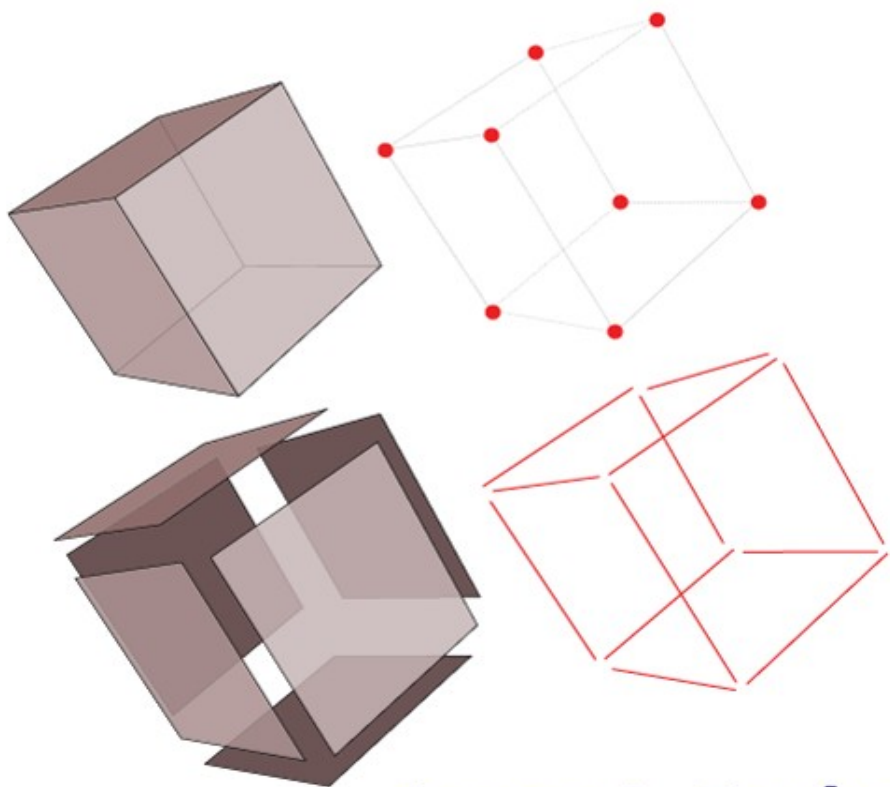


Number Theory, Intersubjectivity and Schizoid Phenomena



James L. Poulton

Dimensions of Psychotherapy, Dimensions of Experience

**Number theory,
intersubjectivity
and schizoid
phenomena**

**Dimensions of
Psychotherapy, Dimensions
of Experience**

James L. Poulton

© 2005 James L. Poulton

e-Book 2020 International
Psychotherapy Institute

All Rights Reserved

This e-book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. This e-book is intended for personal use only. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be used in any commercial manner without express permission of the author. Scholarly use of quotations must have proper attribution to the published work. This work may not be deconstructed, reverse engineered or reproduced in any other format.

Created in the United States of
America

About the Author

James L. Poulton, PhD is a psychologist in private practice, a faculty member of IPI, and co-director of IPI's Salt Lake City Satellite Center. He is also an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology, as well as a Clinical Instructor in the Department of Psychiatry, at the University of Utah.

Number theory, intersubjectivity and schizoid phenomena

James L Poulton

ONE, TWO AND THREE

The concept of number, as it applies both to metapsychology and to technique in psychoanalysis, has been receiving increased attention in recent years from theorists representing various perspectives. One reason for this interest has been the upsurge of

intersubjective concepts in analytic theory, which have functioned to blur the distinctions between such traditional notions as one-person vs. two-person psychologies, or independence vs. interdependence. In consequence, theorists have been prompted to rethink what these concepts might mean, and whether it still makes sense to speak of the traditional *one* of the individual subject (i.e., the analysand or the analyst, taken individually) or even the *two* of analysand and analyst in interaction with each other.

Thomas Ogden's concept of the analytic third is a case in point. Ogden (1994) describes the analytic third as the 'analytical subject', jointly created by the analyst and analysand's individual subjectivities and by their intersubjective interdependence. Involved in this process are the analyst and analysand as *both* separate entities *and* as interdependent. As separate entities, they are 'subject' and 'object' to each other. In the mode of interdependence, however, they form a third subjectivity, the analytic third, which represents an intermediate

ground of shared subjectivity that exerts its own influence on their separate subjectivities. The analytic process, then, is conceived by Ogden to be the outgrowth of a dialectical interplay between *three* ‘subjectivities’: analyst, analysand, and the analytic third.

As a result of theoretical advances like Ogden’s, the old concepts of the one and the two have become questionable. They have, in a word, become infected by the intersubjective, in that the one (of either analysand or

analyst) is no longer simply one, but also contributes to a *third* that is essentially another (though quite different) *one* formed by the fusion of the *two*. In this chapter these confusing concepts will be explored, particularly as they have been transformed by the infusion of the intersubjective. The chapter will have two primary goals. First, theories pertaining to the one, the two, and the intersubjective will be critically examined, and a particular view of the intersubjective, that it participates in an oscillation between individual independence and the

interdependence of shared subjectivity, will be suggested. Second, the idea of oscillation will be illustrated through a case study of an analysis of a schizoid character.

THEORIES OF THE ONE, THE TWO, AND THE INTERSUBJECTIVE

In his chapter entitled ‘One, Two ... Seven’ in *The Mystery of Things*, Christopher Bollas (1999) discusses the one of one-person, and the two of two-person, psychologies (also see Bollas, Chapter 13 in this volume for his additional thinking on number).

One-person psychology, he says, is the proper domain of ‘the self in relative isolation—quintessentially in the dream, but also in daydreams, unconscious fantasies, passing mental fragments, affects, instinctual derivatives and so forth’ (Bollas 1999: 52). Two-person psychology, on the other hand, ‘receives the work of the self in relation to the other’ (1999: 52), in that it involves real interactions with others in which each are called upon to reveal their subjectivity. When analysands explore their one-person psychology, they use the analyst ‘as an

object of thought for an elaboration of the analysand's state of mind' (1999: 53). To force the interaction toward relationality at this moment, i.e., to attempt to interpret the one as evidence of the two, would be 'remedial', a 'category error' (1999: 53), and would undermine the essential work of analysis. When the two is predominant, however, the analysand 'both acts upon and talks to the analyst, and the analyst feels his otherness called into interpersonal engagement' (1999: 55). Here mutuality truly occurs, in which the

subjectivity of each participant transforms and modifies that of the other.

With these definitions in hand, Bollas questions whether concepts of intersubjectivity add any value to our understanding of the analytic process. To his question, ‘where does the intersubjective operate in the analytic pair?’ (1999: 51), he gives two responses, both of which underscore the concept’s apparent lack of utility. First, he says that the intersubjective ‘must’ operate in the analyst’s and

analysand's unconscious, but if it is unconscious, then it is 'fundamentally unknowable' (1999: 52) and any effort to identify it 'bears the strain of the rationalized' (1999: 52). Second, he wonders if the intersubjective could exist in 'some mutually constructed interpersonal area, equidistant from the participants?' (1999: 55). Since this image is absurd (picture the intersubjective hovering like a hummingbird in the space between the two), he has no difficulty shooting it down. Of course that isn't where the two-person exists, he says. 'For *after*

all, the two shall always be registered in the one.... In the end, all relations between two people are collapsed into the labile immateriality of the individual psyche' (1999: 55, emphasis added).

Bollas thus appears to reduce the intersubjective to merely that which registers in the individual psyche. From this perspective, the intersubjective has the same epistemological standing as any other content of consciousness: we experience and think about it, but

always in the privacy of our own individualistic theater. In this view, the other appears to the independent and isolated subject only contingently, in the form of an interaction between essentially separate psyches.

It is telling, however, that Bollas, having gone so far as to assert such an isolated subject, then retracts some of the sharper edges of this view. Near the end of his article, he states, quite enigmatically, that the unconscious, ‘that strange object of our endopsychic awareness, is substantially derived

from what Laplanche terms the “enigmatic signifier”: the mother’s unconscious seduces us into psychic life.... Thus the very zone of the deconstructed—what we term the primary process—derives in the very first place out of a relation’ (1999: 56).

The contradictions in Bollas’s work are not unfamiliar to those who investigate the intersubjective. The confusion arises from the fact that analytic theory encompasses two sets of inconsistent, yet equally grounded intuitions: that experience is a product

of social construction and that each individual lives alone in a private inner world. Most theories have tended to resolve this confusion by making one intuition foundational and demoting the other to being derivative. There have been theories, however, that refer to both the individual and the intersubjective as *aspects* of experience, a theoretical move that paves the way for a resolution of what first appeared to be a contradiction between the two. Instead of requiring that one intuition be privileged over the other, these theories assert that

human experience should be viewed from different perspectives, one that contains the individual and the other the intersubjective. In these theories the themes of dialectic and oscillation are predominant, implying a self that is divided by its participation in the intersubjective, but which nevertheless functions as a unity, i.e., as a one and two at the same time.

Loewald (1980), for example, argued that the self can legitimately be seen as separate and independent *from one perspective*, but that some of its

experiences, or aspects thereof, are also organized by an intersubjective that begins in the fusion between mother and infant and continues throughout life (Mitchell 2000). Loewald goes so far as to argue that from the intersubjective perspective, traditional dualities such as self vs. other, internal vs. external, and even reality vs. illusion, are dissolved.

It is from this perspective, incidentally, that the inadequacy of Bollas's use of a spatial metaphor to undermine the intersubjective becomes

most apparent. For if the intersubjective is as Loewald conceives it, it resides in a separate realm from any considerations of spatiality, or of inner and outer which form the foundations of concepts of space. To reject the intersubjective, then, because it cannot be located in the space between two individuals is akin to arguing that a tree cannot exist because it can't be found in the spaces between its leaves.

Jacques Lacan (1946) adds another elaboration to the theory of an

oscillation, or dialectic, between the individual and the intersubjective. Lacan asserts that an individual subject only arises when in the act of speaking, but since language is a system whose rules are established by a community of speakers, the subject's separateness is eroded in the instant it arises. Rudolph Bernet puts this point succinctly: 'The experience of self in speaking is necessarily connected to the experience that the significance of everything that I say about myself has its origin simultaneously and

undecidably both inside and outside myself' (Bernet 1996: 176).

The theories of Loewald, Lacan and others all point in a single direction: that the confusions inherent in the one, the two and the three can only be resolved if both the intersubjective and the individual are considered to be aspects of experience, and if neither are considered to ground the self exclusively. As aspects of experience, the intersubjective and the individual interact in a dialectical or an oscillatory relationship, in such a way

that the self, both in isolation and in interaction, sometimes is in one and sometimes the other. Understanding intersubjectivity's role in this way, in the economy of a self characterized by differential aspects, helps to illuminate two very different forms of the intersubjective.

On one hand is the view that the intersubjective appears when two individuals share their subjectivities so that each is aware of the other's thoughts, emotions, desires, etc. This might be labeled the 'experiential

intersubjective’, since it requires the experienced recognition in each person of the other's subjectivity. The experiential intersubjective appears in the work of Bollas (1999) as well as many others (Benjamin 1998). The other view advances a more comprehensive theory that the intersubjective is an essential aspect of the construction of human experience, and that it does not require that the individual experience any particular conscious content. This view, which can be called the ‘radical intersubjective’ (Crossley 1996), has

two primary forms: the familiar form, from developmental theory, which asserts that the sequential construction of selves requires the essential influence of the other, and that in early infancy self and other are indistinguishable; and the less common form that asserts that the self, even in adulthood, is inextricably embedded in the social. It is the radical intersubjective, particularly in its adult form, that forces consideration of an oscillatory relationship between aspects of experience, neither of which are privileged (i.e., have more

epistemological priority) over the other. The radical intersubjective also was what moved Stephen Mitchell to exclaim: ‘an individual mind is an oxymoron’ (Mitchell 2000: 57).

The simple numbers of one and two, which have long undergirded psychoanalytic theory, have been rendered substantially more complex by the intrusion of the intersubjective. While the simple, traditional *one* can still be seen in individual subjectivity, and even the *two* in experiential intersubjectivity, these are a one and a

two that have undergone sweeping transformations through their relationship to the radical intersubjective, which has constructed a *third* out of both the one and two, comprising the fusion between self and other. While numerous analysts have argued that the one persists in analysands' most self-contained moments, in dream states, for example, or the reporting of dreams, they are only partially correct. For the radical intersubjective, in both forms, already occupies the dream, since clinical experience convinces us that

elements of figures internalized from developmental periods, as well as elements of the internalized analyst in the real-time relationship, appear with surprising frequency (Poulton 2002; Wallis and Poulton 2001). Indeed, David Scharff (1992) has argued that not only should analysands' dreams be regarded as interpersonal communications, but they may also be socially constructed, either by a couple, or by a family, or by entire social organizations. Even in the analysand's 'self-contained' moments, then, the other can be found to be

present, and it only depends on the contingencies of the analytic relationship whether the individual or the intersubjective becomes the focus of the conversation.

Analysands seem to be more or less capable of utilizing the dialectic between the individual and the intersubjective. Perhaps a mark of healthier patients would be that they are capable of light-footed oscillation, considering first one then the other perspective without being overwhelmed by either. Less healthy

patients, however, favor one over the other: for some, the intersubjective, with its implications of fusion, is sought as a haven against the anxieties of individuation; for others, the intersubjective is experienced as dangerous territory that instigates rigid defenses designed to bolster the isolated self. See also Hopper, Chapter 7 in this volume.

THE REFUSAL TO BE TWO

In the case of schizoid personality organization, the intersubjective in both forms creates a profound irritant

against which an array of aggressive and isolative defenses is employed. The schizoid hates the intersubjective, first and foremost, because the other is characterized via internalized objects as life-eliminating, and because the other's presence signals the onset of toxic affective responses rooted in past experience. Additionally, the schizoid can be seen to *hate the very construction of self* since it the self's essential nature that introduces the intersubjective as an ineluctable aspect of experience. The schizoid personality, then, may be profitably

conceived not simply as a consequence of internalized bad objects, but also as an existential disorder, arising from hypersensitivity to the realities of a self divided by the presence of the other. In consequence, the schizoid continuously attempts to isolate, not only from their bad objects, but also from their core intersubjectivity, and thereby to establish a protective enclave characterized only by the single, removed and individual self. The schizoid's primary purpose, then, is to attack the two, in terms of both the experiential and the radical

intersubjective, and to reside solely in the separate and radically individual one.

The schizoid is often quite successful in attacking the experiential intersubjective. Analysts are familiar with the manifold ways in which their own subjectivity is denied—from refusing recognition of the analyst's own life, to treating the analyst's subjectivity as irrelevant to the analysand's projections and transferences. The radical intersubjective, however, presents the

schizoid with a more substantial challenge. For how does the schizoid eliminate the other when the other is an indissoluble aspect of the self? The dilemma faced by the schizoid at this juncture is encountered in analysis more often than is usually recognized.

Mr T, a 44-year-old single professional in thrice-weekly analytic psychotherapy, exhibited both schizoid and narcissistic characteristics. He commonly stated that he preferred not to have relationships because they were too frustrating, and he utilized

contempt and devaluation of others as a means of achieving protective isolation. Despite these rigid defenses, Mr T would at times consider using me as an intimate in order to explore his interpersonal process. After these flirtations with the intersubjective, however, he would reject me, either through a deadening attack on the liveliness of our interactions, or through contemptuous dismissal and a grandiose reassertion of his desire to live without anyone.

These ambivalent patterns were especially apparent in two sessions from the third year of therapy. Mr T began the first session by complaining that he felt imposed upon by other people's desires and expectations. He wanted to make them leave him alone. He said the only thing that would make him take his girlfriend back (from their recent breakup) was 'my fantasy of her, not the reality since I can't really tolerate being with her.' I said that when he excludes other people because their expectations intrude upon him, all that is left is his

fantasy, which seems to make him quite lonely. In response Mr T silently stared out the window. I felt his silence to be an exclusion of me also, perhaps another retreat to fantasy, so after ten minutes I said, 'Maybe you feel that I'm intrusive too. When I try to understand, you exclude me through silence.'

Mr T responded angrily, 'It's interesting that you take my silence as excluding you, when in my silence I was actually thinking hard about what we have been talking about.' I said that

my interpretation appeared to have broken his sense of a connection with me, but he explained that he felt overwhelmed by other people sometimes, and he knows he withdraws.

The next session began with a brief silence. Mr T then described his plans to spend the weekend with a woman he met recently. ‘On the one hand I’m quite frightened, and on the other I’m excited.’ He wasn’t sure what his motivation was to see this woman, or whether his plans would be successful.

He associated to a friend who died of a heart attack while riding his bicycle. ‘You know,’ he said, ‘this guy’s troubles are over. He’s dead, on the side of the road. It’d be nice to have no troubles, to be dead and to not want anything anymore ... The dead have no desires. I want to go to Mexico, to live on a beach, to live a freer life. I want to have nothing I have to do, nothing I want, nothing anyone else wants from me.’ I said he seemed to be considering both death and fantasy as solutions to his distrust of people and their presence to, or in, him, since he

believed that if he made a move toward recognizing them, he would somehow be damaged.

He became silent for a long time, which seemed to be both a test of whether I would still tolerate silence as his mode of connecting to me, and a way of telling me that his relationship with me scared him, and that he preferred the isolation of either fantasy or death to that kind of fear. In the prior session, I believe he had felt connected to me, in a certain sense, and that I had enacted what he feared:

at the point that he was trying to tolerate and even preserve the connection in his silence, I had misunderstood this paradox and failed to appreciate the dilemma hidden in his discussion of how intolerable it was for him to interact with any but a fantasy image of his girlfriend (and me by extension). The true irony of this interaction was that Mr T was connecting with me by talking about his desire to not connect with anyone. My misreading of this mobilized his defensive attack on my presence. We can thus see that the entire interaction

was characterized by his oscillation between two modes of being—the individual subjective, which he sought in anger and defense, and the intersubjective, with which he was flirting in hidden and timid ways. In the current session Mr T seemed to be operating again in terms of this oscillation. This was why his second silence felt like a test: he was once again undertaking his experiment in intersubjectivity, to see if it could be trusted.

Mr T broke the silence to say he knew he needed approval from people, and that he always felt that he was losing it. He then said: ‘I don’t feel like I have all the freedom I want. I feel like I’ve constructed a world where approval is still necessary.’

These brief words highlight the terrible dilemma the schizoid patient faces. On the one hand, Mr T’s image of the beach in Mexico reveals his desire to retreat from the experiential and the radical intersubjective, since that image is of the single, individual

subject unrelated to anything or anyone else. On the other hand, no matter how much of others' presence he tries to eliminate, Mr T still wants to be connected with them, to get their approval. That is to say: although he claims he wants freedom from his own and others' desires, he continues to discover others within him, at the foundation of his being, and their presence is revealed through his spontaneous desire. His relationship with desire is the microcosm that illustrates the oscillation between the individual and the intersubjective: his

desire refers to the trace of the other that is already present in his self, and through his faith in the individual *one* he attempts to eliminate, through fantasy, death or Mexico, his desire.

Mr T continued by describing a supervisor who acted as though ‘I would do everything he wanted just so I could have his approval ... I don’t want his approval and I don’t need it.’ I suggested he was talking about our last session, when I had misunderstood his silence, and I wondered if he felt I had been disapproving. He responded

angrily, ‘It wasn’t just that I *felt* you were disapproving. You *weren’t* approving.’ I said that his anger meant that he also had wanted my approval, and since this frightened him, he had pushed me away and told himself he’d rather be dead or in a fantasy. He answered by saying, ‘Well, first I gave you the opportunity to redeem yourself, and fortunately you latched onto it and understood what I was saying.’

I believe Mr T meant by this that I had saved myself from the death to

which he at times consigns me. This, then, was a moment when his refusal of the intersubjective was mollified by his calmer acceptance of the presence of, and his desire for, the other. The session ended in a reflective mood, in which he recognized that the same fearful attack on the intersubjective had occurred with his ex-girlfriend. ‘If you think about it,’ he said, ‘that’s what happened to my girlfriend. I simply stopped talking about her, and I tried to stop thinking about her. It was as though I made her die.’

THE RETURN OF THE INTERSUBJECTIVE

Because the schizoid character hates the intersubjective, in the forms both of the other's actual presence, and of the deep structure of a self that is already embedded in the social, they are doomed to a repeating pattern of ejection and rediscovery of the other's influence. For Mr T, this pattern appeared as an oscillation between desiring the other, which reveals the other within himself, and a concerted attack, grounded in his faith in his individuality, to rid himself of any of

the other's traces. Mr T didn't want to just eliminate the other as a content of consciousness. He also wanted to void the self that contains the other in the form of desire. His ultimate anti-intersubjective goal was to finally achieve the one of the purely subjective individual self. To do so, both the two of experiential intersubjectivity, and the two-in-one of radical intersubjectivity had to be eliminated. This left him facing his torturous dilemma: by eliminating the other's presence in the original unity from which he himself also arises, he

eliminates himself. The only self that remains after the other departs is an empty container. His images of being in Mexico, without others or himself, are haunting illustrations of this emptiness.

The origin of the self lies in the two, both in terms of its developmental path and also in its moment-to-moment experience in the presence of others. But the two of radical intersubjectivity is also interpenetrated by the one of individual subjectivity. This dialectic leads the schizoid into

excruciating territory, since the boundaries between self and other are no longer clearly delineated. The schizoid protests against this basic structure of self, since their desire is to eliminate the other *as the second*, under the logic that if there are two, then taking one away will leave the narcissistically cathected one that will finally be comfortable with no needs and no uncontrolled desire for the other. The schizoid's defensive structure, then, rests primarily on the belief that the core of human experience is the two from which one

can be eliminated. The impossibility of accomplishing this explains the schizoid's characteristic repeating pattern of oscillation between the one and the two.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER THOUGHTS

If the most appropriate way to describe human experience is, first, that it is grounded both in the individual and the intersubjective, and second that any person, either alone or in interaction, oscillates between the two positions, then it is possible that

some conceptions both of pathology and of analytic technique will require reconceptualization. Viewing the schizoid character from the standpoint of such oscillation enriches our understanding both of the existential dilemmas they face and of the fact that the very structure of self can be experienced as traumatic. We neglect these dilemmas at the cost—to our patients and ourselves—of failing to conceive of human life in all its dimensions. To forget the intersubjective in our patients' and our own lives is to fail to recognize that

the one, the two, and the three are essential aspects of experience, and negotiating among them is not an easy task.

REFERENCES

- Benjamin, J. (1998) *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis.*, New York: Routledge.
- Bernet, R. (1996) 'The Other in Myself', in S. Critchley and P. Dews (eds.), *Deconstructive Subjectivities*, New York: State University of New York Press, pp. 169-184.
- Bollas, C. (1999) *The Mystery of Things*, London: Routledge.
- Crossley, N. (1996) *Intersubjectivity: The Fabric of Social Becoming*, London: Sage.

Lacan, J. (1946) 'Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty', trans. B. Fink and M. Silver, *Newsletter of the Freudian Field*, 2: 4-22, (1988).

Loewald, H. (1980) *Papers on Psychoanalysis*, New Haven: Yale University Press. Mitchell, S. A. (2000) *Relationality: From Attachment to Intersubjectivity*, Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.

Ogden, T. (1994) *Subjects of Analysis*, Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.

Poulton, J. (2002) 'A New Look at Freud's Dream of Irma's Injection', presented to a conference of the International Psychotherapy Institute, Washington, DC. Scharff, D. (1992) *Refinding the Object and Reclaiming the Self*, Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.

Wallis, K. and Poulton, J. (2001) *Internalization: The Origins and*

Construction of Internal Reality,
Buckingham: Open University Press.

Table of Contents

About the Author

Number theory, intersubjectivity and
schizoid phenomena

ONE, TWO AND THREE

THEORIES OF THE ONE, THE

TWO, AND THE

INTERSUBJECTIVE

THE REFUSAL TO BE TWO

THE RETURN OF THE

INTERSUBJECTIVE

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER

THOUGHTS

REFERENCES