

A brief meditation on the notion of *mediation*: Techniques of the Self and Material

Relationism in 'speaking' of Anorexia¹

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss on the 'public' and 'plural' dimension of the self. The starting point of our argument is a very simple study of anorexic life stories. Originally the stories were recalled from an Internet community of 'people suffering from anorexia'. In brief, the narrative structure of the stories was analysed in order to find communalities and variations. Our results showed that stories were virtually interchangeable, its structure and content being almost identical. They were, so to speak, *public artefacts for identification* and, perhaps more important, for leading with and making sense of 'pain' and 'suffering'. On this ground, our work puts forward for consideration some ideas on (1) 'the self' as a relational enterprise, (2) the socio-technical regulation of 'private experience', (3) the supposed boundaries between subjective and objective spheres and (4) the genealogy of the experience of 'pain' and 'suffering' as it is 'experienced' in our Western cultures. Above all, we will try to consider the huge range of mediators (human and non-human) that are deployed to stabilise a particular notion of the self. In this vein, and departing from the premise that language cannot be considered the one and only relational regulator, we will try to take into account the consequences on the concept of mediation that might arise from our previous study.

Key Words

Anorexia, socio-technical mediation, semiotics, genealogy of subjectivity

Introduction

This paper is an experiment to meditate on *mediation*. Please let us start with a brief story we will use as an empirical *anchor* throughout the whole essay:

My name is Violeta and I'm 19. I'm 1,52m tall and I weight 53Kg. Since I'm 12, anorexia has been a nightmare of which I can't wake up. Everything started when I was at school. One day someone said to me 'hey, how come you look like that?'. I felt shattered; the hidden meaning was "you're getting fat". I started to avoid food and to try to vomit, but as I couldn't, I bought laxatives, which only provoked stomach-aches. I also started to do some exercise. After a long time trying I managed to vomit and started to do it on a daily basis. So much that it became a routine. I eventually got to the edge of 30kg. People told me that I seemed to be sick, but I thought that they told me so because they envied me. I started to go to a psychologist and it was there where they detected my anorexia. I was interned several times in mental asylums, where I was given tranquillisers, anti-depressives, serum... But I still didn't eat. I recovered little by little, but whenever I exited the clinic and went back to normal life I started to loose weight. This illness has made me change a lot, because it has turned me into a liar and a bastard. I'd like someone helped me and if you are interested e-mail me.

This story is the only result of a very simple study recalled from an Internet community of 'people suffering from anorexia' done in our research group (Maestro, 2003). In fact this story has been literally made out of other stories pieces. Our results showed that stories were virtually interchangeable, their structure and content being almost identical: each of the fragments, with different numbers in TABLE 1 corresponds to different functions of a narrative structure ceaselessly repeated in every account.

(1) Presentation	My name is Violeta and I'm 19.
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(2) Current height and weight	I'm 1,52m tall and I weight 53Kg.
(3) Identification	Since I'm 12, anorexia has been a nightmare of which I can't wake up.
(4) Initial Scenery	Everything started when I was at school.
(5) Trigger-event	One day someone said to me 'hey, how come you look like that?'. I felt shattered, the hidden meaning was "you're getting fat".
(6) Reactions	I started to avoid food and to try to vomit, but as I couldn't, I bought laxatives, which only provoked stomach-aches. I also started to do some exercise. After a long time trying I managed to vomit and started to do it on a daily basis. So much that it became a routine.
(7) Aftermath: threshold weight	I eventually got to the edge of 30kg.
(8) Social perception	People told me that I seemed to be sick, but I thought that they told me so because they envied me.
(9) Professional diagnostic	I started to go to a psychologist and it was there where they detected my anorexia.

(10) Relapses	I was interned several times in mental asylums, where I was given tranquillisers, anti-depressives, serum... But I still didn't eat. I recovered little by little, but whenever I exited the clinic and went back to normal life I started to loose weight.
(11) Self-perception: moral judgement	This illness has made me change a lot, because it has turned me into a liar and a bastard.
(12) Farewell, advices, seek for help	I'd like someone helped me and if you are interested e-mail me.

TABLE 1. *Narrative structure of the accounts with its attributed function.*

The most surprising fact, even harmful to our Western sense of dignity and self-regulation, to be derived from our results is that 'suffering', something we experience to be in the most private angle of our intimacy can be a collective affair. Even our way of experimenting suffering of such a kind can be thought as a mediated activity.

We can say 'not even what I thought to be so intimately o privately mine is mine at all'. Even if this seems absurd in the eyes of a bio-psycho-social model of psychopathology, anorexics learn to be, learn to perceive themselves as or become *anorexics* participating and sharing unstable devices that allow them to form a group, to create and constantly enact and perform a particular *identity*. As an example of this strange behaviour to our eyes, we can cite this: in some of the web pages we found messages of girls who asked what they had to do to be anorexics. Implicit in this is that they were probably asking, what they had to say, too (even to 'themselves!').

Our purpose in this brief paper is to meditate, using these stories as a pretext, on our heterogeneous features, our hybrid existence: the question is, to what extent, and exaggerating the metaphor, are we beings made out of other not-so-human beings pieces, *heteropoietic* entities? To what extent are we Frankenstein monsters, designed to fit in the delicate and variable theories of action by which our lives are given meaning? To what extent are we mediated or re-mediated? To what extent are we mediators of other beings?.

Given the fact that artefact mediation has been considered by some the touchstone of the process of evolution of the Great Apes; considering that language, in particular, as an artefact has been thought to be by many the threshold of humanity we would like to meditate on what makes us human and the diverse functions of language in the stabilization of subjectivity and identity in so-called Modern World.

Mediation in the bull's eye

There have been thousands of versions of the relationship between 'language' (or *signs* in general), 'mind/society' and 'the world' under the polymorphic name of *semiotics*. From all this accounts we would like to focus on some of the most important mediational views in the surroundings of Psychology. We are going to talk about mediation but it is possible that the very concept of mediation itself needs to be changed, for the *common (mediational) sense* describes very badly what is taking place in our example.

In the Vygotskian socio-historical theory (Kozulin, 1990; Vygotsky, 1995) language is seen as a 'tool' that mediates activity, internalised after having been established 'inter-psychologically'. Soviet and American revisionisms of his conceptions have maintained a very similar ontology, portraying man as agent and the object as patient, and tools as extensions of human functions, related to culture (see FIGURE 1).

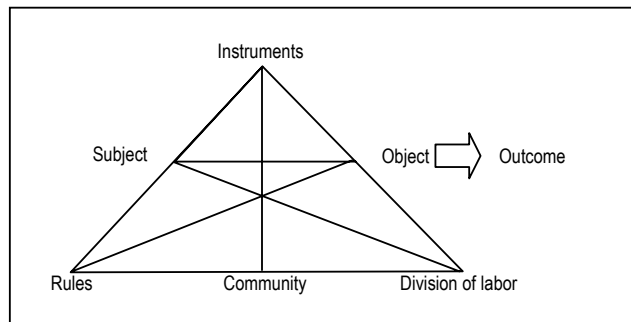


FIGURE 1. *The structure of a human activity system* (Engeström, 1987: 78)

Nevertheless, in our opinion and as we will try to explain, the very problem of these approaches is to situate Nature, Objects, Societies (and their rules, division of labour and so on), Subjects or Instruments (such as Discourse) as the touchstones of any kind of explanation. Even the use of all of them as in Engeström's model is perverse, given the fact that not only these concepts have multiple 'meanings' for many different groups (it should be better said that they enact them differently) but, overall, we are taking their painstaking and unstable genesis for granted! These should be the things to be explained, not the explanatory resources.

Our modest suggestion is that, first of all, we should reconsider the relations between all those terms and how these stances have been segregated from a huge work of entanglement through a non-reductionist empirical type of study of all the practices, heterogeneous associations and dissociations of the materials that are forming and reforming, in a recursive dynamics, the heteromorphic and changing 'groups' we live by (Latour, 1993; 2001). Secondly we will try to bypass (note that we are not saying 'overcome') the micro/macro, intra/inter dualisms in social sciences and, through the understanding of its genesis following the different kinds of actors, spaces and times, try to offer a new 'peace proposal'.

Technique and Subjectivity²

But now we would like to give an example that might illustrate a genealogical attitude put to work to the study of one of those supposedly stable dualisms. Later on we will come back to the general considerations. In particular we are going to focus on the very nature of the particular

mediation that gives meaning to the story we read before and its relationship with the development of subjectivity.

Going back to our example, the *main literary genre* that mediates our stories of anorexia is a hybrid narrative device placed in between the classic clinical history's contents and the genre of self-revelation. Clinical history's mediation is clear in both form and content. Anorexics are precise measurers of their height and weight. They are proficient users of diagnostic categories; they expose their symptoms with a kind of emotional distance proper of a physician and so on and so forth. The genealogy of the other genre or *self-revelation technique* and of some of the cultural practices to which it was linked was analysed by Foucault (1988).

In short, the development of subjectivity in the wake of Christianity depended on the re-elaboration of the Greek technique of *askesis* or remembering, developed by the Stoics. The master-disciple relationship was, to the eyes of Stoics such as Marcus Aurelius, deeply asymmetric. The ancient Socratic pedagogy based in dialogue is substituted by a pedagogy of active listening, repetition and remembering. In fact, the beloved retirement of the Stoics was a strategy to remember properly, with the aid of peace, silence and solitude, the master's words. The disciple listened and the master spoke. No questions, only rules to learn. 'I retire so that nothing can disturb my *askesis* [remembering]'. We will exemplify it with bits of Marcus Aurelius letters:

'Hail, my sweetest of masters:

We are well. I slept somewhat late owing to my slight cold, which seems now to have subsided. So from five A.M. till nine, I spent the time partly in reading some of Cato's *Agriculture*, partly in writing not quite such wretched stuff, by heavens, as yesterday ... After easing my throat I went off to my father and attended him at a sacrifice. Then we went to the luncheon. What do you think I ate? A wee bit of bread, though I saw others devouring beans, onions, and herrings full of roe. We then worked hard at grape-

gathering, and had a good sweat, and were merry ... After six o'clock we came home. ... Then I had a long chat with my mother ... My talk was this: "What do you think my Fronto is now doing?" Then she: "And what do you think my Gratia is doing?" ... Whilst we were chattering in this way and disputing which of us loved the one or other of you two the better, the gong sounded, an intimation of my father had gone to his bath. So we had supper after we had bathed in the oil-press room ... After coming back, before I turn over and snore, I get my task done and give my dearest of masters an account of the day's doings, and if I could miss him more, I would not grudge wasting away a little more. Farewell, my Fronto, wherever you are, most honey-sweet, my love, my delight. How is it between you and me? I love you and you are away' (In Foucault, 1988: 28-29).

As can be seen Fronto was not only his master, but also his lover.

In order to treat with more precision what Professor J.D. Ramírez (this volume) pointed out in the symposium, private reading is not *privative* of a civilized bourgeois history of manners. History of technique needs to be analysed much more carefully. One of the problems is to suppose that all of these practices are necessarily progressive.

For instance, the conditions of possibility for the development of epistolary communication in the Roman *Imperium* had to do with the construction of Roman communication networks. Written messages had as primary function the transmission of military and economic orders, related to the building of secured boundaries. A network construed for one purpose could serve as grounding for other uses and this network fell to pieces with the *Imperium*. Some of the pieces were re-used, of course.

Anyway, Foucault (1988) used to say that in the primitive Christianity, a religion not only confessional but also of self-salvation, two basic forms of self-revelation, of self-presentation, of self-discovery were invented: 1) *exomologesis*; and 2) *exagoreusis*, whose common characteristic was that they assumed the renunciation of one's autonomy.

First of all, *exomologesis* was the public acknowledgement of the truth of one's faith or of one's condition of Christian. It implied the *dramatic, not verbal, expression* of the penitent's condition as sinner, a practice situated in between the extreme expression of mortification and martyrdom. The penitent followed strict rules of dressing and sexual behaviour for four or five years imposed by the bishop (to whom the person had to apply for the condition of such, presenting a convincing case). This technique evolved with that name until the Middle Ages.

Secondly, *exagoreusis* was the continuous, detailed and systematic revelation of one's thoughts to an external and non-contestable authority (such as the abbot, the bishop...). Of the two, *exagoreusis* has been the one that has survived and evolved, embodied in other practices. *Exagoreusis* was verbal whereas *exomologesis* was of another kind and was much more related to the Stoic technologies previously commented: ranging from soliciting master's counsel in love and friendship affairs to the use of letters, diaries and writings of an autobiographic kind. The "innovative" feature of *exagoreusis* was the imperative to "tell the truth" as the one and only way to be at peace with oneself.

In any case, we would like to sketch a historical argument (Blanco, 2002): these forms of self-revelation have progressed and some of them have suffered a great degree of sophistication at the same time and as a consequence of the extension of literature (and the disciplined act of reading) and the multiple institutionalisations of counselling in mesmerism, spiritual counselling, phrenology, psychotherapy, aid groups, sects, and so on.

In brief, what these historical considerations may depict is what has been called *genealogy of subjectivity* (Rose, 1996): in them it can be read the chronicle of the process of the cultural genesis of the Western individual, understood as the *locus* of what we now know as psychological conflict, always a normative conflict of power or of 'autonomy' (Blanco, 2002). This is why we can say that the historical genesis of the idea of a *psychological subject* is symmetric to, and is originated at the same time as, the genesis of the idea of a *political subject*.

Anyway, the form of self-revelation that takes place in that Internet community of shared suffering can be considered as a hybrid genre of: 1) the public “honesty” required in *exagoreusis*; and 2) the acknowledgement of the sin, compulsory in *examologesis*. This genre can only be understood at the heart of a ‘saturated of subjectivity’ conception of the self and is very similar to the one used in Alcoholics Anonymous groups.

Reconsidering the concept of mediation³

This example exposes the very difficulty of a mediated activity theory. We would like to propose another turn of the screw: to take *Actor-Network Theory* (ANT) as grounding for a new mediational philosophy (Latour, 2001; Law, 1994). We will sketch some of the relevant ANT features for this aim.

First, these theorists argue that every so-called ‘social’ or ‘natural’ patterns are formed by the work of *association and substitution of humans and non-humans*. In saying this they point to the fact that we must follow the practices, the associations and dissociations of all the materials needed in the building of a *collective*: the name they give to our groups, in which humans and non-humans working together or *hybrids*, as they call them, are intertwined, forming networks that could be metaphorically described as a **rhizome** (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004). The rhizome metaphor opposes to classical taxonomies based on the root or tree metaphor.

As the *Actor-Network* theorists say (Latour, 2001), a way of life, an stabilized type of relationship can only exist thanks to a relational system of *translations*: all the redefinitions and changes of materials that are needed to *act* in a particular way (Callon, 1986); and *mediators* that are implied in this work of translation. Mediators are agents or more strictly ‘actants’ (for an agent, for them, does not necessarily have to be human), which are able to translate.

In employing these concepts their aim is to substitute Subject/Object reductionism by what they call a *material relationism* (Latour, 1993; Law, 1994). The networks that derive from such collective (human and non-human) work are growing or shrinking associations of

heterogeneous materials that act recursively. Why recursively? Because the act of definition can have performative effects, defining and redefining constantly the elements that are held together. See FIGURE 2 for a visual depiction: the main problem of this image is that temporality has been neglected for the sake of the exposition of our argument.

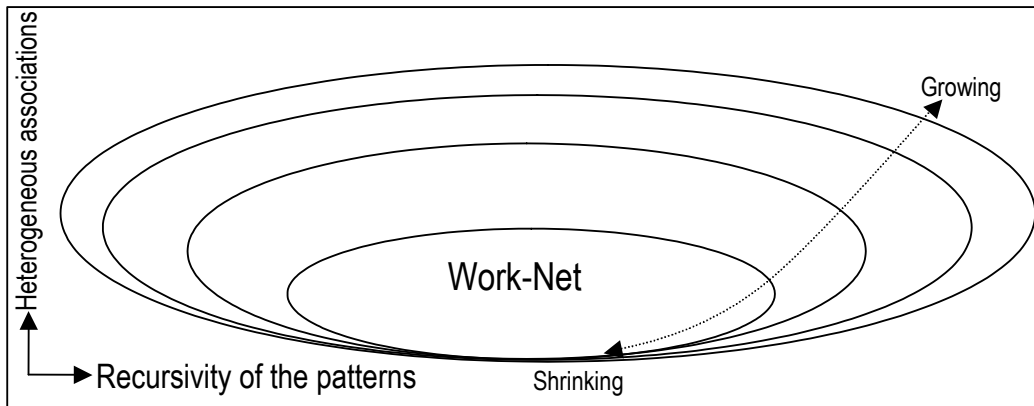


FIGURE 2. *Formation and recursivity of Work-Nets.*

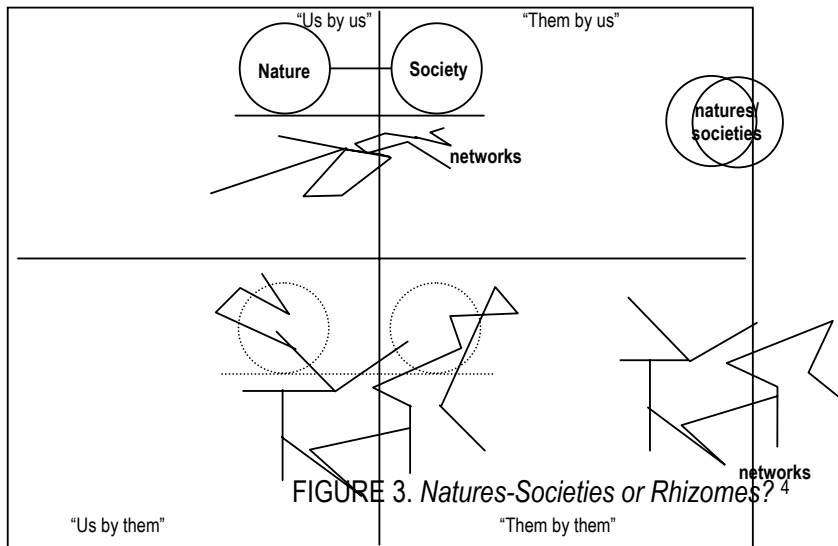
Going back to our example: if we observed the case of an ‘Internet-community-of-people-suffering-from-anorexia’ to use this new ontology as a basis would mean to study the connections between *actants* (discourses of and about anorexia as the one showed, applied technologies of the self, doctors and psychologists, computers, wires, definitions of ‘pain’ and ‘suffering’, ‘vomit’ and ‘fashion’, the World Wide Web...) that are needed to extend multiple networks and to eventually stabilise a new actor-network called “anorexia” and how they are related.

The arranged discourse showed above is a long-running artefact, whose nature is only apparently “textual” and that allows the formation and disciplining of some people and the categories they use to ‘lead with pain and suffering’ and to share it. In sum, the previous genealogy of the technologies of the self could be inserted in a broader description that focuses on two mediated process, crucial to the understanding of the most widely spread theory of action in our Western thought (Latour, 1993):

1. The development of the Subject-Object distinction in the West or **work of purification**, by which the arrangement and hybridization has been rendered unseen and unheard.

2. The formation of networks of hybrids or **work of translation**, by which collectives are formed.

The only way to establish a cultural comparison would be to look at the processes of *purification* (understood as a mediational process) and *translation*: so-called natures and societies have only been 'segregated' in our civilization (our *collective*) through these mediational processes. Nevertheless, the work of translation has been also constant in other *collectives*, forming 'rhizomes' as well (see FIGURE 3).



This change of ontology or philosophy has recursive implications for our work as psychologists observing the discourse of anorexics sharing their suffering. In brief, there is no 'suffering' without this narrative mediation, among many other elements.

Conclusions

The first step is to reconsider the function of the mediators, or relational regulators, we live by, of which language is not but one among many. Secondly, we should start to take into consideration that language is a relational mediator. In this line of thought neither Piaget nor Vygotsky were strictly right in their depictions (see Cole and Wertsch, 1996), for if our argument makes sense:

Language also [...] becomes a mediating artefact like the ruler, the chart [...] even when we talk to ourselves, memorize a routine, or invent shortcuts and rules of thumb to overcome a difficulty of calculating (Latour, 1996b: 58).

It is tempting to think that the words and the world are coordinated by language in order to produce the meanings. It is more accurate to say that the meanings, the world, and the words are put into coordination with one another via the mediating structure of language. (Hutchins, 1995: 299-300).

In Actor-Network Theory wording language or cognition cannot be the property of an individual, nor of a society, but of a *collective* of humans and non-humans working together. In this vein, to close we would like to quote a brief piece of Latour's article *On technical mediation* (1998b):

Objectivity and subjectivity are not opposite; they grow together in an irrevocable way. The challenge for our philosophy, social theory and morality is to invent political institutions that might absorb so much history, this enormous spiral movement, this destiny, this fate... At least I hope I have persuaded you that if our challenge were to be attended it wouldn't be considering artefacts as things. They deserve something better. They deserve to be located in our intellectual culture as social actors in their own right. Do they mediate our actions? No, they are us (Latour, 1998b: 299-300; our translation).

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² See Kendall and Michael (2001) for a discussion on the bad translation of Foucault's *techniques* as *technologies* and how could they be related to Latour's thoughts.

³ See our introduction to a special number on Science and Technology Studies and Culture: Sánchez-Criado and Blanco (2005).

⁴ Image adapted from Latour (1993: 152).