CHAPTER 8

BEYOND THE COUCH

An Introduction to the Work of John D. Sutherland

Key words and themes: the self in society, persons in relation, personal relations theory, the autonomous and relational self, the self as agent, closed and open systems, the best form of welfare is development, spreading psychoanalytic insights beyond the couch, disturbance at the core of the person, continuity of self, self-system, self-other relational matrix, governing centre or system, the sense of self, the self as actor and chooser.

John D. Sutherland, known to his friends and colleagues as Jock, played a very significant part in the development and wider application of psychoanalysis in the years during and after the second world war, in England, Scotland, and the USA, up until his death in 1991.

In recent years, the Scottish Institute of Human Relations and the Sutherland Trust have contributed to supporting the work of Jill and David Scharff in their scholarly investigations and celebration of the writings and work of both Ronald Fairbairn and Jock Sutherland.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Jill Savege Scharff for her edited collection The Autonomous Self: the work of John D. Sutherland (Jason Aronson, 1994), to David E. Scharff and Ellinor Fairbairn Birtles for their edited volumes From Instinct to Self: Selected Papers of W. R. D. Fairbairn, vols. 1 and 2 (Jason Aronson, 1994), and to Jill Savege Scharff and David E. Scharff for their edited volume The Legacy of Fairbairn and Sutherland: Psychotherapeutic Applications (Routledge, 2005).

In 2007 the Trust and the Institute organised the launch in Edinburgh of Jill Scharff’s selection of Sutherland’s major papers, entitled The Psychodynamic Image: John D. Sutherland on Self in Society (Routledge, 2007). Later that same year the Trust and the Institute collaborated with the Centre for Counselling and Psychotherapy Studies of the University of Edinburgh to run a successful course, entitled Beyond the Couch, to spread knowledge of Sutherland’s work among a younger generation.

The two pieces which follow do not claim to give a comprehensive account of Sutherland’s contributions, but to summarise and highlight, within the context of the aim of the present book, which is to define and demonstrate the persons in relation perspective. It is my contention that Sutherland in his person, his work and his writings illustrates aspects of that perspective.

These two pieces were prepared for the Beyond the Couch course. The first is a set of teaching notes distributed to course members, and the second is a close
reading of a recently rediscovered short paper written by Sutherland for a seminar he gave in 1978.

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THE WORK OF JOHN D. SUTHERLAND

Sutherland’s key themes:

– object relations/personal relations theory: his engagement with and promotion of the work of such key figures as Ronald Fairbairn, Harry Guntrip, Michael Balint, and Donald Winnicott
– at the core of this engagement, his exposition, promotion and further development of Ronald Fairbairn’s conceptualisation of the basic inner situation in each person, conceived in relational (self/other) terms
– his emphasis on the autonomous and relational self-in-society, in families, groups, communities, workplaces, and the corollary of that emphasis – the need to apply psychoanalysis and develop psychodynamic perspectives beyond the couch, in group relations, organisational consultancy, counselling and community development; and also in our thinking about current and future developments in society as a whole, for example his reflections on welfare, on the need to integrate health, education and social care, and his interesting observations on the post-industrial society
– his perception of the vital role of the caring professions: social workers, GPs, nurses, psychiatrists, teachers, the clergy, occupational therapists, adult educators and so on; his concept of community mental health; and his promotion of community development (most notably in the Craigmillar housing scheme in Edinburgh) and of counselling services such as the then Scottish Marriage Guidance Council
– his own key area of intellectual innovation: the conceptualisation of the self, imagined as autonomous, grounded in relationships, present from the start of life, first whole, then divided, developing and changing throughout life; the self as an evolving structure-in-process; the hologram as an image of this dynamic self; the self as a supra-ordinate system, capable of reflecting upon itself; the self as an agent, with the ego or ‘I’ imagined as a kind of executive director of the self, managing both internal and external reality; the self developing not in isolation but in family, society and culture; the key role of affects as a monitoring system for the self in all of its encounters in the world; the self as forming part of a larger system; the self as a (relatively) closed or open system; the self as a person-in-relationships; and the need for a developmental view of the self
– his view of psychoanalytic psychotherapy as a warm, responsive, personal relationship; the patient or client’s need to be valued for him- or herself as a