Interpersonal and Social Dynamics

Social group behaviour in humans and other species comprises successive impulses of “aggression, fear, protection-seeking and renewed aggressiveness”, impulses that mostly express themselves in ritualized form (LORENZ, 1963, p. 55). LORENZ (1973) thought that “the tension between opposing rituals, such as those of threatening and those of appeasement” results in “a unitary integrated system” that is characterized by high rigidity (p. 213). Cultural ritualization of intraspecific aggression plays a particular role in humans. Curtailed and culturally ritualized intraspecific aggression is, according to LORENZ (1963), an important constituent of social manners and customs and lies at the heart of social ambition, competitiveness, enthusiasm for a cause, envy, and the use of status symbols. Curtailed aggression underpins self-respect and finds expression in “the sublimest artistic or scientific creation” and in the “specifically human faculty” of laughter (LORENZ, 1963, p. 269).

FREUD (1933) acknowledged that civilization and cultural achievements are founded upon aggressive as well as sexual impulses – the very impulses that “are inhibited by society” (p. 143), whereby inhibition (and modification) of aggression, in particular, is achieved by the “setting up of the super-ego, which makes the dangerous aggressive impulses its own” (p. 143). Others’ aggression towards oneself (and symbolically that of the superego towards the ego) is disinhibited by one’s nonconformity, one’s failure to control one’s own aggressive or sexual impulses. The fear of others’ aggression is counteracted by one’s conformity and the display of culturally or phylogenetically ritualized appeasement gestures and by one’s perception of their appeasing effect on others (or it is overcome by offensively aggressively induced submission in others). Healthy narcissism can be taken to refer to all behaviours that cause others to display appeasing (or submissive) gestures towards oneself, all behaviours that produce a sense of safety in oneself (i.e., maintain one’s narcissistic homeostasis) through the perception of others’ approvals, approbation, or recognition of oneself.
Burrow (1949) recognized that the “disposition of an individual to exercise projective control over others [is] coupled with a reciprocal subservience on the part of his listeners” (p. 4). At the heart of all social interactions, individuals “approve and are approved of” and “disapprove and are disapproved of”; “society is composed exclusively of these two complemental reactions” (Burrow, 1949, p. 5).1

By virtue of this authoritarian give-and-take that now characterizes man’s interrelational level of behaviour, there is to-day early imbued in him – in us all – a dichotomous attitude of servile dependence upon other people on the one hand, and of vindictive repudiation of them on the other. The social fabric of human relations is now shot through with this dualistic factor of personal attraction and repulsion. This bipolar reaction is universal. Our mental world is divided between those towards whom we feel kindly disposed, and those towards whom we feel unkindly disposed. People with whom we agree, or who agree with us, are those for whom we feel affection, while people with whom we do not agree, or who do not agree with us, are those with whom we do not share our affections.

(Burrow, 1949, pp. 4–5)

Our safety within the group and our access to narcissistic resources are regulated by our social status or ranking position in the group, which we have to maintain dynamically through appropriately targeted assertive (offensively aggressive) and submissive gestures. While competing for social status, in an attempt to maintain in unconscious fantasy our relationship with the primary care giver (omnipotent object), we have to conform to the norms of society in order to avoid being driven into social disconnectedness or unrelatedness (which unconsciously stands for maternal separation) and becoming the victim of collective punishment.

9.1 Safety in interactions and relationships

Relationship with an object is the context in which narcissistic needs are satisfied, in which another person’s appeasing and affirmative (self-affirmative) affect signals are received and can be solicited. In defining the context for affective exchange, the individual projects his self or object representation onto the other person, “while enacting the reciprocal object or self representation” (Kernberg, 1996, p. 127). Thus, an ‘internal object relation’ is actualized, that is, a “significant past object relation” is recapitulated (Kernberg,

1 Burrow (1949) believed that this dichotomy is entirely socially conditioned, that it is acquired in childhood development as a result of exposure to parental and societal attitudes that have been reinforced in cultural evolution.