



# Horsing Around: Commentary on Sehrbrock's "Social Thirdness: Intersubjective Conceptions of the Experience of Gender Prejudice"

William J. Coburn

To cite this article: William J. Coburn (2020) Horsing Around: Commentary on Sehrbrock's "Social Thirdness: Intersubjective Conceptions of the Experience of Gender Prejudice", *Psychoanalysis, Self and Context*, 15:3, 296-301

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/24720038.2020.1767622>



Published online: 06 Aug 2020.



Submit your article to this journal 



View related articles 



View Crossmark data 



## Horsing Around: Commentary on Sehrbrock's "Social Thirdness: Intersubjective Conceptions of the Experience of Gender Prejudice"

William J. Coburn, Ph.D., Psy.D.

Institute of Contemporary Psychoanalysis

### ABSTRACT

This commentary on Sehrbrock's "Social Thirdness: Intersubjective Conceptions of the Experience of Gender Prejudice" highlights the role of social thirdness and its breakdown across a variety of domains, clinically and cross-culturally. It expands upon Sehrbrock's concept of White Fragility, introducing the concept of mythological fragility—one that pertains to the need to maintain a person's and/or a culture's collective psychological organization and their essential ties to important others. The role of "horsing around"—the exercise of an expansive sense of play, freedom, creativity, passion, and authenticity—is essential not only in early life, but in the clinical setting, allowed, or sometimes disallowed, in the context of clinical psychoanalysis. This commentary argues, in agreement with Sehrbrock, that clinical work should provide a space in which both patient and analyst can indeed "horse around" and then see what becomes of it. This includes the adoption of an attitude of constructive uncertainty and of striving to be open to surprise, however welcome or unwelcome that surprise may be.

### KEYWORDS

Intersubjectivity;  
authenticity; cultural  
prejudice; passion; creativity

"As the power over the incubus is obtained by addressing it with its real name, so the world of It ... is bound to yield to the man who knows it for what it really is—severance and alienation ..."—Martin Buber (p. 64)

"How can the man in whose being lurks a ghost, the I emptied of reality, muster the strength to address the incubus by name?"—Martin Buber (p. 64)

(from *I and Thou*, 1958, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith)

The concept of the third (Aron, 2006; Benjamin, 2004; Britton, 1989) and its many permutations (Cambray, 2002; Hanly, 2004; Miller & Twomey, 2000; Ogden, 1994, 2004; Sweetnam, 2000; Zeddies, 2001) remains a vital facet of theorizing in contemporary psychoanalysis. Sehrbrock's present work exemplifies another significant expansion of the concept, particularly as it applies to social prejudice. Specifically, his illustration of the social third, including its breakdown, reflects an additional and clearly vital dimension of the concept of thirdness in psychoanalytic work. Drawing from a variety of relational analysts, such as Ogden (2004) and Benjamin (2004), he finds especially useful the work of Harris (2005) and her astute grasp of the role of not just the individual and the unique complex relational fields that emerge out of the interface of two or more persons, but importantly of considering the larger socio-cultural-historical milieu in which we are, and always have been, relentlessly embedded. We individuals naturally are emergent products and properties of our milieus, or I would say, our complex systems—"softly assembled," as Harris says. It is not simply that we, as individuals, have been influenced by the idiosyncrasies of our respective cultures, as if we stand somehow separate and only impacted by them. We are our cultures, and our cultures are we. And thus, it behooves us to know our cultures, our life contexts, to grasp as best we can what Sehrbrock refers to as the "ghosts of collective and systemic agents" (2020. 291), however sickeningly

smothering they may be at times. Paraphrasing Martin Buber (1958), getting rid of a ghost requires calling it by its real name.

We are indebted to Sehrbrock for underscoring, among other important themes, the psychoanalytic necessity of striving to understand not simply and reductionistically the individual before us, but to comprehend and articulate the larger complex systems and contexts from which we have emerged, in which we find ourselves, and which we continue to inform and transform, including those organized around phobic hatred and prejudice toward difference. Coming to know the contextual water in which we swim and have swum—what Sucharov (2015) refers to as “complexification”—is an integral facet of a contemporary psychoanalysis. Phillips (1995) avers that “sameness makes us mute, dull, or repetitive” (p. 187). Indeed, Sehrbrock tells us that this striving is not solely methodological but comprises a “clinical and ethical obligation of exercising social conscience” (p. 291). Not especially psychoanalytic, some might say, to think of hoisting social and cultural attitudes upon our patients, readily agreeing with certain of our patients’ own attitudes or implicitly or explicitly denouncing the “ghosts of conservative religious doctrinal pressures” (p. 290). Though we have long dismissed the notion of analytic neutrality and opaqueness, some still remain rather squeamish at the thought that we, while presumably engaged in collaboratively realizing the true nature of the patient and her emotional world, perhaps relatively unbiased and non-judgmental, are powerfully conveying our subjective attitudes about innumerable phenomena to the patient on an ongoing basis (Coburn, 2014; Friedman, 1995; Hoffman, 2009). But this is what we do. And some attitudes are better than others.

In the spirit of free association, I share here a brief memory of my own that emerged as I read Sehrbrock’s paper. Growing up in an often-chaotic household with musicians and artists, I was exposed to a wide array of personalities, identities, and cultures. Many of the folks who frequented my house hailed from a colorful and diverse Hollywood environment, whose gender and sexuality I experienced as rather fluid, sometimes indeterminate. As a young adolescent, I had an unplanned education in diversity, thanks to the many folks who, over time, morphed into a kind of extended family for me. While I’ve always personally identified as a straight male (I never exactly cared for that term—straight, the straight and narrow, not nuanced, not variegated, not as interesting perhaps?), the racial, cultural, musical, artistic, and sexual diversity that surrounded me was the fabric of my early life. I feel fortunate to have grown up in it.

Germane to Sehrbrock’s thesis, there were, of course, more ominous sides to my formative years. Whereas I attended what some might consider a rather liberal high school—Hollywood High—within its walls resided large pockets of prejudice, inequality, and angry discrimination. My close connections emerged predominantly out of my family’s ties to others, not so much from my academic world. But I did have a few friends in high school. And it was not uncommon to convene at someone’s house on a Friday or Saturday night to conduct the time-tested rituals of smoking and drinking.

With shame, I recall that on one occasion, one of my friends blurted out to someone else in the room, “Oh, you fag, don’t be such a faggot!” And then another voice piped in: “Yeah, you’re such a fag.” Had I had the benefit of a true sense of my self, of self-ownership, and of agency, I would have immediately protested, perhaps cursing my friend—perhaps, at that age, I would have hit him. And parenthetically, if I had, how would I have been different from him, the guy who was being obnoxiously barbaric and prejudicial? Should I blame someone for having been thrown into and influenced by life situations largely not of their making? And would I have not fallen into the very split complementarity of which he was already in the grip? Perhaps so. Instead, now, on reflection, I think I probably felt something collapsing within me, a kind of disavowal and dissociation. I blanked out, thinking, what? Are gay folks bad? Should I be saying “fag, fag” to insure my place in the group? What of my family life, my close ties to my family circle of amazing friends? I was rendered simultaneously split and numb, certainly not for the first time in my life, but most certainly on this occasion, sitting in a claustrophobic haze.

It is not coincidental that this personal memory of mine emerged while reading Sehrbrock’s paper—something I had not really reflected upon before: As with his patient Tom, though for me in

a different context, “the violence of homophobic prejudice” indeed obliterated my “words, ideas, and parts of [my]self” (p. 292). I believe this anecdote illustrates a firsthand instance of not only an obvious and painful collapse of social thirdness, certainly on the part of my friends turned antagonists, but, considering my role and contribution, a kind of collapse in which no real perspective on my part could be held in mind—neither the split complementarity nor the mutual recognition of which Benjamin (2004) has written—but a no perspective that sadly did nothing to counter the cruel prejudice in the company of which I had found myself. In contrast to the perspective of the antagonists—that of, to paraphrase Harari (2014), the other being too familiar to ignore, but too different to tolerate—my own was one of suddenly becoming unfamiliar to myself. I think this might reflect a specific instance of a collapse of social thirdness, not precisely one in which one is being explicitly othered by another, but one that inadvertently aids and abets the very prejudice and collapse of social thirdness of which Sehrbrock writes. Roger Frie (2019, p. 130) asks us: “To what extent does complacency in the face of ... current injustices make us complicit?” And how often might this phenomenon arise in the clinical setting? The problem of prejudice is enormous and far-reaching. Both Sehrbrock and Harris (2005) speak to this: He tells us, “ ... such collapses [in social thirdness] are rampant due to prominent taboo, dogma, and fear-based ideology” (p. 292), and following Harari (2014), I would add myth. How might we understand the breakdown of intersubjective social thirdness? What perpetuates the breakdown? What exactly is at stake here?

Considering some answers, Sehrbrock rightly speculates that the “soil” of the “seeds of collapses of social thirdness” (p. 292) resides in historical and extant patriarchal structures and dynamics and that their maintenance is fueled by a “split-off narcissistic vulnerability” (p. 292). Similar to a “White fragility in the context of confrontation of White privilege,” he wonders, perhaps then a “masculine fragility”? I agree with Sehrbrock on this. The strong, powerful, independent, and aggressive exterior of the John Wayne individualist indeed often belies the undergarments of fear, defensiveness, disavowal, and vulnerability. However, perhaps there is more to consider here. Again, what is at stake for those human cultures and systems that tenaciously cling to the othering that inevitably collapses social thirdness? I wonder whether masculine fragility might be more of an emergent property and specific instance of a more elaborate undercurrent of what could be considered a mythological fragility—one that, drawing from intersubjective systems theory, pertains to the need to maintain a person’s and/or a culture’s collective psychological organization and their essential ties to important others. Throughout the world, adherence to monotheistic as well as polytheistic mythologies that presumed the existence of powers greater than ourselves was, and still seems to be, a necessary component of maintaining a sense of psychological order—we could say, epistemological certainty and cohesion—and of maintaining vital ties to family, to community members, and to the powers that promise safety. It often also proved to be an effective antidote or counteractive agent to our sense of mutability and finitude—many of our myths promised everlasting life. Out of these constructed mythologies evolved notions of true nature, naturalness, and cosmic laws, with people and cultures deciding what was “natural” and acceptable, and what was not. Montaigne was onto the absurdity of this practice when he wrote in the 16th Century: “We call contrary to nature what happens contrary to custom; nothing is anything but according to nature, whatever it may be” (2016, p. 575).

Encountering difference in an other—one who perhaps adhered to a different mythology, including different ideas about gender, sex, appearance, and practices—might conceivably threaten one’s sense of psychological organization (for example, how I am familiar to myself, how the world is familiar to me, and how others and the world experience me as familiar to them and to it). And since family and community members perpetually strive to remained tied to one another—that is, in most instances—let us say for reasons of survival, nurturing, love, and status, there emerges a personal and cultural imperative to remain familiar enough not to be ejected from the community, adherent enough to the prevailing mythology not to be cast out. This might be what Sehrbrock refers to when he tells us that the “DNA of experience is altered and biased by the systems within which it

operates.” And I would add, most likely the altered DNA of experience then feeds back upon the system in a self-perpetuating cycle. In complexity theory, this is referred to as recursion.

It seems we humans have always had, and continue to have, a strong penchant not solely for maintaining our collective familial and community myths, but also for forcing our myths through coercion if not through violence into the minds of others. The more individuals we can convert to our own mythological tenets, it seems, the more relaxed and comforted we can feel that we are indeed grasping a greater truth, instead of simply holding a unique opinion or perspective. Historically how many lives have been lost through violence because of religion’s incessant missionary striving? It seems we can’t just have our own view of the world—we have to force others to have it, too.

Perhaps Sehrbrock’s patient Tom was in the grip of this imperative to maintain a collective myth, such that he was rendered feeling “unreal in the aftermath” of his cousin’s homophobic sermon, instead of immediately protesting, being antagonistic, and privileging his own personal agency over that of the group mythology. Following Benjamin, we might say that this doer-done to imperative is associated with a “powerful fantasy” (p. 6) that, as Benjamin says, “only one can live.” She tells us: “Resisting ... this fantasy requires some version of the Third, a vision of a lawful world in which self and other, Them and Us, can be recognized” (p. 7). Perhaps I was in the grip of this imperative when I was rendered numb and dissociated in the aftermath of my encountering homophobic hatred. Perhaps we have some sense of what is at stake in our striving toward instating or reinstating a social thirdness—the threat that any of us might face in pursuing recognition of self and other, of sameness and difference. But how might this be accomplished in the clinical setting. Indeed, how might we “muster the strength to address the incubus by name?” I believe Sehrbrock sheds enormous light on this question.

Sehrbrock shares with us his experience with Francois, a queer-identified millennial, who is recounting contexts of his exploring and playing with gender—horsing around—in what feels to me to be a delightfully expansive way, after which and at some point, Francois’ father slammed the lid shut on what could have been, in Kohut’s words, a mirroring selfobject experience, or for Benjamin, what could have been an offering of a lawful world. Mirroring, in the Kohutian sense, is not just about acknowledging talents and skills, but is also about responding positively to a variety of dimensions of self expansiveness. Sehrbrock tells us that he is mesmerized, nearly giddy. To draw from self psychology, perhaps Sehrbrock is not simply mirroring something essential to Francois’ sense of self, but also perhaps enjoying a kind of twinship experience with Francois, grasping the expansiveness and freedom that indeed can accompany playing with gender.

What does it mean exactly to “horse around”? The Cambridge dictionary tells us that horsing around is “behaving in a silly or noisy way,” and its synonyms usually include rather pejorative connotations: playing the goat, asking for trouble, clowning around, goofing off, mucking about, being a spectacle, and so forth. If we remove the pejorative implications of this word, I would argue that sense, reason, authenticity, creativity, and passion emerge precisely from horsing around. Isn’t that what we aim to do, clinically? Provide a space in which both patient and analyst can indeed horse around and then see what becomes of it? I vote for more horsing around, as in its absence, in its being stifled, much heart and authentic self are lost. And in that particular clinical moment that Sehrbrock shares with us, Francois and Sehrbrock, in a kind of intersubjective conjunction, experience an erosion of social thirdness. It is much to Sehrbrock’s credit, first, that he was exceptionally attuned to witness Francois’ shift from exuberance to something less so, to, as Francois says, “something not right.” Quickly and astutely, Sehrbrock instinctively rebuilds their sense of social thirdness in daring to own his own internalized misogyny. Momentarily the incubus of Francois’ father and culture had been resurrected in the Sehrbrock/Francois system, but then was deftly identified and symbolized, restoring the very social thirdness of which he writes. It seems that such a restoration does not only entail a mutual recognition of difference interpersonally, but also occasions and I suppose sometimes necessitates the holding of disparate and conflicting facets of one’s own subjective world—for instance, the remnants of homophobic and misogynistic



proclivities, on the one hand, and dimensions of self and world experience centered on the toleration if not enjoyment of diversity and the uniqueness and complexity of the individual, on the other hand. Can we, each of us, have the courage to “feel the shadows” in which our personal and cultural ghosts—our Achilles’ heels, as Sehrbrock puts it—continue to haunt us, while simultaneously be open to the freedom and self ownership of “horsing around”? I think it is possible, and Sehrbrock certainly provides us with an admirable example of such a possibility.

Sehrbrock highlights Harris’ call to clinicians to “let themselves be woken and opened to their blind spots ... to free ourselves enough to feel unsettled, unbridled, bewildered” (p. 294). And following Corbett (2014), I would add, to strive toward working in a state of unknowing and constructive uncertainty. That is to say, let us not remain too complacent in the presumed knowledge of where our personal prejudices and ghosts do lie, but instead perhaps hold them lightly, in the fallibilistic sense of which Orange (2003) writes, and keep, as Sehrbrock tells us, a “beam of intense darkness” (p. 294) trained upon our unthought known and our unknowing as best we can. This translates into an attitude of striving to be open to surprise, however welcome or unwelcome that surprise may be. And of course, to be open to horsing around whenever possible.

## Notes on contributor

**William J. Coburn**, Ph.D., Psy.D., is Founding Editor Emeritus of Psychoanalysis, Self and Context (formerly the IJPSP), Associate Editor of Psychoanalytic Dialogues, and an Editorial Board Member of Psychoanalytic Inquiry. He is Faculty Member and Training and Supervising Analyst at the Institute of Contemporary Psychoanalysis in Los Angeles.

## References

- Aron, L. (2006). Analytic Impasse and the Third: Clinical implications of intersubjectivity theory. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 87(2), 349–368. doi:10.1516/15EL-284Y-7Y26-DHRK
- Benjamin, J. (2004). Beyond doer and done to: An intersubjective view of thirdness. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 73(1), 5–46. doi:10.1002/j.2167-4086.2004.tb00151.x
- Britton, R. (1989). The missing link: Parental sexuality in the Oedipus complex. In J. Steiner (Ed.), *The Oedipus complex today: Clinical implications* (pp. 83–102). London, UK: Karnac.
- Buber, M. (1958). *I and thou* (RG Smith, Trans.) (p. 11). New York, NY: Scribner.
- Cambray, J. (2002). Who’s Really There? Dreams and the Analytic Third. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 19(4), 772–776. doi:10.1037/0736-9735.19.4.772
- Coburn, W. J. (2014). *Psychoanalytic complexity: Clinical attitudes for therapeutic change*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Corbett, K. (2014). The Analyst’s Private Space: Spontaneity, Ritual, Psychotherapeutic Action, and Self-Care. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 24(6), 637–647. doi:10.1080/10481885.2014.970964
- Frie, R. (2019). History’s ethical demand: Memory, denial, and responsibility in the wake of the holocaust. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 29(2), 122–142.
- Friedman, J. A. (1995). Ferenczi’s Clinical Diary: On Loving And Hating. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 76, 957–975.
- Hanly, C. M. (2004). The Third: A Brief Historical Analysis of an Idea. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 73(1), 267–290. doi:10.1002/j.2167-4086.2004.tb00159.x
- Harari, Y. N. (2014). *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Harris, A. (2005). *Gender as soft assembly*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.
- Hoffman, I. Z. (2009). Therapeutic Passion in the Countertransference. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 19(5), 617–637. doi:10.1080/10481880903340141
- Miller, L., & Twomey, J. E. (2000). Incoherence Incognito: The Collapse Of The Third In A Fee-For-Service Structure. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 36(3), 427–456. doi:10.1080/00107530.2000.10747056
- Montaigne, M. (2016). *The Oxford handbook of montaigne*. Ed. Phillipe Desan. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ogden, T. H. (1994). The Analytic Third: Working with Intersubjective Clinical Facts. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 75, 3–19.
- Ogden, T. H. (2004). The Analytic Third: Implications for Psychoanalytic Theory and Technique. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 73(1), 167–195. doi:10.1002/j.2167-4086.2004.tb00156.x
- Orange, D. M. (2003). Antidotes and alternatives: Perspectival realism and the new reductionisms. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 20(3), 472–486. doi:10.1037/0736-9735.20.3.472

- Phillips, A. (1995). Keeping It Moving: Commentary on Judith Butler's "Melancholy Gender—Refused Identification". *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 5(2), 181–188. doi:[10.1080/10481889509539060](https://doi.org/10.1080/10481889509539060)
- Sehrbrock, J. (2020). Social Thirdness: Intersubjective Conceptions of the Experience of Gender Prejudice. *Psychoanalysis, Self and Context*, 15(3), 289–295. doi:[10.1080/24720038.2020.1766045](https://doi.org/10.1080/24720038.2020.1766045)
- Sucharov, M. S. (2015). Historical and Cultural Narratives: Confessions of a Diaspora Jew. *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology*, 10(4), 305–317. doi:[10.1080/15551024.2015.1073993](https://doi.org/10.1080/15551024.2015.1073993)
- Sweetnam, A. (2000). Sexual Sensations and Gender: The Psychological Positions and the Erotic Third. *Fort Da*, 6(1), 87–100.
- Zeddies, T. J. (2001). On the Wall or in the Ointment? The Psychoanalytic Community as a Third Presence in the Consulting Room. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 37(1), 133–147. doi:[10.1080/00107530.2001.10747071](https://doi.org/10.1080/00107530.2001.10747071)