in which human beings need to satisfy their instincts. These urges (...) differ in principle from the natural factors, namely the drives to satisfy hunger, thirst and sexual desire. While all human beings and animals have these in common, the others are specifically human productions. (Erich Fromm Archive, Tuebingen)

Fromm elaborated these thoughts in an essay completed in the summer of 1937, which was received unfavorably by his colleagues at the Institute for Social Research and therefore remained unpublished. (I found this essay, thought lost, in 1990 in the part of Fromm’s estate deposited at the New York Public Library. It is now accessible in English with the title “Man’s impulse structure and its relation to culture” (Fromm, 1937/2010). By means of this essay, it is possible to see point for point which insights brought Fromm to a reformulation of psychoanalytic theory. For most psychologically relevant phenomena, being driven by the need for relatedness is more plausible than being driven by instinctual needs, which a person shares with animals.

In Fromm’s eyes, Freudian drive theory took too little regard of a person’s specific situation. According to him “the psychic structure of man is regarded as the product of his activity and his manner of life and not as the reflex thrown up by his physical organization” (ibid., p. 71). Being driven by a need for relatedness (extensively elaborated in Fromm, 1955, pp. 30-36) resulted from the circumstance that the person lacked the instinctual ability to adapt to his environment to a large extent, so that he perceived this relatedness as a psychic necessity, which he would have to satisfy all his life with his human potential and because of social requirements.

What drives the person, especially internally, are conscious and unconscious psychic impulses, with which the person satisfies his or her need to be related to reality, to other people and to him or herself, in which the implementation of these impulses are largely the result of his or her adapting to the demands of societal cohabitation.

The “naturally given physiological drives” (Fromm, 1937/2010, p. 44) such as for example hunger, thirst and sexual desire, do not have a particular significance for the formation of the psychic structure for Fromm. “The most important elements of the psychic structure are the ‘attitude’ of the individual to others or to himself, or, as we should like to say, the basic human relation, and the fears and impulses which, in part directly, in part indirectly, arise out of this behavior” (Ibid.). Fromm calls relatedness here “basic human relation,” to express that the person does not exist other than as a relational be-
ing, where the concrete manner of his relatedness and his impulses rise from a social
process. Later, he speaks of character orientations rather than basic human relations and
thereby distinguishes between those that develop because of social adaptation and those
that are based on individual life circumstances and relational experiences. He already
calls the character orientation resulting from social relatedness the “socially typical char-
acter” (Ibid., p. 58) in the 1937 essay, and distinguishes it from individual character for-
mations.

This distinction between individual and social character also results for Fromm from
another understanding of the relationship between individual and society. Just as the
Freudian individual is always faced by a society that must be accepted by the individual
for better or for worse for the sake of social cohabitation, and which demands of him to
abandon his impulses, so Fromm’s relational theoretical approach sees society always at
work in the individual, and the individual exists only as a socialized being. “Society and
the individual are not ‘opposite’ to each other. Society is nothing but living, concrete
individuals, and the individual can live only as a social human being” (Ibid., p. 58).

With this, Fromm really introduced a new and different understanding of individual
and society to psychoanalysis. In conclusion, this understanding will be connected with
the intersubjective paradigm.

Fromm’s social psychological approach and the intersubjective paradigm

What is special in Fromm’s psychoanalytic approach is that he understands the person as
having always been related to others, and that he understands this primary sociality not
only in the sense of interactive sociality, as antecedent relatedness to other individuals,
but as a social relatedness that precedes all concrete perceptions of relatedness, which
has its psychic representation in the social character. The social character has the same
function that Steven Mitchell assigns to the “relational matrix” (Mitchell, 1988, p. 41 ff.)
as the connection between the intrapsychic and the interpersonal, only with the differ-
ence that Fromm connects the intrapsychic with the social.

For Fromm, the interpersonal is subordinated to the social. It partakes in two intra-
psychic structural dimensions: the social character and the individual character. For the
intersubjective construction of reality, this means (expressed in Mitchell’s terms) that not
only the personal, but also the social “microcosms of the relational field” (Mitchell,
2003, S. 57) play a part in organizing the self and the outside world.

Fromm always tries to see the person, even in his intersubjectivity and relatedness, as
a social being. He thus overcomes, theoretically and clinically, a social amnesia of which
social scientists in particular accuse psychoanalytic theory and practice, and which is not
really transcended by relational psychoanalysis or the intersubjective paradigm.

Certainly there are many similarities, especially in clinical regards between Fromm,
interpersonal and relational psychoanalysis and the intersubjective paradigm (cf. Funk,
2009). The avoidance of addiction formation within the therapeutic relationship, the
recognition of the other’s character and of the common and mutual constructions of the
psychoanalytic relationship, the establishment of an empathic “central relatedness to the
patient” (Fromm, 2009), the understanding of transference and countertransference,
and their management, the meaning of the patient’s active professional, familial, social
and political situation, the concentration on the here and now and the avoidance of a
reconstructionist psychoanalysis, a rule of abstinence that does not allow the psychoanalytist to hide himself but rather allows for the equality of the participants in the therapeutic process to be felt—all of this (and much more). Fromm and the aforementioned approaches have in common.

In looking at the intersubjective approach, as Stolorow and Atwood developed it, I see most notably two main differences: as much as it is true, that the experience of the own person, or self-experience, develops more easily where experiencing and active people encounter one another (why such intersubjective construction is a suitable space for processes of psychic change), so such a construction does not occur in a vacuous space, but rather is determined by multiple facets. When intersubjectivity means that one’s attention turns “to the mutual interaction and interactive control of subjective worlds” and therefore predominantly to the intersubjective field, then it should not be forgotten that certain distressing irrational forces, which run riot in this “intersubjective field” (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992, pp. 3 f.; cf. Beebe & Lachmann, 1988) are at issue and that one’s attention should very much be turned to these irrational drives. Everything else just leads to a belittlement of the drama that must also be at issue in an intersubjective psychoanalysis. Where this drama is not realized intersubjectively, one merely encourages a constructivist Zeitgeist that thinks it can overcome threats or inconveniences through new staging, rather than confronting the patient’s, and therapist’s, unconscious reality.

I already mentioned the other difference: from the Frommian perspective, the intersubjective approach is still far too limited to do justice to the social imprint of the person. Sociability of the person is defined in the intersubjective paradigm only from the interactive social, not from that, which the person has to develop in terms of irrational pathogenic drives to do justice to the demands of a certain society.

The intersubjective paradigm lacks the potential for social critique that capacitated Freud to recognize the meaning of repressed sexual urges in the development of psychic illnesses and brought Fromm to unmask authoritarianism as pathogenic, given both its inherent quest for power and subordination. At issue is a social-psychological approach with which it is recognizable that that which society needs to function is manifested in the person as a powerful striving, but by all means can also make him or her sick.

Fromm’s psychoanalytic approach is able to do exactly this. It can let us recognize, for example, that the socially required and promoted striving for security, predictability, and quantifiability stifles a person’s ability to trust and to love. It especially allows for a critical distance from the consumerism omnipresent today, in which what goes into a person and what he can acquire and become is the only thing that counts, not what he can bring out of himself from his own abilities.

Such consumerism occurs today especially with respect to the experience of feelings and passions. The production and offer of events, emotions, affects and passions are in full force and bring the individual to relinquish his innermost perception of feelings and affective powers in order to experience the proffered emotions. The pathogenic effects of this are readable in insurance companies’ statistics of depression and in the inner emptiness and lifelessness that overcome people more and more if they do not let themselves be animated, entertained, stimulated and enlivened (cf. Funk, 2011).

In view of such a development, the question is very much how psychoanalysis understands itself today, what kind of relatedness is realized within it and how it handles
the consumerist expectations of its patients. Fromm’s remark from more than 50 years ago has enormous currency in this regards. That is, he said: “If I were to put a sentence on the wall of my practice, I would write: “Being here is not enough.” (Fromm, 2009a, p. 51.)

Translation by Anke Schreiber

References


