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# **Towards a Lacanian group psychology: The prisoner's dilemma and the trans-subjective**

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# Towards a Lacanian group psychology: The prisoner's dilemma and the trans-subjective

**ABSTRACT:** Revisiting Lacan's discussion of the puzzle of the prisoner's dilemma provides a means of elaborating a theory of the trans-subjective. An illustration of this dilemma provides the basis for two important arguments. Firstly, that we need to grasp a logical succession of modes of subjectivity: from subjectivity to inter-subjectivity, and from inter-subjectivity to a form of trans-subjective social logic. The trans-subjective, thus conceptualized, enables forms of social objectivity that transcend the level of (inter)subjectivity, and which play a crucial role in consolidating given societal groupings. The paper advances, secondly, that various declarative and symbolic activities are important *non-psychological* bases – trans-subjective foundations - for psychological identifications of an inter-subjective sort. These assertions link interesting to recent developments in the contemporary social psychology of interobjectivity, which likewise emphasize a type of objectivity that plays an indispensable part in co-ordinating human relations and understanding.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis, identification, inter-objectivity, inter-subjectivity, trans-subjective.

## Towards a Lacanian group psychology: The prisoner's dilemma and the trans-subjective

This paper explores the well-known logical puzzle of the prisoner's dilemma and does so via the work of Jacques Lacan (2006b), who utilizes it as a means of grounding what we might term a theory of the *trans-subjective*. My hope in this respect is to make a contribution to a series of recent developments in the contemporary social psychology of interobjectivity, and to do so by means of the 'extra-disciplinary' source of psychoanalytic theory. More specifically, I would like to use the prisoner's dilemma, and Lacan's associated 3-fold schema of logical time, to make two general arguments. I want to assert, firstly, that we need to grasp a logical succession of modes of subjectivity - from subjectivity to inter-subjectivity, and from inter-subjectivity to a form of *trans-subjective social logic* - if we are to understand the subject-to-society relation. This sequence of modalities of subjectivity and, more particularly, the distinction between the *inter-subjective* and the *trans-subjective*, will be crucial in appreciating the difference between what are sometimes referred to as symbolic and imaginary forms of identification (Lacan, 1988a, 1988b; Žižek, 1996).

My second key objective in the paper is to advance that various declarative, institutional and symbolic activities are important *non-psychological* bases for imaginary (or what we might loosely call 'psychological') identifications. In other words, I am making an argument about the importance of certain symbolic constituents as conditions of possibility for the existence of psychological identifications. This second objective links back to the first, inasmuch as symbolic identifications always entail the dimension of the trans-subjective, whereas what I am calling imaginary identifications do not. Importantly, although Lacan himself does not utilize the term 'trans-subjective' - the imposition of this term is my own - I maintain that it remains faithful to a reading of his early work, and that it provides a means of linking his ideas to more current debates.

## **Intersubjectivity, interobjectivity and trans-subjectivity**

We may start our discussion by asking a straightforward question: why the need to develop an understanding of the *trans-subjective*? Surely, given the sophistication of recent work on the topic of intersubjectivity, this concept should itself suffice? Within the field of social psychology Gillespie & Cornish (2009) have for example illuminated the concept from the perspective of dialogical analysis. Gillespie & Richardson (2011), similarly, have explored the topic via discussions of position exchange, perspective taking and actor-observer communication. Coelho & Figueiredo (2003), furthermore, have brought philosophical and psychoanalytic insights to bear in their categorization of four basic forms of intersubjectivity, each of which is based on a matrix of organizing and elucidating otherness. They distinguish a phenomenological type of intersubjectivity from *traumatic*, *interpersonal* and *intrapsychic* forms (Coelho & Figueiredo, 2003).

As perspicacious as each of the above analytical engagements have been, I follow Moghaddam (1997, 2003) in arguing that there are important limitations characterizing the literature on intersubjectivity. The first of these shortcomings, for Moghaddam (1997), is disciplinary insularity. He accordingly calls for greater bridge-building between different scholarly perspectives (social psychologists, theoreticians, developmental psychologists), in order to advance a broader cross-theoretical exploration of the underlying foundations of intersubjectivity. Moghaddam also (2003) advances the charge of reductionism: studies of intersubjectivity remain typically focussed on individualistic rather than inter-group processes, leading us to examine interpersonal and intra-personal experiences at the cost of collective ones. The result of this is that political relations and inequalities of power are elided in such analyses. While I concur with Moghaddam's (2003) views, proposing to offer a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective to expanded theoretical field he asks for, I also add a further element of critique. That is to say: perspectives on intersubjectivity often lack an adequate examination of the logical relations and symbolic structures underlying such interactions. They may be considered reductionist in this sense also.

Like Moghaddam (2003) then, I am concerned with a broader (and in my case, structural and symbolic) domain that underlies and potentially delimits the field of intersubjectivity. Moghaddam offers the concept of interobjectivity as a means of correcting the “reductionist, individualist biases in traditional research arising out of western culture” (p. 221). By interobjectivity he has in mind “the understandings that are shared within and between cultures about social reality” (p. 221). Given the foregoing contextualization, it is perhaps clearer why I emphasized so strongly the notion of the trans-subjective in sketching out my proposed arguments in this paper. It is via this notion that I wish to signal a direction of analysis that both exceeds, and yet remains linked to, analyses of the intersubjective; and it is through this notion that that I make my contribution to how we think interobjectivity.

The concepts of interobjectivity and the trans-subjective overlap significantly. Interobjectivity has been defined as an account of shared meanings that structure interactions between subjects through objects (Sammut, Daanen & Sartawi, 2010). In this respect, trans-subjectivity would indeed be one form of interobjectivity, provided that we understand the object in question as type a kind of ‘social objectivity’ rather than an object per se. This qualification is present in the distinction that Sammut, Daanen & Sartawi (2010) draw between: a) inter-objectivity as a description of material object-relations, and b) interobjectivity as a description of a representation that spans different objectifications and enables diverse inter-objective relations (p. 451). It is the second of these definitions that has the most in common with what I am calling trans-subjectivity. In this respect it is worth stressing Moghaddam’s (2003, 2006) gloss on interobjectivity as an account of the nature of shared meanings for people that represents *a return to ‘objectivity’*. This approach likewise shares much with the idea of the trans-subjective.

A few additional qualifications are in order here, so as to contextualize the ‘extra-disciplinary’ contribution that I hope to make to social psychological theory. For a start, the variant of the prisoner’s dilemma that I draw on, following Lacan, is not – as readers will soon become aware – the version most familiar to students of game theory (i.e. that of two prisoners each involved in a strategic plea-bargain attempt in which they make a strategic decision as to

whether they betray the other prisoner, remain silent, attempt a type of cooperation) (see for example Marks (2004)). Likewise significant is the fact that the topic of identification as posed here differs notably from the notion of 'identity' that a social psychology audience would be more familiar with. It helps here to add a brief definition of identification as understood in the psychoanalytic literature as that largely unconscious process "whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1978, p. 206). With imaginary identifications we are primarily concerned with the domain of interpersonal ego-other (or psychological) identifications, with how subjects take on 'images' from the external world that provide the basis for the formation of an ego (Lacan, 2006a). There is an idealizing and narcissistic quality to such imaginary schemas which prioritizes visual markers of difference and/or similarity. The imaginary register of identification should be differentiated from that of the symbolic, which is best grasped via anthropology's emphasis on social convention and the codification of social relations (bonds, exchanges, kinship structures) that structure experience. The symbolic order is the 'extra-psychological' realm of differential systems, language, law, prohibition. It is an a-subjective social grid in which subjects must necessarily assume a position, a role, a place which, despite the ego's imaginary reassurances, is never merely spontaneous, 'natural'.

One further point of qualification. The treatment of inter-subjectivity and trans-subjectivity I develop may seem to supersede issues of everyday expected psychological reactions by prioritizing the role of logical relations and rational agents. Let me concede as much: I am not directly addressing the most obvious psychological aspects of behaviour in the prisoner's dilemma. My discussion focuses on the element of what we might call trans-subjective objectivity, i.e. a domain that transcends the merely (inter)subjective. Let us turn now to Lacan's variant of the prisoner's dilemma.

### **Three times of subjectivity**

It is necessary now to briefly replay the puzzle of the prisoner's dilemma (for other psychoanalytic discussions of the dilemma see Fink, 1996; Johnston,

2005). Place yourself in the following position: you are one of three prisoners who have been given the opportunity of winning their freedom, provided that you are able to give the correct response to a simple question, namely “What is the disk that has been affixed to your clothing?” You of course cannot see the colour of the disk, and each of the other two prisoners facing you is likewise unawares of the colour of the disk that has been attached to them. At the beginning of the challenge the prison warden outlines a series of basic rules. Firstly, only one prisoner will win their freedom in this way, and this will be the first prisoner to stand up and correctly tell the warden the colour of the disk they are wearing, along with the logical reason underlying their deduction. Secondly, no verbal communication is allowed between the prisoners. Importantly, the parameters of the game state that there are only two black disks and three white; there is thus a limit to the possible combinations of disks.

Here then is the first of the possible scenarios you might be faced with: each of the two prisoners facing you has a black disk attached to their clothing. Little calculation is required here: if there are only two black disks, and that is what you see before you, then you must be wearing a white disk. No hypothesis-making is required here, you are presented with none of the inter-subjective complications of needing to put one’s self into the position of the other. Given that there are only two black disks, a single glance is enough to confirm that you must be wearing a white disk. All that is required here is a rudimentary and instantaneous deduction – no significant period of time needs to pass. This is what Lacan refers to as ‘the instance of the glance’. We might call this a time of singular subjectivity; no inter-subjective dialectic is involved.

The second possible situation is more challenging. Of the prisoner before you, one is wearing a white disk, the other a black. In contrast to the first scenario you will make no headway here unless you make recourse to the inter-subjective dialectic of *how another sees you*. So, following this direction, and extending the logic already utilized, you would need to ask yourself: what are the other prisoners seeing? More particularly, you would need to ask yourself what the prisoner *with the white disk* sees. Why is it so important to imagine what the white disk prisoner is seeing? Well, if he were to see two



black disks before him he would stand up and leave, having arrived at the conclusion that he must be white (because there can only be two black disks). If the white disk prisoner does not stand up to leave, it can only be because you are wearing a white disk rather than a black. Clearly, a form of inter-subjectivity is involved here; the subject needs to reason from the place of the other. It is also necessary that a certain time elapse here; this is not an instantaneous moment of recognition but rather what Lacan refers to as ‘the time of understanding’, which varies in length. This is the inter-subjectivity of the ‘indefinite reciprocal subject’, a phrase which points to an important reliance on the action (or lack thereof) of the other.

The most difficult variation of the dilemma occurs when the prisoners before you are both wearing white disks. Once again, it becomes necessary to refer to the reasoning of others. Given that your own disk could be white or black, it helps to play out both options. Assuming then for the moment that your disk is black, then the other prisoners would each see one black disk, and one white. They would each hypothesize that if their own disk were black, then one of the remaining prisoners would stand up and leave. This does not happen. They conclude that they are wearing a white disk. They would then be in a position to stand up and leave – but they don’t. You are thus in a position to disconfirm your initial hypothesis: if you were wearing a black disk one of your rivals would have left by now – having worked their way through the logical steps detailed in the second situation above – therefore you must be wearing a white disk.

The logical reasoning in this third situation requires not merely reasoning from the position of a second (the inter-subjectivity of how I imagine the other sees me). It requires my hypothesis of what a second subject hypothesizes *about a third*. This is not just a case then of what I think (the subjectivity of ‘the instant of the glance’). Nor is it simply a case of the inter-subjectivity of what is deduced by virtue of how the subject imagines he is seen by a second (the ‘time for comprehending’). A threefold structure is in operation whereby I imagine myself via the position of a second *who makes a guess at and responds to a third party*. A twofold mediation is at work: who I am is not simply mediated by a second, but by what this second hypothesizes

about me via a third. Part of what makes this such an anxious experience is that my social identity cannot be fixed simply by capturing the perspective of one other; I am dependent here on the other's Other, the precarious associative linking of what the generalized other of various others' perceptions seems to amount to. This threefold structure is vital: it is only at this third moment of logical time, Lacan's 'moment of concluding', that a type of *trans-subjective social logic* is activated. This three-fold structure is required before types of social consensus, what we might term an elementary form of 'social objectivity', becomes possible. The link to the notion of interobjectivity is apparent here, certainly so inasmuch I am here concerned with the necessary mediation of an external object of sorts, which grounds and orients various inter-subjective interactions. The trans-subjective would thus be one form of interobjectivity. Crucially of course – and herein lies a key conceptual distinction – the object one is most concerned with in speaking of the trans-subjective is a posited social objectivity with reference to which each subjectivity finds its relation to societal norms.

### **The disconnect between inter- and trans-subjective**

Two brief examples may help secure the distinction between the inter-subjective and the trans-subjective. Consider the idea of invented words, 'private' signifiers of special significance, that a given individual or couple may utilize as their own code. We remain here at the subjective or intersubjective levels, respectively. As functional as such words might be within the (inter)subjective exchanges of their 'private' usage, they remain separated from the properly trans-subjective value of accepted linguistic terms; they would not be understood by others who stand outside this (inter)subjective frame of reference.

For all members of a given language community accepted words have a conventionalized meaning that cannot be reduced to the personal significance they have for any one member. This is not to deny that certain signifiers will have a particular resonance for some. For me 'hook' is not a noun like any other, but is linked to a series of associations with my surname ('Hook' as a family signifier), i.e. nicknames ('Right Hook', 'Hookster', 'Captain Hook') and so on. None of this has any bearing when I go to a hardware store and ask for

an implement that will enable me to hang a picture to the wall. Bluntly put: communicative use-value necessarily outstrips idiosyncratic nuance. There is something tantamount to a shift of paradigm when we move from the psychological frame of (inter)subjectivity to the 'social objectivity' obtained via the use of symbolic and logical processes which entail a type of consensus. One brief qualification should be noted here: despite the objectivity of conventionalized meaning we are discussing - namely, that of the signifier to which the signified is, in Saussure's (1974) classic formulation, arbitrarily attached - the question of its final meaning is always potentially detoured. Detoured, that is, by the question of what this signified meaning may "really mean" in view of a set of possible broader implications, for an Other.

A second example regards the difference between the inter- and trans-subjective concerns anxiety. Anxiety is a common enough response when one is introduced to a group of unfamiliar people. Interestingly, the degree of anxiety is often proportionate to the number of people, and the difficulty one has in reading their prospective intentions. One way of domesticating this anxiety is to gravitate to someone similar to one's self within the group and establish a degree of common ground. Although this person may be a stranger, a brief interaction with them will, as per Goffman's classic analysis (1959), provide clues as to who they are, and, more importantly, as to *what they might think of you*. This minimal inter-subjectivity will provide a frame of sorts, that is, the elementary co-ordinates of how you are understood within the perspective of this other. Now while this situation is conditioned by ongoing guesswork, by errors of assumption and the deliberate mis-leading of impression management, it does hopefully indicate something of how one is being perceived and assessed more generally.

Far more anxiety-provoking – presumably because it is more difficult to control – is the question of how an unfamiliar group *as a whole* sees one, a group that one confronts without any (inter-subjective) recourse to one isolated member. What is in question here is not simply an aggregate of inter-subjectivity (the sum total of possible one-to-one relationships you may have with each member). What is in question is rather an unstable group consensus which emerges through the *double mediation* of what members in the group

think not simply of you *per se* (that is, inter-subjectively) but of what group members think *other group members think of you* more generally (the level of the trans-subjective). Importantly, this is not to deny that there may well be an aggregate of inter-subjective views – no doubt each single member of a group *does* have a view of you, and this combined force can be significant, one vector in the overall trans-subjective consensus. One should not under-estimate the degree to which this inter-subjectivity is always mediated by (what is taken to be) the group consensus. As ardently as one may stick to one's subjective views, these will always be contextualized, evaluated, made coherent in reference to what is thought to be a norm, a bench-mark of value, the hypothesized 'sum total evaluation' of the subject or object in question. The prevailing norm, whether we refer here to it as a discourse, a type of hegemony, or a condition of trans-subjectivity, has a different order of agency, an agency with the ability to eclipse an amassed inter-subjectivity.

The canny politician is one who realizes that their destiny depends not on the singular subjective opinions of voters, but on the less predictable 'collective gestalt' engendered by public opinion. Such a 'trans-subjective image' takes on a life of its own, and can never be reduced to the amassed (inter)subjectivity of those who make up society. We have cause here to reflect on suddenness and unpredictability of change in public opinions. As the eponymous character in Stephen Frears' (2006) film *The Queen* in effect comments to Tony Blair: 'Your time will come'. That is, enjoy the positive regard of the public while it lasts, because this regard may all too abruptly flip over into resentment. We can easily enough imagine a situation of a constituency in which each member thinks positively of a given political candidate – would in fact like to vote for him – but which nonetheless, as a whole, votes him or her out of power. The difficulty of gauging such a political situation is made apparent by a simple fact: no subjective opinion needs in fact to change before a broader trans-subjective tipping-point is reached. What matters is not so much what single individuals think, or even the trade in inter-subjective impressions of the given politician; more important by far is apprehension of what the Other of the group thinks (what we might call, with a tip of the hat to Lacan, the Other of the others).

I have discussed a similar point elsewhere (2011) in reference to racism. It is quite possible to find a community where no one - quite honestly - feels themselves to be subjectively racist. This may in fact be an accurate psychological portrayal of the individuals within this group. Nevertheless such a community may well retain deeply racist assumptions embedded either within its de-subjectified symbolic and institutional practices or within the trans-subjective framework of *what others are considered to believe*. Importantly, this would not necessarily be a case of denial or projection, both of which imply the subjective presence of racism which I am suggesting, for the purposes of this argument, are absent (i.e. this is not an instance of repressed psychological racism). What I am pointing to here is rather a case of distributed or delegated racism which can quite adequately persist in ostensibly de-personalized institutional or *trans-subjective* forms, without any obvious need for clear subjective psychological agents.

Such a thesis calls to mind Žižek's (1989) analysis of inter-passivity in ideological belief. Žižek contends that believing often occurs in an *extra-psychological* manner via the role of external objects or others. This is the idea, in short, that I need not personally believe, for there nonetheless to be a believing of which I am part. Thus, in line with the above argument, we might contend that I need not be 'psychologically' racist, that is, in any way subjectively invested in or consciously identified with racist values, *for there nonetheless to be a racism of which I am a part*. One should be attentive to the nuance of Žižek's point, he is not simply eliding the category of subjectivity: the believing subject *does* effectively (indeed, for Žižek, *objectively*) believe, just not in an overtly personalized or subjective manner. They believe instead at one step's remove, with the comfort of cynical distance from their belief. The 'believing' is effectively delegated to a series of institutional operations, symbolic actions, or, crucially, to the trans-subjective network of the beliefs of others.

### **Discursive versus structural positioning**

We can shed further light on the distinction between the (inter)subjective and the trans-subjective by referring to an important notion within social psychology, that of positioning (Davies & Harré, 2001; Harré & van

Langenhove, 1999; Wetherell, 1998), and by contrasting *discursive* as opposed to *structural* forms of positioning. The influential notion of positioning described by Davies & Harré (2001) is “the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story-lines” (p. 264). Davies & Harré speak of positions as “cumulative fragments of a lived autobiography” (p. 265). Furthermore: “One way of grasping the concept of positioning as we....use it, is to think of someone listening or reading to a story” (p. 265).

What is immediately apparent is that this notion of positioning is contingent upon discourse – it is a discursive practice - and it is content-rich, which is to say that it is stories, narratives, conversations, interactional content that substantiates or ‘fills out’ the positions in question. Discursive positioning is also a sense-making procedure: “We take on the discursive practices and story lines as if they were our own and make sense of them” (Davies & Harré, 2001, p. 271). This type of positioning thus entail an interpretive aspect. It is, likewise, a process of negotiation in which subjects respond to different or contradictory social demands, weaving together a variety of cultural, social and political values available within a number of different discourses.

Now while initially this account may seem to overlap to some degree with the positioning dilemma proposed by Lacan, it is important to stress how different the two approaches in fact are. Lacan (1988a, 1988b) is constantly wary of subjective meaning as a questionable ego-construction designed to substantiate effects of knowledge and stability. He will approach a discourse not as a set of thematic or narrative contents, but rather in view of the set of relations, in terms of the particular social links, the *structural positions between people* that it holds together (Lacan, 2007). His attention is not drawn by the ‘descriptive materials’ of a discourse, i.e. its narratives, meanings, stories, etc., but *by the relations established between participants*, hence his (2007) model of four fundamental social bonds (the discourses of the master, university, analyst and hysteric) in which the thematic contents may vary widely despite that the structural positions remain intact (master and subject; doctor and patient; teacher and pupil, etc). Verhaeghe’s (2001) distinction between the approaches of Foucault and Lacan is instructive here:

In his discourse theory, Foucault...puts the accent on the content of a discourse. Lacan...works beyond the content and places the accent on the formal relationships that each discourse draws through the act of speaking (p. 21).

Lacan is thus interested in structural positions that are not simply 'secured' by meaning or by the contents of discursive practices, but which remain in question, uncertain, reliant on others' views which are themselves contingent on the presumption of given social norms and values. His attempt is precisely to circumvent the psychological (or in his jargon 'imaginary') concerns of subjective sense-making and meaning by looking to an underlying grid of inter-linked symbolic positions. These positions are both more precarious and opaque than those afforded by subjective attempts at making-meaning. They are, furthermore, always linked, as in the prisoner's dilemma, to other positions (indeed, to a chain of interlinked positions). Furthermore, each of these related positions remains uncertainly related to a key signifier – in the prisoner's dilemma, the white disk – which remains both conventional (it embodies a certain consensus) and yet uncertain (in the pragmatic sense of what it may mean here and now). Lacan's focus on the trans-subjective, certainly inasmuch as it prioritizes structural positions and the contingency of symbolic values, exists always at a step's remove from the (inter)subjectivity of discursive positioning that focuses on subjective forms of meaning, narrative and sense-making.

Having drawn such a stark comparison between discursive and structural types of positioning – attempting thus to highlight Lacan's contribution to this area of theory – it is worthwhile noting there are a few momentary points of resonance between these approaches. As we have seen, Lacan's psychoanalytic perspective emphasizes the contingency of positioning – such positions always being linked to, determined by, the position of others – and the inherent opacity of such positions. Davies and Harré (2001) come close to acknowledging the contingency of such interlinked social relations. Positions, they claim, are not merely the result of personal experiences, they are also in part the result "of relating to someone in that position" (p. 270). Similarly, the sense of continuity we have to being a particular person is...[in part]

compounded out of shared interpretations” (p. 271). So, although this factor is not stressed by Davies and Harré (2001), it remains nonetheless true that a degree of uncertainty shines through the processes of discursive positioning. Having noted the role of uncertainty – and by implication, anxiety - in Lacan’s approach, let us turn back to his analysis, to appreciate better their importance in his account.

### **Two suspended gestures**

We need now return to our point of departure, for we have not yet exhausted all there is to say about the prisoner’s dilemma. As noted above, the second period in Lacan’s sequence of logical time, the ‘time for understanding’, varies in length because each of the prisoners is reliant in their reasoning upon the (in)action of the others. This introduces a problem of course, because this inaction - precisely what the logical deduction is dependent upon - will evaporate the moment one of the prisoners stands up.

The instability of this logical reasoning is compounded by a further consideration; the impetus to act first. It is no surprise that Lacan comments that ‘the ontological form of anxiety’ manifests at this stage of dilemma. Why so? Well, each of the prisoners realizes that their rivals are capable of reaching the same conclusion that they have, if they have not in fact already done so. The brief triumph accompanying the realization that there is an apparently objective solution to the puzzle is thus undercut by the anxious recognition that it may be one of the other prisoners who acts first. There is a switch-over here between a time of suspension (in which one ensures that one’s fellow prisoners are not standing to leave) to the sudden rush to pre-empt the action of departure of the others that would then invalidate the basis for one’s own conclusion. This is the “temporal pulsation” as Forrester (1990) puts it “whereby the time for understanding is transformed into the moment for concluding” (p. 181). Or, as Pluth & Hoens (2004) make the point:

A realizes...that he urgently has to end his thinking process and head for the door. So, he jumps to a conclusion that closes the time for comprehending, and makes time retroactively meaningful...he can



and has to end his thinking by an act. Is A sure of his act? He is sure that it is necessary to act, but cannot be sure of the soundness of his reasoning. This is the moment [of]...anticipatory certitude....A leaps to a conclusion whose ground or reason can only be verified after the act (p. 184).

In other words, the logical solution to the dilemma proposed above is all well and good, but it must be reached and acted upon within a context of *inter-subjective* reliance. The grounds of this decision *may themselves* be put in question; as in the above reference to what the broader meaning of a given meaning might be, we are dealing here with oscillations between ostensible objectivity and the attenuated question of what that objectivity might mean. We can say then that this scenario represents an intersection of logical and psychological considerations. So, if the three prisoners are all of a similar intelligence, they will all, when each wearing a white disk, finally arrive at the same conclusion: none of the other prisoners is making a move, hence I must be wearing a white disk. The delay preceding this point is followed by a moment of indecision. If each of the three rises at the same time, how are they to interpret the reactions of the other prisoners? The meaning of the actions of their fellow prisoners permits for more than one explanation. They will each need to ask themselves whether the other prisoners has arrived at the same logical conclusion as they have, or whether they stood up simply because they saw a black disk. Lacan describes this situation in the following terms:

If A, seeing B and C set off...wonders again whether they have not in fact seen that he is black, it suffices for him to stop and newly pose the question... For he sees that they too stop: since each of them is really in the same situation as him...each encounters the same doubt at the same moment as him. Regardless of the reasoning A now imputes to B and C, he will legitimately conclude again that he is white. For he posits anew that, had he been a black, B and C would have had to continue (pp. 164).

The awkwardness of the shared indecision does not last long. It is the fact of the hesitation which gives the game away: if one of the other prisoners had seen a black disk, he would have no reason to stop and question the gestures

of his fellow prisoners. The mutual hesitation can only mean that they're each in the exact same position, that each is wearing a white disk. The solution to the dilemma relies on a halting sequence – in this respect much like the Barbeque sauce problem - whereby inter-subjectivity and trans-subjectivity come to be transposed. An initial suspension in which the subject is reliant on the actions of their fellow prisoners to stand up or not leads to a logical conclusion ('I am white'), but this is followed by another moment of inter-subjective hesitation ('We have all three stood up....why?') which again gives way to a trans-subjective solution ('None would have hesitated if they saw a black disk, thus we are all white'). As Pluth and Hoens (2004) explain: "During the halts, what was subjective about the line of reasoning gets de-subjectified, and becomes a shared...[trans]subjective truth. Beginning with an uncertain, singular decision A reaches a certain and 'universal' truth" (p. 184).

### **Hastening to identity**

Let us return to the decisive act that the prisoner confronted by two white disks in the suspended 'time of understanding' is forced to make. This is an act which draws a line that commits the prisoner to a course of action. The retroactive impact of this act, whose grounds can only be subsequently verified, direct us to a discussion of the pre-emptive quality of symbolic identifications. It is in respect of such a precipitate gesture in the midst of uncertainty – the fact indeed of 'anticipatory certitude' – that Lacan makes perhaps his chief contribution to the Freudian group psychology that the logical time papers seeks to extend. As Žižek (1996) emphasizes in his discussion of the paper, symbolic identification – one's assumption of a given social role, of a structural location in a socio-symbolic realm – always maintains something of an anticipatory character. Succinctly put: there is a psychological time-lag in taking on a symbolic mandate. Or, as we might convey the same point in a different formulation: there is no pre-psychological adaptation to what at basis amounts to an anonymous subject-position ('wife', 'brother', 'doctor', 'grandmother') in the symbolic network. One might take as a case in point here the 'rehearsals' – and I use the word in view of its full theatrical significance – of recently married couples, whose repeated reference to the nominations "my husband", "my wife", form part of their attempt to

symbolically 'play themselves into' their new roles. This is likewise the case when a couple has children, in respect of the time-lag between the child's actually being born (or, perhaps, conceived) and the active assumption of the roles which come to be tirelessly repeated - eventually in one no less than the child themselves - of "mommy" and "daddy".

The fact of (trans-subjective) symbolic performance as condition of (subjective) belief can be illustrated via the social rituals that must be obeyed in the public lives of people of great historical or political importance. In fact, the more illustrious or elevated the symbolic position, the more elaborate the performative rituals tend to become, at least historically. We may go back to the example of *The Queen*, which playfully evokes all the odd rules of conduct one is expected to abide by when meeting the Monarch: there is no turning of one's back upon or touching of, the Queen; one needs bow or curtsy at the right moment, and to use only the correct term of address ("Your Majesty..."), etc. It is as if without these seemingly redundant and slightly ridiculous rules of conduct we might effectively cease to believe in the elevated social rank in question. One might likewise cite the ceremonial activities accompanying the inauguration of a new President, along with the title 'President Elect' used before the event, presumably to prepare the nation for the transition in authority. Such symbolic activities need to be performed correctly and to be publically witnessed if they are to be registered within the trans-subjective network of a given social mass. A recent historical example is of course Obama's 'second' swearing-in ceremony, the presidential oath that need to be performed a second time. We might jokingly comment here that given the severity of the political contrast between George W Bush and Barack Obama, and the fact that Obama was the first African-American president, it was no wonder he had to be sworn in twice, to ensure that we would actually believe this had happened.

Back though to the issue of symbolic identification. It is important to bear in mind that the structuralist thrust of Lévi-Strauss's (1974) conceptualization of the symbolic – to which Lacan is obviously indebted – wants precisely to advance a form of *symbolic* agency over and above notions of subjective agency. One can appreciate how the symbolic order thus

conceptualized, is a matrix of spaces, an a-psychological network of relational positions. There is no intrinsic psychological essence to these subject-positions, no relation of innate belongingness between the subject and their social mandate. Much the same point can be made via the clinical psychoanalytic cautioning to attend very carefully to moments of sudden symbolic change. Indeed, there is something that does not 'immediately compute' about sudden or dramatic changes in symbolic status which are, not incidentally, often considered to be potential triggering-events in the case of psychosis. The who I think I am, my experiential and (in Lacanian terminology) *imaginary* sense of identity on the one hand as opposed to what I am called to be, how I am socially recognized, my social or symbolic identity, on the other, is always qualified by a minimal gap. No hand-to-glove relationship exists between these two facets of identity. The reason for this lack of congruence, for the fact that there is no spontaneous or natural assumption of symbolic roles – and here I borrow from Žižek's (1996) gloss on Lacanian theory - is that they can always be questioned with a '...but why me?' At the level of rational discourse answers can be always be provided: 'I am a prince because my father is the King'. Then again, this prince may well remain plagued by the returning question: 'What is it about me that justifies this symbolic destiny?' The situation is akin to the communicative dilemma cited above: 'Yes, I understand that you have told me something, I can interpret the meaning of your words; what eludes me is the broader contextual implication of why you're telling me this now, to what further ends? Symbolic roles, in other words, are not groundless; reasons can be given for them, it's just that – offering here a variation on a theme introduced above – the grounds for the grounds remain questionable.

One way of negotiating this gap between imaginary and symbolic identifications, of avoiding the unease of this disjuncture, is to vigorously grasp one's symbolic mandate, to pronounce myself as it. I need, in other words, to pronounce myself as the role I might be, to declare myself as that and to recognize myself as such. What this means is that there is necessarily something which precedes the psychological activation of a role, namely the symbolic conferral - the declarative event - that provides the symbolic basis to make the latter possible. As in the declarations of speech-act theory, we have thus an extra-psychological element that forms the basis for imaginary

identity. Hence the idea of precipitate identification, the anticipatory, hastening character of my symbolic identifications that come prior to their actual psychological subjectivization. In his discussion of the “genesis” of objective socio-symbolic identity Žižek claims that

if we simply wait for a symbolic place to be allotted to us, we will never live to see it. That is, in the case of a symbolic mandate, we never simply ascertain what we are; we “become what we are” by means of a precipitous subjective gesture. This precipitous identification involves the shift from object to signifier (p. 76).

In the case of the prisoner’s dilemma, this is the shift from the object of the disk – which remains inaccessible to me, an indication that I can have no full understanding of what I ‘objectively’ am – to the assumption of the operation of the signifier, an understanding that my role is effectively that of what I am in the negotiated network of trans-subjective meanings. In order not to be left behind in the game, I actively declare myself to be *that*, the symbolic position conferred upon me by the symbolic network (i.e. within the prisoner’s dilemma, nominating myself as, and acting accordance with the symbolic identity of ‘white’). In so doing

I assume a symbolic identity which fills out the void of the uncertainty as to my being. What accounts for this anticipatory overtaking is the *inconclusive* character of the causal chain... [W]ithin the space of symbolic intersubjectivity, I can never simply ascertain what I am, which is why my “objective” social identity is established by means of “subjective anticipation” (p. 76).

One may think of this as a type of self-interpellation motivated by the anxiety of a primary state of non-inclusion. In this way the subject hopes, via a peremptory self-inclusion, to deny exclusion, to forestall the possibility of social non-belonging. We are presented thus with an instance of symbolic subjectivization. It is worth citing the stark ‘syllogism’ with which Lacan closes his paper, notable both for blunt formula of human belonging it offers – the zero-level, we might speculate, of such a self-nominating declarative event –

and for the fact that the first person pronoun (indicative of the fact of subjectivization) only appears in the last line:

- (1) A man knows what is not a man;
- (2) Men recognize themselves among themselves as men;
- (3) I declare myself as a man for fear of being convinced by men that I am not a man (Lacan, 2006b, p. 174).

### **The 'grounds of the grounds'**

By now it is perhaps clear why, in respect of the 'trans-subjective', Lacan was fascinated with logical time and a puzzle which involves both subjective anxiety and a universal solution. Logical time, as Evans (1996) stresses, is neither objective (the chronological 'time of the clock') nor simply a matter of subjective feeling. We are dealing with "a precise dialectical structure", an unfolding sequence of types of inter/trans-subjective logic "based on a tension between waiting and haste, between hesitation and urgency" (Evans, p. 206). This movement between inter- and trans-subjective logic casts a light on the three instances in this paper where I have reflected on paradoxical objectivity, be it that of universal logic (the solution of the dilemma), the consensual agreed-upon status of certain key signifiers, or the social reality of symbolic roles. In each case a form of objectivity is evinced (of logical reasoning, of convention, of relations of social exchange) that exceeds the level of subjective or inter-subjective interpretation. In each case there is thus a 'grounds'. Importantly however – and this is why Lacan's work is never simply an extension of Levi-Strauss's structuralism – the grounds in question is subjected to the 'psychological' articulations of questioning, doubt, anxiety. Hence the idea that while there is a stable grounds (rational, consensual, societal objectivity) underwriting social life, the 'ground for the grounds' can most certainly be brought into pragmatic re-consideration.

We are better placed thus to understand why Lacanian psychoanalysis so often defines itself as being (in a narrow sense) *non-psychological*. Lacanian theory, that is to say, avoids any reduction to the frame of purely psychological (inter)subjectivity by prioritizing the role of symbolic functioning, or, more

accurately perhaps, by grappling with how the (inter)subjective is always profoundly moulded by the trans-subjectivity entailed by such symbolic processes. This qualification enables us to anticipate a mis-reading of the ideas presented here. True enough, I have attempted in what has gone above to stress the difference between the (inter)subjective and the trans-subjective on the one hand, and process of psychological/imaginary as opposed to symbolic identification on the other. While it is crucial to point out this distinction analytically, for each conceptual perspective draws out attention to different facets of the social situations being observed, we need to insist on the overlapping, inter-penetrating quality of these two aspects of social psychological life. As the oscillation between interpretative inter-subjectivity and trans-subjectivity in the prisoner's dilemma makes clear, these two dimensions – as is indeed the case for psychological and symbolic modes of identification – are coterminous and cannot be divorced from one another. As such the analytical challenge lies in grasping this continual relation, the ways in which the potential dissonances of this 'non-fit' relation are negotiated, in closely attending to the oscillations between inter- and trans- subjectivity that characterize both the human condition and the more general domain of group psychology.

The foregoing discussion behind us, we may now return to the question of how the respective notions of interobjectivity and the trans-subjective intersect. A clear point of commonality is apparent: both ideas point to a level of analysis beyond the confines of (inter)subjectivity, to a type of objectivity that may play its part in co-ordinating human relations and understanding. In what has gone above I have discussed the time-lag between symbolic roles and psychological identifications. I have likewise touched on the idea of the symbolic as an a-psychological network of relational positions. In doing so, I tried to emphasize the importance of various declarative gestures and symbolic rituals in holding identities in place, as conditions of possibility for psychological/imaginary identifications. The upshot here is that some matrix of common beliefs or understandings, some external framework of mediation becomes absolutely essential in human sociality. The same point is made by theorists of interobjectivity. Recall Moghaddam's (2003) description of in-group interobjectivity as an account of the nature of shared meanings for

people within the same cultural context that relies on a form of 'objectivity'. In this respect the notions of the trans-subjective and interobjectivity are in full agreement.

The difference comes with how the 'objectivity' in question is understood. The 'objectivity' in the Lacanian account I have introduced here is *always symbolic*, always to be understood in reference to the role of language, or, in Lacanian jargon 'the operation of the signifier' in the production of a symbolic universe. It pays in this respect to return to Žižek's careful qualification that precipitous identification "involves the shift from object to signifier" (1996, p. 76). We might put it this way: an object is never merely an object within human relations, but an element in a distributed and never fully-resolved signifying game. A Lacanian perspective would therefore want to stress that whatever serves as the object in a given instance of interobjectivity is also a signifier, a signifier, furthermore, which represents something not merely to one or two others, but – as I have tried to show above - to the Other of these others. It is this facet of the Lacanian account, a questioning of what the (trans-subjective) Other of various (inter-subjective) others *wants*, that emphasizes something not stressed by theorists of interobjectivity, namely that the objectivity in question is shadowed by a degree of uncertainty, by a minimal residual anxiety. After all, it is never exactly sure what this Other of others – understood here as exactly a conjunction of the symbolic and subjective - in fact wants.

This insistence on object as signifier poses a challenge to those theories of inter-objectivity which focus on material object-relations to the relative exclusion of symbolic considerations. It helps to return here to the distinction offered at the beginning of the paper between a) inter-objectivity as a description of material object-relations, and b) interobjectivity as a description of a representation that spans different objectifications and enables diverse inter-objective relations (Sammut, Daanen & Sartawi, 2010, p. 451). To be clear: there is a general agreement between the approach of trans-subjectivity discussed above and the second approach to interobjectivity as described by Sammut et al, an approach which after all, is sensitive to the role of representations and aligned symbolic considerations. The problem lies with the



what we might provisionally term 'non-symbolic' notions of interobjectivity. I have in mind here particularly Latour's (1996) influential discussion of this notion, which explores how the affordances of various objects both condition and structure relationships between actors in a way which effectively bypasses broader symbolic considerations. Latour (1996) makes reference to the organized behaviour of simian societies, explicitly thus seeking to avoid any recourse to the 'role of the signifier', to any structuring function of the symbolic, which he feels are frequently inadequate and over-used theoretical notions. Now while it is too late to enter into any detailed consideration of this seminal paper, to enlarge upon the disagreements and convergences that may emerge in light of the material discussed above, it perhaps suffices for me to close with a question. The Lacanian approach warns that objects in a world of meaning cannot be severed from signifiers; within the social domain there are never merely material objects (or affordances) separated off from the dimension of what they might be thought to mean for others. This suggests that the role of signifier is apparent even where we might not expect to find it, even within - to draw on Latour's (1996) example - the social negotiations of simian actors. The question is this: can the distinction between 'non-symbolic' and symbolic interobjectivity be considered tenable, if interobjectivity always – seemingly necessarily - entails a minimal degree of signification? We should, in short, be cautious of assuming that inter-objectivity, in Latour's sense of 'the materiality of object-relations' ever exceeds the question of signification.

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