

Running head: The fear of insignificance

**The Fear of Insignificance from a Socio-Communicative Perspective:  
Reflections on the Role of Cultural Changes in Carlo Strenger's Thinking**

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### **Abstract**

This paper commemorates the work of Carlo Strenger, a prolific writer and unparalleled critic of contemporary culture, with a focus on his thinking concerning the role of cultural changes, and globalization in particular, on the development of what he termed the *fear of insignificance*. We relate Strenger's thinking in this regard to socio-evolutionary and developmental psychopathology approaches concerning the role of culture in engendering a sense of agency and selfhood. These views illustrate our own shift in thinking concerning the role of psychological and socio-cultural factors in the development and course of psychopathology. The implications of these views for the role of culture in psychoanalytic theory and practice are discussed.

*Keywords:* culture, psychoanalysis, mentalizing, epistemic trust

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Carlo Strenger's untimely death reminded us in the first place of his landmark book *Between Hermeneutics and Science* (Strenger, 1991), which served as a beacon in our own efforts to develop a systematic program of empirical research on psychoanalytic concepts and treatments. In this now-classic book, Strenger argues that the almost exclusive reliance on clinical data in psychoanalysis is insufficient, and psychoanalysis should emerge out of its not-so-splendid isolation and restore the dialogue with other sciences if it wants to avoid becoming obsolete. We have always defended a similar position (Fonagy, 2003; Fonagy et al., 2006; Luyten, 2015; Luyten et al., 2006) and, in retrospect, Strenger's *Between Hermeneutics and Science* might have been one of the main sparks that ignited the revival of psychoanalytic ideas. Yet, reflecting on Strenger's contributions, we were also struck by his work on culture and psychological development, and the marked shift in our own thinking about the role of culture in normal and disrupted psychological development that has taken place over the past few years (Fonagy et al., 2021; Fonagy & Luyten, in press; Fonagy et al., 2017a, 2017b).

We were particularly struck by some of the arguments Strenger advanced in *Freud's Legacy in the Global Era* (Strenger, 2015)—that psychoanalysis has lagged far behind other theoretical approaches in terms of incorporating the role of major sociocultural changes, especially as a result of globalization, in shaping identity formation and meaning making. We could not help but be struck by the parallels between our own recent thinking and his in terms of the role of the environment in shaping psychological development, and feelings of identity and selfhood in particular. In his earlier work *The Fear of Insignificance: Searching for Meaning in the Twenty-first Century*, Strenger (2011) had argued that human society, and thus the development of self and identity, has dramatically changed under the influence of

globalization and social media, leading to an expectation that everyone has to become a “*Homo globalis*,” who believes everything is possible. Religion and spirituality have been replaced for *Homo globalis* by “pop-spirituality” and science. However, these fail to bring lasting relief from what Strenger has termed *Homo globalis*’s fear of insignificance, as one is always doomed to fail or fall short of the ideal that is promoted by our current society, dominated as it is by images of unlimited success, unprecedented beauty, endless possibilities, and perfection. Yet, building on existential psychology, Strenger argued that humans have a deep-seated need to matter and to be part of a meaningful system. We would fully agree with this latter proposition, and have in recent years attempted to develop a socio-communicative approach focusing on the role of marked mirroring and epistemic trust in generating a sense of selfhood and meaning, rooted in an evolutionary-based developmental psychopathology approach. In this paper, we discuss emerging evidence for this approach in relation to Strenger’s thinking. We end the paper with some thoughts about the future of psychoanalytic thinking in relation to culture and its implications for psychoanalytic theory and practice, humbly following in Strenger’s footsteps.

### **A Socio-Communicative Approach to Agency and Selfhood**

Psychoanalysis has always had an interest in the relationship between culture and psychopathology. In *Civilisation and its Discontents* (Freud, 1930), Freud pointed to the paradoxical relationship between the individual and society: on the one hand, society provides a powerful protection against adversity and thus unhappiness; on the other hand, there is an inevitable conflict between the individual’s wishes for autonomy and drive satisfaction and societal norms and ideals, leading to frustration and discontent. The starting point of our own thinking concerning the need to reconsider the role of culture in psychoanalytic thought has, at first sight, been a very different, yet at least equally important,

one from Strenger's. Thinking about vulnerability to psychopathology, we were struck by findings concerning the major role of socioeconomic disadvantage, racial discrimination (Liu et al., 2017), and childhood and adolescent adversity and victimization, even after accounting for genetic liabilities and pre-existing symptomatology, in explaining vulnerability to psychopathology (Fonagy et al., 2021; Lund et al., 2018). Stated otherwise, there is growing consensus that social exclusion and disadvantage in the family, but also in peer and neighborhood environments, play a key role in vulnerability to psychopathology.

How can we understand this? Research findings in this area bring us back to the issue of the emergence of selfhood and identity and, in Strenger's words, the fear of insignificance. Central to the thesis we develop in this paper is that developmental psychopathology approaches converge to suggest that an individual needs to feel recognized as an individual agent and that they are being mentalized by their social system to experience a sense of meaningful connection with their broader social community (Fonagy et al., 2021). We have realized that in the past we have overly focused on the role of the immediate social context, and the nuclear family in particular, in generating a feeling of agency and selfhood (Luyten et al., 2020). Yet, research on disadvantaged individuals clearly demonstrates that the experience of a broader social context that fails to recognize the individual as a person—that is, that fails to mentalize the needs of that individual to belong and be part of a community—lies at the heart of feelings of loneliness, alienation, and estrangement, leaving these individuals vulnerable to psychopathology. In this respect, we argue that psychological disorders are best conceptualized as disorders of social communication and that what has been categorized as “disorder” in fact reflects attempts at adaptation to a sociocultural environment that temporarily or chronically fails to appropriately mentalize the individual's needs (Fonagy et al., 2017a).

Much of our thinking in this context is inspired by Gergely and Csibra’s ideas on the “demand characteristics of cognitively opaque cultural forms” (Gergely & Csibra, 2006, p. 8) as being central in human culture. Human beings require education or teaching by others to learn about themselves, others, and their wider social environment through a process of *natural pedagogy* (Gergely & Csibra, 2006). From this perspective, culture is both the process and the outcome of the communication of opaque knowledge that is passed on from one generation to the next. Experimental research suggests that in humans this type of social learning is heavily dependent on the capacity to “think together”—that is, the capacities for joint attention and mentalizing, the ability to understand oneself and others in terms of intentional mental states (O’Madagain & Tomasello, 2019; Tomasello, 2020).

The capacity for mentalizing is not limited to humans but is also present in nonhuman primates (Sandel et al., 2011) and other animals, including domestic dogs and goats (Call et al., 2003; Tomasello et al., 2006). However, nonhuman primates appear to lack the capacity for joint attention, that is, the capacity for two or more individuals to understand themselves to be attending to the same thing at the same time, each from their own, different, perspective (Tomasello, 2018). Tomasello also refers to this capacity as a dual-level structure entailed in *shared intentionality* (Tomasello, 2020) as it involves both a shared and an individual focus on the same thing. Others have referred to this stance as involving a relational mode or “we-mode” (Higgins, 2020) that fundamentally implies a mutual recognition of the individuality and subjectivity of the other. In earlier writing, we have coined the notion of *relational mentalizing* (Asen & Fonagy, 2012, 2017; Bateman & Fonagy, 2016) to refer to this capacity, which plays a key role in social systems such as a dyad, family, or broader social group.

Csibra and Gergely’s formulations concerning the importance of *ostensive cues* and *ostensive cueing* in human learning (Csibra & Gergely, 2009, 2011), concepts that were discussed initially by Bertrand Russell (1940) and subsequently by Sperber and Wilson

(1995), are highly relevant in this context. Ostensive cueing means that human social learning is, to a large extent, based on the use of certain signals, first by attachment figures and later by other members of the community who want to convey knowledge, that signal an intent to communicate and put the addressee into a “learning mode.” Typical ostensive cues are eye contact, raising one’s voice and/or eyebrows, and, particularly in relation to young children, infant-directed speech (so-called “motherese”). Experimental studies suggest that such ostensive cues counteract infants’ natural *epistemic vigilance*, the tendency to be suspicious toward potentially inaccurate and thus damaging information (Sperber et al., 2010). Hence, ostensive cues appear to generate the we-mode, in which epistemic vigilance is suspended, by eliciting a feeling in the addressee that the communicator wants to convey information that is *relevant* to the addressee and potentially also *generalizable* across situations (Egyed et al., 2013; Futo et al., 2010). As a result, the addressee develops the capacity for *epistemic trust*, the capacity to perceive others as a reliable source of knowledge concerning oneself, others, and the (social) world. Studies in this context have demonstrated the key importance of repeated experiences of being mentalized in the we-mode in the development of the capacity for epistemic trust (Eaves & Shafto, 2017; Markson & Luo, 2020; Tong et al., 2020).

Although more research on the precise mechanisms involved in this process is needed, from a more clinical perspective, being mentalized in the we-mode appears to involve the following sequence of experiences: one’s imagined sense of self is imagined by another person (in the first instance, an attachment figure) and, when there is an epistemic match between the imagined self and the co-representation that has been created (i.e., the individual feels recognized and correctly mentalized by the other), one’s epistemic vigilance is lessened and a channel for rapid, efficient knowledge transfer, which we have also referred to as an “epistemic superhighway,” is opened (Fonagy et al., 2017a, 2017b). This formulation leads us back to Strenger’s notion of the fear of insignificance: “If I do not have the feeling that I

am being understood, I do not know what is it that I need or want, and there is no way that I can ever live up to what is expected from me because I do not really know what is expected from me.”

Hence, from this perspective, attachment relationships not only serve as a much-needed secure base, as emphasized in more traditional conceptions of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973), but they also form a major context in which a sense of self and identity, and, importantly, epistemic trust in others develops (Luyten et al., 2020). Indeed, attachment relationships provide one of the most powerful contexts for the feeling of being understood and being mentalized, which then may generalize to others and one’s broader sociocultural environment. This is embodied in Tomasello’s (2016) concept of *collective intentionality*—that one is part of a broader sociocultural group based on shared intentionality that enables communication and collaboration, generating a sense of identity, belonging, and communality through common practices, beliefs, and attitudes. Gergely (2021) contrasted the Cartesian view of forming true beliefs about reality as nonsocial, internal, conscious, and effortful individual activity of the human mind with his view, which he holds in common with Sperber (Mercier & Sperber, 2017), that rationality serves to persuade others to change *their* beliefs and instead embrace one’s own beliefs: to establish shared beliefs with others through communication by reason-giving, justification, and argumentation. Gergely (2021) argues that humans are seekers of holding shared beliefs with other members of their social community, and this drive serves the adaptive functions of facilitating cooperation, coalition formation, affiliation, and cohesiveness of human social groups, even at the expense of not holding true beliefs.

This brings us to the role of broader socio-environmental factors. Although (early) attachment relationships play an important role in engendering feelings of identity, selfhood, and epistemic trust, other influences become increasingly important during psychological

development. Even the notion of parental sensitivity in the context of attachment relationships may be limited to Western countries (Luyten et al., 2021). In many non-Western countries, simultaneous multiple caregiving or alloparenting is the norm (Hrdy, 2009; Hrdy, 2016; Marlowe, 2005; Meehan & Hawks, 2015). The Western model of attachment appears not to be the only one that recognizes the child's needs for agency and selfhood (Morelli et al., 2017). Stated otherwise, the generation of agency and attachment need not be intrinsically linked. For instance, a broader social group with an investment in the child may similarly "teach" the child what is expected from them and what their place is in society, thus generating a sense of selfhood, without involving (much) attention to mental states (Keller et al., 2018; Keller & Chaudhary, 2017).

Furthermore, as the child develops, broader socio-environmental factors beyond the attachment context increasingly begin to influence the development of selfhood and epistemic trust. This is particularly the case in adolescence. Because of the increasing influence of peers and the wider community during this developmental stage, adolescents' perceptions of the world as safe and reliable, or as dangerous and unpredictable, may dramatically change. Particularly from adolescence onward, epistemic trust involves not only trust in the knowledge offered by attachment figures and other important others, such as close peers and teachers, but also a generalized trust, or the absence thereof, in one's social community. Fuelled by increasing cognitive and mentalizing capacities (Luyten & Fonagy, 2018), the central question for the developing young person is whether there is an expectation that the community of which they are part will protect, care for, and help realize their aims and ambitions.

Increasing cultural expectations with regard to both autonomy and relatedness in this developmental stage put both mentalizing capacities and epistemic trust under pressure, particularly in psychologically and/or socioeconomically disadvantaged young people. Both

mentalizing and epistemic trust are typically compromised in young people with a history of adversity, leaving them prone to mistrusting and misrepresenting their own and others' mental states, which results in their feeling misunderstood, rejected, and/or treated unfairly—feelings that have been demonstrated to underlie both internalizing and externalizing problems (Fonagy & Luyten, 2018; Luyten & Fonagy, 2018; Sato et al., 2018). Moreover, because of their often profound sense of (epistemic) isolation that results from epistemic mistrust, even when they are confronted with pieces of social information that contradict their feelings of mistrust (e.g., an interaction with a caring other or a public expression of solidarity within a community, as typically happens after traumatic events that have impacted the community as a whole, such as acts of terrorism or racism), they do not experience an epistemic match, but interpret such experiences as another confirmation of their inner sense of being a failure, being bad, or feeling misunderstood.

Meanwhile, particularly in some young people, epistemic hunger—that is, what Strenger referred to as the universal need to feel understood and valued by others—may lead to excessive epistemic credulity. What follows is a personal narrative characterized by a hyperactive social imagination that fails to generate a sufficient match with their own internal sense of self. As a result, such an initial illusory fit or match between a narrative that results from “wild imagination”—in our current society often fuelled by social media—and the young person's own internal narrative typically results in yet another experience of disappointment and the feeling that one is not understood. Hence, we agree with Strenger that the current social climate, in which a sense of collective intentionality is increasingly difficult to achieve, may foster feelings of alienation, emptiness, and insignificance. When individuals or entire social groups feel deprived of psychological safety (Edmondson & Lei, 2014) and legitimately feel cynicism and distrust, alienation, and anomie (e.g., Walley, 2017), this generates an angry anti-rationalist backlash against educated “elites” who have migrated to

the cities and accrued significant economic, cultural, and political power (e.g., Fukuyama, 2018; Gest, 2016). The widening division between rich and poor (Glasmeier, 2018) is creating an increasingly substantial group who resentment towards a privileged “metropolitan elite” who are perceived to be relatively economically comfortable, to have lost “we-ness” with the quotidian experience of those outside their circles, and to have different values. Feeling alienated and excluded from shared discourse, those who feel misjudged by and alienated from these elites are filled with an understandable sense of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2017). Even in those whose mentalizing and epistemic trust are more robust, the question of whom to trust in this age of fake news, conspiracy theories, and populist views is becoming increasingly difficult to answer. As a result, a growing number of people seem to choose a “quick fix” as expressed either in extreme epistemic vigilance or in epistemic credulity, or a combination of the two, in search of selfhood and a community that offers a sense of selfhood and personal value. Moreover, the images that are reflected back in the “black mirror” of smartphones may further challenge epistemic trust and collective intentionality, as they often propagate an “I-mode” instead of a we-mode.

### **Culture Revisited: Implications for Psychoanalytic Practice**

Population-based studies suggest that a small segment (between 10% and 20%) of the population accounts for the majority of socioeconomic burden. Early adversity and poor mental health—factors that we have shown in this paper to be related to impairments in mentalizing and epistemic mistrust—are highly associated with this segment (Caspi et al., 2016). Moreover, studies have shown a strong relationship between income inequality, epistemic trust, and mental health issues, including violence and substance abuse (Mikucka et al., 2017; Rözer & Volker, 2016). For instance, in a prospective study including 94,295 participants from 30 European countries, social inequality was negatively associated with

trust in others, and lower trust in others in turn predicted poor mental and physical health (Rözer & Volker, 2016). In another study of 48,641 adults from 33 countries, lower trust in others also mediated the relationship between income inequality and both life expectancy and mortality (Elgar & Aitken, 2011). Again, these studies suggest that countries characterized by low levels of (epistemic) trust do not seem to provide levels of support and interconnectedness that have been empirically associated with successful aging (Waldinger & Schulz, 2016).

Moreover, inequalities in access to and benefit from psychological treatment are also related to factors indicative of epistemic mistrust (Andrade et al., 2014; Evans-Lacko et al., 2018; Falgas-Bague et al., 2019; Leis et al., 2011; Majumder et al., 2014; Moore, 2018). These findings are particularly important for psychoanalytic therapy, as this type of treatment is still often perceived as being aimed at, and accessible to, those who are affluent and White (Bateman et al., in press). Moreover, psychoanalytic therapies are often perceived as prioritizing autonomy over relatedness. Studies suggest that such a focus may prioritize high-socioeconomic-status individuals, as they tend to feel more powerful and show a greater focus on the self (Inesi et al., 2011). Socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals, by contrast, often not only feel less powerful but also by necessity have a greater focus on others and their community, as they are more dependent on others for survival. As we have argued elsewhere, psychotherapy involves changes not only in the *content* of what the individual has learned (i.e., their specific attachment or object-relational patterns) but also in the *process* of learning itself (Fonagy et al., 2017b). Human beings have a unique capacity to learn from others and their environment. Hence, psychoanalysts should actively support their patients' capacity to bring about changes in the way they relate to their environment and particularly their social environment. Similarly, there is a need for psychoanalysis to incorporate culturally sensitive interventions, and for psychoanalytic therapists to acquire multicultural

competencies (Bateman et al., in press; Soto et al., 2018). To date, like most psychotherapeutic approaches, psychoanalysis is largely based on the study and treatment of so-called “WEIRD” (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) individuals, although they constitute only about 10% of the world’s population (Henrich, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has only magnified this issue, as demonstrated by findings that those with the worst mental health problems were often not reached during the pandemic because services were closed, they did not have adequate internet access, or they tended to self-isolate. Hence, outreaching (early) intervention strategies that involve local groups and communities may considerably broaden the therapeutic scope of psychoanalytic interventions. This will necessitate major changes in psychoanalytic training.

Beyond the treatment room, psychoanalysis should actively contribute to increasing social capital (the values and resources offered by a society to the individuals that constitute that society, emphasizing reciprocity, trust, collaboration, and kindness) (Fonagy & Luyten, in press). If this does not happen, as Strenger noted, many young people will continue to experience difficulty in establishing a sense of identity and selfhood as they grow up in a society that fails to offer them sufficient opportunity to feel recognized as an individual. In our own theoretical language, they will continue to grow up in a society that prioritizes an I-mode instead of a we-mode that is conducive to collective intentionality characterized by an emphasis on trust, reciprocity, and collaboration.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

There are remarkable parallels between the thinking of Strenger on culture and cultural changes and our own recent work on the importance of environment and culture. Psychoanalytic theory needs to appropriate these developments and integrate changing culture into its thinking. But how can a discipline that is profoundly committed to the

microscopic study of intra-individual mechanisms make a contribution to the understanding of social processes? We have found an evolutionary perspective of particular help in clarifying how conceptualization at the level of the individual can be helpfully integrated with conceptualizing social processes. The concept of a we-mode function is helpful in creating this bridge where the individual recognizes the agency and individuality of the other while generating an experience of feeling, thinking, and acting together (a “we-ness”), so that the “I” now sees itself as signified and significant in the interpersonal landscape as “we-structured” and being part of a group as a social being. While the “we-subjectivity” can be reduced to individual psychology, there is also a process of deindividuation in which self-identification is subsumed into identification with a social unit, enabling distinctive ways of functioning. There is no mysterious leap into a mystical interpersonal space of we-ness. The “I” seeking to escape from the insignificance generated by withdrawal from evolutionarily prioritized collective action voluntarily subsumes the I-mode into a mode in which the dominant goal is joint action and collaboration. The content of individual intention is transformed. Each person sees themselves and the other as intending to play a mutually collaborative role in some action. The cumulative nature of human culture and its efficient intergenerational transmission through teaching and learning are prototypical instances of we-mode cognition.

These social processes are of critical relevance to the clinical practice of psychoanalysts, whose work is so often concerned with the catastrophic disruption of this learning process because of the destruction of the capacity to trust by early—and sometimes later—extreme adversity, and the persistence of epistemic hypervigilance. This means not only that clinical interventions have to help patients develop epistemic trust in their social world but also that clinicians need to interest themselves in ensuring that their patients are discharged with improved capacity for relatedness into social environments that are deserving

of their changed capacity for relationships and trust. This adds weight to the imperative for clinicians to involve themselves in social reform and the regeneration of social capital.

This brings us to our final point, that more research on the relationship between culture and psychopathology is needed. Although we have an epidemiological perspective on the social gradient in prevalence driven by race, inequity, and other cultural factors, the mechanisms of these factors at both individual and societal level are poorly understood. We have pointed to the disruptions to the processes of social learning as a potential conduit for increased risk, but there is much more to understand about how privilege translates to health (i.e., salutogenesis) for those toward the top end of the gradient. The best tribute to Strenger's thinking may indeed be if the future of psychoanalytic research could continue in his footsteps in exploring the intricate yet complex relationships between culture and the development of mental distress.

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