

Descandalizing Laing: R.D. Laing as a Social Theorist

Samantha Bark

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
of Nottingham Trent University for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

September 2009

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors Dr Conrad Lodziak and Dr Matt Connell for their help and support with this project. I am very grateful to Inger Hatloy (Mind Information Officer) for providing some of the information which is used in Chapter Seven of this thesis. I would also like to thank my partner for his support.

Abstract

The scandal surrounding R.D. Laing's work concerns both his life and his theories. Given that there is sufficient biographical material on Laing already in existence, this thesis focuses upon his theoretical contributions. No substantial review and critique of the criticism of Laing is currently in existence. The main objectives of this thesis are to evaluate the critiques of Laing, and to examine these in the light of his contributions to social theory. The critiques of Laing fall into three main categories: conservative critiques by psychiatrists, feminist critiques, and left-wing criticism.

The methodological problems involved in the production of a critique are highlighted within each category of criticism. Some of the critiques of Laing constitute little other than criticism of the critic's own misreading and misinterpretation of his work, which omit the lack of textual evidence to support the critic's claims. The lines of development of key concepts within Laing's work, and his intentions for his projects, may be ignored. Laing's feminist critics view his work as prejudiced against women. This thesis examines the lack of validity within this assertion, and provides an original reading of Laing's work as of benefit to women, through Laing's central concern of making 'madness' intelligible.

The importance of certain of Laing's ignored texts, such as *Reason and Violence*, (1964) is highlighted through their centrality to his theoretical contributions. This thesis aims to debunk some of the myths surrounding Laing's work, such as that it glorifies psychosis. Sedgwick, in particular, has been responsible for the promotion of some of these myths. The

poverty of his critique is replicated by other critics, as is a similar poor approach to the production of criticism. Critiques of elements of Laing's work which lie outside of the standardised criticism are provided, in which the attempt to avoid reproducing the same errors as the other critiques is made. The principles required for a coherent critique of an author's work are elucidated.

1) Introduction

The key objective of this thesis is to examine and analyse the validity of the main theoretical critiques of Laing's work. The criticism of Laing falls into three broad categories: conservative critiques by psychiatrists, feminist critiques, and left-wing critiques. A key part of assessing the validity of the critiques of Laing involves looking at the assumptions that the critic may be operating upon. These assumptions and values held by the critic may or may not limit the extent of their actual engagement with Laing's work. A further important consideration here is the matter of how Laing's work should be read and interpreted. Some of the criticism of Laing is unfortunately the product of a poor reading and interpretation of his work, which weakens the criticism severely. Examples of this will be explored by exposing the critic's misreading, misunderstandings, or misconceptions regarding Laing's texts. I will be using examples from Laing's work itself as a response to his critics, if appropriate. The lines of development of concepts within Laing's work may also be ignored, or misrepresented by the critic. Some critics omit aspects of Laing's work that do not fit into their representation of his texts.

At this point, I feel that it is worth making clear that I am not denying that there are problems with Laing's work. Since I am aware of this, I am including a section on my own criticism of Laing, which will follow my review of the existing ones. However, many of the critiques of Laing fail in their aims, due to the above issues. Why look at the criticism of Laing? I feel that

it is important to assess which criticisms are valid, and which are not. Kotowicz¹ does deal with some of the criticism of Laing, as well as making his own criticisms. However, his review of the critiques could be more comprehensive. He deals implicitly with the psychiatric establishment's problems with Laing's work, rather than giving its exponents a good examination. I think there is a need for a thorough review of the criticism of Laing, in order to determine which of the critiques have some weight, and which do not. My aim is then to productively engage with the critiques, in order to advance Laing's contribution to social theory. This forms the other main objective of this thesis – to examine Laing's work as social theory.

Any attempts to criticise Laing's theory via his biography will be treated with suspicion. It is a well-known fact that Laing was an alcoholic, and that his personal life was fairly chaotic. Laing 'is typically referred to because of personal excesses rather than his scholarship.'² However, Laing's theories cannot be simplistically written off because of his life story. His theory is of a sufficient quality, in my view, that it has to be met on its own terms, and any valid critique must do this. As Burston puts it: 'a theory has to stand or fall on its own merits – not whether the author was drunk or so forth.'³ To critique Laing's theory via his biography is a very low form of criticism. Doing this may even suggest that the critic was intellectually incapable of criticising Laing at the level of his theory. Also, since my focus in this thesis is on Laing's theory, and

¹ Kotowicz, Z, (1997), **R.D. Laing and the Paths of Anti-Psychiatry**, London, Routledge, pp.90-105

² Jones, A, (2001), Absurdity and being-in-itself. The third phase of phenomenology: Jean-Paul Sartre and existential psychoanalysis, **Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing**, No.8, pp.369-370

³ Burston, D, (1996), **The Wing of Madness: The Life and Work of R.D. Laing**, USA, Harvard University Press, p.78

not his biography, I want to engage with the criticism which is most relevant in terms of my project. There is quite enough material existing already on Laing's biography. Indeed, in recent years there have been more biographies appearing of Laing than theoretical texts. Therefore, no biography of Laing is provided here. There may be a sense in which the scandal surrounding Laing has contributed to a climate of poor scholarship with regard to his work. I think that a good way to descandalize Laing's theory is to offer a thorough reading and interpretation of his work, which may be enabled by the following review of his critics.

The next short chapter lists what I perceive as Laing's main contributions. Chapter Three examines the critiques of Laing's work that have been produced by conservative psychiatric critics. Reznek's attempt at criticising Laing constitutes more of a critique of his (poor) interpretation of Laing's texts, as opposed to Laing's actual work. Clare, by and large, reproduces the same methodological errors as Reznek, in terms of criticising his (i.e. Clare's) own assumptions about Laing's texts. However, Clare introduces the problematic approach of labelling Laing as an 'anti-psychiatrist', something which Laing himself denied. Clare also contributes to the misleading line of critique which proposes that Laing romanticised madness. This chapter additionally makes use of interviews with Laing, where he provides responses to this strand of criticism. It is noted in these interviews that attempts to criticise Laing's work by claiming that he was himself psychotic were made by the psychiatric establishment.

Chapter Four investigates Deleuze and Guattari's comments on Laing. They provide both praise and criticism of Laing's work. The first section of this chapter demonstrates how Deleuze and

Guattari develop, and commend, the idea of the schizophrenic voyage. They perceive the voyage as containing insights into the experience of the schizophrenic. This section draws upon Laing's critique of psychoanalysis in order to demonstrate the difficulties involved within the psychoanalytic approach to forms of psychosis. The next section of this chapter evaluates Deleuze and Guattari's direct criticisms of Laing's work. They criticise Laing for not politicizing the voyage sufficiently, for not making an adequate distinction between social and mental alienation, and for an excessive focus upon familialism within his work. My responses to these aspects highlight problems within Deleuze and Guattari's arguments in relation to Laing's texts and the overall focus of his work. Nevertheless, they raise some productive points with regard to omissions within theoretical discourse. The third section of the chapter compares the theories of groups provided by Deleuze and Guattari and by Laing in his summary of Sartre's late thought (*Reason and Violence*), and provides an example of the critique of psychoanalysis from Sartre's work, which is referred to by Deleuze and Guattari. It also provides some of Laing's responses to Deleuze and Guattari's critique of his work.

Chapter Five examines Mitchell's lengthy critique and assessment of Laing's work. She provides overall some of the most valid criticisms of Laing's work which are reviewed in this thesis. The production of such a critique is aided by the approach to Laing's texts taken by Mitchell. Her chapters on Laing benefit from a reading of all of Laing's texts, and from the extent of her engagement with Laing's work. However, despite her efforts to discuss the lines of development within Laing's work, these do, at times, go astray. Mitchell's discussion suffers from a lack of comprehension of

the aims of phenomenology. She has a tendency to lapse into what I have termed the Procrustean critique, where elements of Laing's theories that do not fit into her account of them are ignored. She additionally tends to impose views on to Laing's work, such as the psychoanalytic perspective, which she is sympathetic to. This chapter criticises Mitchell's claims that Laing's work demonstrates a prejudiced view of women. It includes some examination of Object Relations Theory, and Winnicott in particular, which is used as a comparison to Mitchell's allegations that Laing blames the mothers for their children's distress to an unfair extent, within his case studies. However, Mitchell does make some substantial contributions in terms of her identification of certain aspects of Laing's 'science of persons'. She attempts to make use of a fairly sophisticated method of critique, where she tries to apply Laing's development of Sartrean concepts to Laing's own aims. This is, unfortunately, not as successful as it could, potentially, have been. Nevertheless, Mitchell's assessment of Laing provides arguably the best review of his work that is evaluated in this thesis.

Chapter Six examines Showalter's attempted critique of Laing. However, most of her criticism is more accurately viewed as directed at Cooper and the anti-psychiatric movement than Laing himself. Little distinction is made between Laing and Cooper. Showalter's chapter simply describes aspects of Laing's theories and life, as opposed to offering any real analysis or engaging with Laing's concepts. Showalter's poor approach involves moralising over Laing's biography. She essentially produces a character assassination of Laing. Her assertions are unsupported by textual evidence, and make use of other claims which are either inaccurate or unsubstantiated. Her attempt to portray Laing as a misogynist is flawed due to the above issues.

Showalter provides arguably the worst 'critique' of Laing out of those reviewed in this thesis.

In Chapter Seven, I provide my own arguments for a feminist reading of Laing. This chapter is intended to provide counter-arguments to those made by Mitchell and Showalter. My central premise is that Laing's main project of demystifying madness can actually be seen as of benefit to women. I also aim to challenge the assumption made by the feminist critics that Laing's work is prejudiced against women. The first section of this chapter examines empirical evidence regarding levels of mental illness, and schizophrenia, in particular, in terms of gender. Up to the age of sixteen, more boys than girls tend to receive a diagnosis of mental illness. However, statistics on schizophrenia in adults suggest that it affects both genders in roughly equal proportions. The empirical evidence regarding the social circumstances of those diagnosed as psychotic suggests that men may fare slightly worse in living with such a diagnosis. This section is intended to demonstrate the problematic nature of the assumptions made by Mitchell and Showalter that schizophrenia is a 'female malady.' It includes some discussion of Laing's desire to investigate the relation between biology and the social, in the light of recent research which is moving towards the notion that extremely traumatic and stressful experiences may be a factor in the experience of forms of psychotic distress.

The next section of this chapter draws upon the evidence from the previous section in order to present my arguments for a feminist reading of Laing. Laing's case studies, and other relevant examples from his work, are utilised in order to present my arguments. Instances of Laing's defence of women within his texts are cited. A large part of

the analysis in this section is devoted to *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, (1964) where I identify key themes and features of the treatment of the daughters within that text. The featured families appear to expect total conformity to their wishes from their daughters. They will not let them go, nor be their own individuals. Autonomy tends to be mistaken for a symptom of mental illness. The families experience an excessive level of anxiety about what they see as a threatening outer world, which is then used to attempt to control their daughters. However, within some of Laing's case studies, the parents appear to be living in a world of their own constructions, as opposed to any approximation to reality. My reading of these case studies suggests that they highlight the gendering of socialisation, and of the abuse of female children by their families. My interpretation also draws upon some of the concepts in *Reason and Violence*.

Following this is a section on Laing's defence of women within his reinterpretations of past clinical descriptions. The first example of the latter aspect of Laing's work that I examine is his re-evaluation of an unpleasant clinical examination conducted by Kraepelin. The second concerns Laing's critique of Binswanger's account of the life and death of 'Ellen West'. This is a harrowing, tragic account of a woman, where Laing provides some resounding criticism of Binswanger's failure to conduct a proper existential analysis of the material. The final section draws upon Laingian theory in relation to a recent feminist text, in order to further advance my development of Laing's ideas along feminist lines. This section critiques the cultural prescriptions placed upon women to focus upon the outer realm, particularly in terms of appearance, and a focus upon the other's expectations.

Chapter Eight examines the left-wing critiques of Laing. Jacoby's critique of Laing is problematic, despite there being some limited validity to some of his criticisms. Some of the issues are produced by Jacoby's intention to view Laing's work as constituting a form of 'conformist psychology'. Laing and Cooper's work are examined as though they were practically identical. Jacoby criticises Laing for ignoring wider social forces, such as class. He claims that Laing's work is lacking in social criticism, and that reification is present within it. Jacoby furthermore suggests that Laing's work consists of little other than a form of bourgeois positivism. I have critiqued Jacoby's criticism in this chapter, by noting that much of it is predicated upon profound misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Laing's work. Jacoby has a tendency to engage in a selective reading and identification of elements of Laing's work to criticise (the Procrustean critique). The Frankfurt School critique of existentialism is examined in the light of Jacoby's criticism of Laing. It is apparent that Jacoby has transposed Marcuse and Adorno's critiques onto Laing's work, without sufficient adaptation. However, Marcuse's critical essay on Sartre neglects Sartre's later work, which is highly influential upon Laing. This may explain some of Jacoby's misinterpretations of Laing's work. Nevertheless, Jacoby's critique of Laing is disappointing.

The next section of this chapter examines Sedgwick's criticism of Laing. Despite Sedgwick's efforts to present himself as left-wing, very little of his criticism of Laing actually operates from within that perspective. Sedgwick replicates some aspects of Jacoby's critique of Laing. He criticises Laing for not maintaining the 'correct' Marxist line. The poverty of Sedgwick's critique of Laing is considerable, despite him

being one of Laing's most quoted critics. Sedgwick is happy to use second-hand evidence, such as gossip, as means of critique. The vast majority of his criticism involves critiquing his own misreading and misinterpretations of Laing's texts. Sedgwick's 'scientific' criticisms of Laing have more in common with those produced by the conservative psychiatric critics, than with those of Jacoby and Deleuze and Guattari. In this respect, Sedgwick has produced a template for the poor criticism of Laing, since his erroneous critique is reproduced by others, as is the same sloppy approach to Laing's texts. Sedgwick is happy to contribute to the myth of an anti-psychiatric movement, or Laingian school. He clearly was a source of some irritation to Laing, whose responses and identification of errors within Sedgwick's critique are noted.

In Chapter Nine, I endeavour to produce some of my own criticism of Laing. The aspects of his work that I examine are the use of mapping and notational sets within his work, and Laing's comments on birth and pre-birth experience within his later texts. In seeking to criticise these aspects of Laing's work, I attempt to avoid the errors that I have identified in the poor critiques of Laing. I examine the lines of development of these concepts within Laing's work, how they are deployed, and check my criticisms against the texts, in order to assess the validity of my arguments. Through applying these principles, Laing's use of mapping and notational sets is rendered more intelligible than I had previously assumed it may be. These elements are used by Laing to examine different modes of experience, and operations, such as projection, that are performed upon experience. Therefore, it is consistent with Laing's aims for a science of persons. With regard to Laing's discussions of birth and pre-birth experiences, it is noted that these comments can be related to

Laing's considerations that a form of 'existential rebirth' may occur after the schizophrenic voyage, in *The Politics of Experience* (1967). However, I argue that this aspect of Laing's late work can be considered as problematic, since it could be interpreted as suggesting that an unpleasant birth causes an unhappy individual in later life. This element of Laing's work appears to sit uneasily with his other main contributions. In this section, I draw upon an interview with Laing by Taylor, where the latter provides some criticism of this strand of Laing's work. Nevertheless, my critique of this element of Laing's work is itself problematic in some respects, which is discussed at the end of the chapter.

Chapter Ten provides the conclusion to this thesis. In this chapter, I summarise the key methodological problems involved in the poor critiques of Laing. Some of Lodziak's work in this area is drawn upon in order to highlight aspects of my argument. Adorno and Lodziak's conceptions of the immanent critique (the best possible form) are discussed in terms of how these notions advance the principles for a coherent critique of an author's work.

2) A Summary of Laing's Main Contributions

This short chapter is intended to provide a general overview and summary of Laing's main lasting contributions to social theory. Laing's central contribution, and the one which is referred to most frequently in this thesis, is that of making forms of mental distress intelligible. This occurs through demystifying and explaining the situation of the individual within their wider social context, such as the family. The other aspects mentioned here all relate in some ways to this core element of Laing's theory. Examples from Laing's texts are not provided in this chapter, since they are cited within the main body of this thesis.

Laing's

methodology and approach to the study of the person is of importance here. Laing endeavours to produce a 'science of persons', which can be viewed as a strand which is developed throughout all of his theoretical texts. It is not intended to constitute another form of conventional science. Laing suggests that an appropriate method should be used for what is being studied – the personal should be studied in personal terms. His 'existential-phenomenological' method involves the attempt to enter into the individual's world, without preconceptions as to the nature of their experience. For Laing, a phenomenological science of the person enables far greater objectivity than positivist science, simply because the object of the study (the person) can speak for her/himself, i.e. the object is a subject.

It must be emphasised here that Laing's development of concepts from Sartre's late work is a key element that enables his main project of demystifying mental distress. This conceptual development produces a means of examining the

individual and family context without conservative preconceptions. Laing endeavours to deploy philosophical concepts as means of explanation for the experiences of individuals and the apparent inertia of groups. This can be considered in a similar manner to the efforts of Marcuse, who presented a paper at the Dialectics of Liberation conference in 1967, which Laing helped to organise.¹ Laing's work is highly original in terms of his creation of an alternative (and ignored) theoretical psychology. This suspension of conventional viewpoints enables Laing to produce critical material on the family as a social formation. There are occasions where Laing explicitly criticises the family. However, the reader, particularly within *Sanity, Madness and the Family* (1964), is enabled to make up their own mind with regard to this element of Laing's work. This, in many ways, produces a more damning verdict on the families concerned, and highlights the benefits of Laing's phenomenological approach. This criticism of the family is, in particular, my favourite aspect of Laing's work. Much of psychology simply reinforces common assumptions about the nuclear family, whereas Laing's work dissects this social arrangement through its effect upon the individual who comes to be seen as 'insane'.

Far from the families

concerned 'knowing what is best' for their children, the families that feature in Laing's case studies are highly claustrophobic and will not permit their children to become their own individuals. The confusion of the young person's growing sense of autonomy with a mental illness is a common theme. It is to Laing's credit that he is able to demonstrate how conservative psychiatry colludes with the parent's perspective. This specific aspect of Laing's work is rather dark and

¹ See particularly: Marcuse, H, (1956), **Eros and Civilisation – A Philosophical Inquiry Into Freud**, London, Ark

unpleasant. This may provide some of the reason for the unfortunate current neglect of Laing's work. It speaks a truth that society does not wish to hear through its challenge to the institution of the family.

Further elements of Laing's approach involve examining the relation between behaviour and experience. The focus upon the experience of the individual within their wider social environment forms another of Laing's main preoccupations. He argues that the omission within forms of psychology of the consideration of a person's behaviour as a consequence of their experience has led to forms of study which may examine the individual in isolation, and lack power as tools for rendering 'madness' intelligible. The importance of Laing's work lies in his questioning of some of the fundamental assumptions upon which psychology is based. Laing's method of study avoids causal relations and explanations, since simplistic determinism ignores the complexity of human experience. His approach is apparent within the large numbers of case studies, or psychobiographies, which feature in his texts. Laing is happy to let the patients who have been diagnosed as schizophrenic speak for themselves, and to make the effort to consider what life events actually meant for them. In this way, the patient is put at the centre of the process. Laing's theory maintains a relevance to lived experience through this approach. Laing enables the reader to step into the person's world. His work is like nothing else that I am aware of in this respect. All of the other psychological theorists that I have researched at some stage produce case studies where the reader is at least one step removed due to the theoretical constraints placed upon the account. Laing demonstrates considerable skill in this respect, in terms of avoiding forcing his view on to the material, and thus distorting it.

Laing attempts to provide an alternative theoretical psychology which radically opposes the prevailing orthodoxies of the day. His critique of psychiatry, and of psychoanalysis are key elements within this aspect of his work. Laing criticises psychiatry because he sees it as an inhumane approach to mental distress, for example, with regard to the use of electro-shock 'therapy', and other invasive procedures. Laing considers psychiatry's mimicking of the methodology of the natural sciences as inappropriate for the study of the person. The individual is viewed simply as a diseased object, as opposed to a subject whose experiences may be intelligible within their social context. Laing's work serves to expose the conservative assumptions at the core of conventional psychiatric approaches. Laing argues that the principles of general medicine are imported into psychology without being modified sufficiently to take into account the very different nature of mental distress, which may not be adequately explained by reference to bodily ailments alone. One of Laing's best criticisms of psychiatry appears in an interview from 1983 where Laing suggests that: '...the people who have benefited humanity most in recent times have been opticians and dentists.'²

Laing's critique of psychoanalysis also raises the problematic nature of its attempt to present itself as a form of natural science. He takes issue with this approach because it splits the individual up into parts, such as the ego, id, and super-ego, and has little means of conceptualising the relations between persons. Laing views psychoanalysis as a closed system, consisting of jargon which has little relevance to human existence. In making psychoanalytic interpretations, the analyst may be placing unnecessary constructions upon the

² Taylor, L, (1983), Revisiting the explorer of experience: The Times Profile: R.D. Laing, **The Times**, 31st January, p.8

person's experience, which may have no relevance to their view of the situation being considered. Freud never created an adequate theory of psychosis, which, since the majority of Laing's work investigates what is viewed as schizophrenia, may explain some of Laing's dissatisfaction with this method of study.

Nevertheless, Laing criticises Freud's work in a respectful manner – Laing recognises the contribution that Freud made as a pioneer of psychology, whilst producing arguments for moving beyond Freud. In this way, Laing's criticism of Freud provides an example of the immanent critique which I refer to in Chapters Four and Ten of this thesis. The critical elements of Laing's work, in terms of examining the validity of the methodology behind psychiatry and psychoanalysis, are well-honed and highly significant for any future research into this area.

My consideration of Laing's work as social theory is based upon the ways in which Laing's theories can be used as explanatory tools – to explain the intelligibility of allegedly 'insane' individuals' actions within their social context, and to explain the deficiencies of other theoretical paradigms. These aspects are what I perceive to be Laing's main contributions, which are referred to within the more substantial chapters of this thesis. Before I finish this chapter, however, I wish to note some considerations as to why Laing's work is currently neglected. Kotowicz suggests that: '...the relative silence around Laing is more of a reflection of the times today than of the value of his work.'³ I agree in some respects with this quotation, but consider there to be additional aspects which need to be taken into account. The above quotation is valid in terms of the fact that funding for psychological research has, in contemporary times, been

³ Kotowicz, Z, (1997), **R.D. Laing and the Paths of Anti-Psychiatry**, London, Routledge, p.9

focussed upon biological explanations for mental distress, such as a potential genetic cause. However, in Chapter Seven, where I examine empirical evidence regarding mental distress, it is noted that some recent research is moving towards an examination of traumatic life events in relation to psychosis. This strand of research moves closer to Laing's position. The fact that psychosis is relatively rare may mean that Laing's work is only sought out by those with a specific interest in this topic.

Earlier in this chapter I have referred to Laing's criticism of the family, and that this is one of the main aspects that I read Laing's work for. Nevertheless, it may well be the case that what I find so engaging about Laing's work is precisely what others do not. Questioning the institution of the family may not be a task that everyone is willing to undertake. Laing's work may still be considered highly controversial in this respect. However, it is the true realm of critical theory to examine that which some may hold beyond criticism. This thesis seeks to debunk received notions regarding Laing's work, such as the idea that he romanticised madness. There is the potential that the standard reception of Laing's work has become so ingrained that it is neglected for this reason. The fact that Laing was an alcoholic could be used as an excuse to dismiss his work. Clearly neither of the above are valid reasons for ignoring Laing's work, but nevertheless this could be the case.

In a similar vein, neither age nor obsolescence can be used to justify the neglect of Laing. One finds it amazing how Freud's work is still approached with such reverence, even in contemporary times. This is not to say that Freud's work is lacking in any form of insight which is of continuing relevance. However, that the concept of the unconscious is still

deployed uncritically, despite the lack of evidence to support its existence, suggests that Laing's critique of this element becomes all the more necessary. Freud and Laing can both be considered to be ground-breaking in their own, very different, ways. As I have mentioned previously, Freud was one of the first to create conceptual, theoretical psychology. Laing progresses from Freud in terms of moving the level of analysis beyond the individual to their wider social context. Since Freud remained in the arena of examining neurosis whereas Laing did so for psychosis, given that the latter presents with allegedly more incomprehensible 'symptoms', Laing's achievement in making this intelligible is rendered all the more remarkable. Laing's case studies recognise that human beings are all unique in some ways, whereas the weight of Freud's conceptual framework squeezes out some of this awareness.

In all honesty, the neglect of Laing is something that I find utterly baffling. I find that Laing's work is of continued relevance. However, processes of detraditionalisation could eventually produce less controlling, closed families. This could lessen the impact of Laing's critique of the family, but not that of his criticism of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and of the coldness of Western medical practice. What remains to be done in psychology is to find the links between the family and the wider social organisation without simplistically reading one off from the other. The fact that Laing does not do this is not (contrary to some of his critics) a matter for critiquing Laing. This was not Laing's project. Nevertheless, the concept of privatisation, the idea that the public arena is shrinking and that individuals are becoming increasingly powerless to change anything beyond the private sphere

could produce a link between Laing's work on the family and a critical analysis of wider social phenomena.

3) Conservative Critiques by Psychiatrists

This section will examine the critiques of Laing's theories by Lawrie Reznek in *The Philosophical Defence of Psychiatry* (1991), and by Anthony Clare in *Psychiatry in Dissent* (1980). Both of these authors are or were psychiatrists themselves, and demonstrate a conservative point of view in their writings. There are also some criticisms from the psychiatric establishment which feature in interviews with Laing, which will also be dealt with here. A chapter concerning Deleuze and Guattari's comments on Laing's ideas in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) will follow this one to show how some aspects of Laing's theories which come in for criticism from conventional psychiatrists are instead praised and taken on by Deleuze and Guattari. However, criticism of Laing is also found within *Anti-Oedipus*, which will also be examined in the next chapter.

Reznek's Critique of Laing

The chapter of Reznek's book which contains his critique of Laing is entitled 'Ronald Laing and the Rationalizing of Madness'. Reznek claims that:

Laing attacks the disease model of schizophrenia. Instead of seeing the behaviour of schizophrenics as the symptom of some disease, Laing sees it as rational – i.e. as intentional behaviour performed for reasons. Where an orthodox psychiatrist sees a disease causing a symptom like thought disorder, Laing explains the behaviour in terms of the desire to avoid being understood and the belief that by talking mad one will achieve this goal.¹

Reznek then proceeds to illustrate his interpretation of Laing's theories by two quotations from *The Divided Self* (1960), and one from *The Politics of*

¹ Reznek, L, (1991), **The Philosophical Defence of Psychiatry**, London, Routledge, p.53

Experience (1967). I will assess the validity of Reznek's interpretation of these quotations later. Reznek's main criticism of Laing is that he views both madness itself, and schizophrenic behaviour as rational. This criticism of Laing is found throughout this chapter in slightly different forms. It is represented well by the following example:

From the conceptual premise that if behaviour is explicable in terms of reasons (desires and beliefs), then it is not caused by a disease, and the factual premise that the behaviour of schizophrenics is explicable in terms of reasons, [Laing] concludes that the behaviour of schizophrenics is not caused by a disease – i.e. the disease schizophrenia does not exist. Laing argues that the so-called signs of schizophrenia such as incoherent speech are not symptoms of disease but are instead motivated by reasons.²

Reznek then proceeds to criticise his own interpretation of Laing's work as given in the above quotation. He uses various examples to support his criticism that simply because behaviour may be motivated by 'reasons (desires and beliefs)' this does not therefore mean that the behaviour is not caused by a disease such as schizophrenia. I will return to these examples after setting out the rest of Reznek's criticism of Laing.

Reznek suggests that this argument that he claims Laing puts forward 'fails', and that 'this interpretation appears to turn Laing's argument into a straw man.'³ Reznek continues: 'however, I include it because Laing invents bizarre reasons that purport to make schizophrenic behaviour rational but produces no evidence that schizophrenics actually possess these.'⁴

Reznek argues that:

² *ibid*, p.54

³ *ibid*, p.55

⁴ *ibid*

There is nothing to stop us identifying the acquisition of schizophrenic ideas and beliefs as a unique disease process... If schizophrenic behaviour is caused by the desire to appear unintelligible to others and the belief that by adopting schizophrenic behaviour this desire can be satisfied, we can still identify the processes leading to the formation of such desires and beliefs as the disease process of schizophrenia.⁵

Reznek poses the question: ‘how do we gain access to someone’s desires and beliefs if all we have access to is their behaviour?’⁶ He then moves on to critique Laing’s case study of Julie in the last chapter of *The Divided Self* – ‘The Ghost of the Weed Garden: A Study of a Chronic Schizophrenic.’ Reznek notes that ‘the difficulty of interpreting speech is especially relevant here because the talk of schizophrenics often seems unintelligible.’⁷ His criticism of Laing’s interpretation of Julie’s speech is similar to the point noted by Reznek earlier where he accuses Laing of inventing bizarre reasons to try and make schizophrenic behaviour intelligible.

Laing argues that Julie speaks in a roundabout way that she is a ‘told belle’ (a girl told what to do and be), that she is an ‘accidental son’ (because her mother had wanted a boy), and ‘tailor-made by her parents’ (because she had no identity of her own). If we attribute non-standard meanings to the words being used, we can turn apparently incoherent babble into intelligible talk. But the fact that meaning can be invented for schizophrenic babble does not mean that it actually has this meaning. Our problem is to specify how we can have evidence that the dialogue actually has some meaning and is not simply a Laingian invention.⁸

In the second part of his critique of Laing, Reznek turns his attention to Laing’s theory that the families of those people who end up being seen as schizophrenic may have treated that person

⁵ *ibid*, p.56

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *op. cit.*, p.58

⁸ *ibid*, p.58

very badly, and this may have played a part in them suffering extreme mental distress. Reznek claims that:

...Laing fails to show that the schizophrenic behaviour is caused by unlivable family situations (Sedgwick, 1982). To show this, he needs to show that schizophrenic behaviour occurs more commonly in such families than others, but he fails to produce any control groups. In addition, he needs a longitudinal study to show that it is the abnormal family set-up that produces the schizophrenic behaviour rather than the reverse. For it is quite possible that it is trying to cope with the abnormal behaviour of the schizophrenic that makes the families abnormal. But he fails to do this.⁹

Reznek insists that 'even if we discover that schizophrenic behaviour is caused by certain abnormal family situations, this does not mean that we cannot say that such abnormal family situations cause the *disease* of schizophrenia. To think otherwise is to commit the essentialist fallacy.'¹⁰

The last section of Reznek's critique of Laing concerns Laing's ideas that normal existence may be a state of alienation, and that the person who comes to be labelled as insane has really broken through this state of alienation, and may have more insight than normal people. Reznek is somewhat more accepting of this view than Laing's theory that schizophrenia is not a disease in the conventional bio-medical sense. However, Reznek takes issue with Laing's views on the position of psychiatrists in this.

...Laing assumes that psychiatrists judge people to be deluded if they do not hold the majority view about reality. But this is false. If the person can produce good evidence for his beliefs, psychiatrists will not judge him to be deluded. To be deluded one must believe something tenaciously in the face of obvious evidence to the contrary... But simply adopting socially sanctioned facts is not harmful and is unworthy of the title

⁹ *ibid.*, pp.61-62

¹⁰ *op. cit.*, pp.63-64

‘pathological’... Hence Laing’s account of how psychiatrists judge delusions is wrong...¹¹

Reznek finishes his critique of Laing with a consideration of Laing’s much-maligned comments in the later chapters of *The Politics of Experience* that ‘going mad’ may be an attempt at a healing process. Reznek’s reading of this is that Laing is suggesting that ‘schizophrenia has valuable consequences’,¹² which Reznek suggests is not the case. He concludes his critique of Laing with the following summary.

...Laing has failed to show that schizophrenics are rational and are in touch with ‘true’ reality rather than ill. He has also failed to show that schizophrenia is an intelligible response to intolerable circumstances, or that it is society that is mad.¹³

A significant problem with Reznek’s critique of Laing is that his interpretation of Laing’s theories is incorrect. In order to criticise an author’s work, an understanding of that work must first be achieved prior to any criticism. The basis of the criticism must also take into account what the author most probably meant in their writing. I find these methodological points to be lacking in Reznek’s critique of Laing. With regard to Reznek’s main criticism of Laing – that Laing sees the behaviour of schizophrenics as rational – at no point in any of Laing’s theoretical texts is this point actually made. Reznek is labouring under some confusion about what Laing was most probably trying to say. This confusion centres on Reznek having taken Laing’s project of making madness and schizophrenia ‘comprehensible’,¹⁴ or ‘socially intelligible’,¹⁵ as

¹¹ *ibid*, pp.66-67

¹² *ibid*, p.69

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Laing, R.D, (1960), **The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness**, (2nd ed), Harmondsworth, Penguin, p.9

actually meaning that Laing thinks that schizophrenics are rational. This gross misreading of Laing is achieved by Reznick taking a very partial view of Laing's work. The quotations that Reznick uses to support his criticism are taken out of the wider context of the text they are located in. This is a problem found throughout his critique. With regard to Reznick's claims that Laing explains schizophrenic behaviour 'in terms of the desire to avoid being understood and the belief that by talking mad one will achieve this goal,'¹⁶ Reznick jumps from a few instances where Laing makes these sorts of remarks to this being what the entirety of Laing's work is actually about. This shows a very poor reading of Laing's work on Reznick's behalf.

To illustrate this problem, I will set out these first two quotations from Laing that Reznick uses, and show how they are abstracted from their wider context in the book they are taken from. The first quotation that Reznick uses is taken from *The Divided Self* (1960):

A good deal of schizophrenia is simply nonsense, red-herring speech, prolonged filibustering designed to throw dangerous people off the scent, to create boredom and futility in others. The schizophrenic is often making a fool of himself and the doctor. He is playing mad to avoid at all costs the possibility of being held *responsible* for a single coherent idea, or intention.¹⁷

This quotation is from Chapter 10 of *The Divided Self*, called 'The Self and the False Self in a Schizophrenic.' Rather than the above quotation being representative of a comprehensive statement by Laing on his views on schizophrenia, it is part of a discussion of how the schizophrenic seeks a measure

¹⁵ Laing, R.D, and Esterson, A, (1964), **Sanity, Madness and the Family, Vol.1: The Families of Schizophrenics**, (2nd ed), Harmondsworth, Penguin, p.27

¹⁶ Reznick, L, (1991), **The Philosophical Defence of Psychiatry**, London, Routledge, p.53

¹⁷ *ibid*, p.53. **The Divided Self**, p.164

of safety by attempting to be very difficult to understand. 'Any form of understanding *threatens* his whole defensive system... The schizophrenic is not going to reveal himself for casual inspection and examination to any philandering passer-by. If the self is not known it is safe.'¹⁸ Reznek demonstrates no awareness of this wider context of the quotation. He takes it as more representative of Laing's work as a whole than it truly is. This quotation that Reznek uses is not even representative of Laing's position in *The Divided Self*. Also lost upon Reznek is the fact that this quotation suggests that schizophrenics find psychiatrists rather irritating, and so are uncooperative. Reznek instead interprets this as all schizophrenics do not want to be understood by anyone. A closer reading of this chapter may have enabled Reznek to clear up his confusion regarding his idea that Laing thinks that schizophrenics are rational. Laing's point is rather that: '...if we look at the extraordinary behaviour of the psychotic from his own point of view, much of it will become understandable.'¹⁹ It is an extremely cheap form of criticism to simply lift out parts of a text, abstracted from the wider discussion of the book, and criticise them as it suits the critic. Little engagement with a text is needed to do this.

This also applies with the second quotation from Laing that Reznek uses, from *The Politics of Experience*.

To regard the gambits of Smith and Jones [schizophrenics] as due *primarily* to some psychological deficit is rather like supposing that a man doing a handstand on a bicycle on a tightrope 100 feet up with no safety net is suffering from an inability to stand on his own two feet. We may well ask why these people have to be, often brilliantly, so devious, elusive,

¹⁸ Laing, R.D, (1960), **The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness**, (2nd ed), Harmondsworth, Penguin, p.163

¹⁹ *ibid*, p.161

so adept at making themselves unremittingly incomprehensible.²⁰

This quotation and the previous one from *The Divided Self* are rather ‘thrown in’ by Reznik. No further discussion of these quotations is offered, as would be expected in good scholarship. These quotations are simply presented to bolster Reznik’s incorrect version of what Laing’s theory is about. The above quotation from *The Politics of Experience* particularly suffers from being chopped off the end of a ‘conversation between two persons diagnosed as schizophrenic.’²¹

Without this conversation being included the quotation used by Reznik is taken completely out of context, with his intention perhaps being to present a quotation from Laing which looks rather daft. I think particularly this would be easy to do with *The Politics of Experience*, to lift out a small section of this book, take it out of context, and criticise Laing based upon that. This may be a problem that occurs again with criticism of this book.

Reznik’s criticism of Laing also suffers from Reznik’s use of very poor examples to try and support his argument. Reznik offers the following example to attempt to criticise his notion that Laing claims madness is ‘explicable in terms of reasons.’²²

Suppose we are trying to understand a man who builds a tower of bottle-tops and then proceeds to dance around them, screaming ‘Yobbol toddol tu’. We might suppose that he believes that dancing around a tower of bottle-tops screaming ‘Yobbol toddol tu’, which we translate as ‘God is Great’, will keep him healthy, and that he wants to be healthy. In this way, his behaviour is explicable in terms of reasons (desires and beliefs)... To explain *any* piece of behaviour B, all we have to

²⁰ Reznik, pp.53-54, Laing, R.D, (1967), **The Politics of Experience**, Harmondsworth, Penguin, p.85

²¹ **The Politics of Experience**, p.85

²² Reznik, p.54

do is attribute to the agent any desire D, and the belief that by doing B, he will achieve D.²³

It is this example that leads Reznik to then conclude that this turns ‘Laing’s argument into a straw man’, and that ‘Laing invents bizarre reasons that purport to make schizophrenic behaviour rational.’²⁴ With regard to the above quotation, it seems to have been created by Reznik to illustrate his argument, rather than being a direct criticism of Laing’s work. Reznik offers no concrete examples from Laing’s actual work to support his idea that Laing invents reasons for schizophrenic behaviour being understandable. This greatly undermines Reznik’s critique of Laing. He cannot demonstrate that his argument has any validity by reference to Laing’s actual work. This means that Reznik’s criticism here is rather tangential and arbitrary. In a good critique, examples from the author’s work which is being criticised must be offered to show that the critic is not just inventing criticisms. Since Reznik cannot do this (as mentioned above, he lifts quotations from Laing out of context), it would be better on Reznik’s behalf not to accuse Laing of being a straw man, when that description more accurately fits his attempted critique.

Reznik also supplies various examples of a bio-medical nature to show that individuals can have unusual desires and beliefs which are caused by diseases. These examples are intended to support Reznik’s view that schizophrenia is a disease whether it is intelligible or not. Much of this chapter by Reznik requires further explanation than he provides. When he claims that ‘there is nothing to stop us identifying the acquisition of schizophrenic ideas

²³ *ibid*, pp.54-55

²⁴ *ibid*, p.55

and beliefs as a unique disease process',²⁵ I would like to know why exactly he makes that claim. The status of schizophrenia as a biological disease is contested. Laing contributed greatly to that debate, so one would expect some engagement with this. Instead, Reznick simply asserts throughout this chapter that schizophrenia is a disease, and leaves it at that. Reznick shows little reflexive awareness in his argument.

Reznick's critique of Laing suffers from the impression created by this chapter that Reznick either has not read any Laing, or that his reading of Laing was so poor that he did not understand any of Laing's work. Alternatively, Reznick only read Laing in order to find snippets of Laing's work to use as quotations to be criticised. When Reznick asks 'how do we gain access to someone's desires and beliefs if all we have access to is their behaviour?',²⁶ he has completely missed and ignored Laing's investigation of the experience of the individual through phenomenology. The problem is that Reznick's critique operates on such a shallow level that he cannot engage with the deeper levels of analysis in Laing's theory. This leads him into making cheap criticisms of Laing. It also means that some of his criticism may be found to be offensive by the serious scholar of Laing. I write this with Reznick's criticism of the case study of Julie in the last chapter of *The Divided Self* particularly in mind. As I have mentioned earlier, Reznick assumes that Laing simply has invented the interpretations that Laing made of Julie's speech.²⁷ This is a further example of Reznick leaving me with the impression that he has not done his reading properly. His criticism here would be fair if he at least acknowledged the lengthy preceding psychobiography of Julie and her family context that appears before

²⁵ *ibid*, p.56

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ Reznick, p.58

Laing makes these interpretations of Julie's speech, and noted that he did not find it convincing, or that there were problems with it. However, Reznick does not show any respect for this case study. It is written off simplistically in one paragraph, picking on Laing's interpretations of Julie's speech which Reznick assumes Laing has merely invented. He makes this assumption against the evidence provided in Laing's case study of Julie which suggests that these interpretations may have been correct. There is no evidence in 'The Ghost of the Weed Garden' to suggest that Laing has invented his interpretations of Julie's speech. Reznick here provides an example of the psychiatric attitude that Laing has criticised – that all schizophrenic speech is nothing but jibberish, and does not deserve a close examination.

There are points in Reznick's critique of Laing where Reznick states that he is in agreement with some aspects of Laing's ideas. Reznick notes that 'there is some evidence that schizophrenics intentionally put on their symptoms to achieve various ends...'²⁸ However, as I have mentioned earlier, this is a misinterpretation of Laing's actual ideas regarding schizophrenia. So Reznick is rather agreeing with his interpretation of Laing, than with Laing himself. Reznick also agrees with Laing that 'a whole culture can be deluded.'²⁹ However, Reznick still takes issue with Laing's position on this matter.

Thus Laing is right to think that a whole culture can be mad, but he is right for the wrong reason – only if beliefs are adopted in a particular way are they delusions. They are not delusions simply because they are false.³⁰

²⁸ *ibid*, p.62

²⁹ *ibid*, p.67

³⁰ *op. cit.*, p.68

Reznek is keen to defend psychiatrists against Laing's view that they are quick to judge individuals as deluded, when the person may not be. This is not the place to engage in a debate over views of what may or may not be classified as a 'delusion'. Reznek takes a rather naïve view of how psychiatrists judge whether someone is deluded or not. He assumes that psychiatrists will give people the benefit of the doubt 'if the person can produce good evidence for his beliefs...'³¹ However, doing this in real life may not be as simple as Reznek assumes. This is particularly the case with families.

One of the brilliant aspects of Laing's case studies is how he demonstrates that the 'mad' accusations that the child has made against his or her parents actually have more validity than what the parents have said. Laing also points out that frequently psychiatrists believe the parents' version of events more than those of the child. This comes across especially well in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* (1964). A good example is in the second chapter on 'The Blairs'. Here Laing and Esterson note that:

...the Blair family had been recognized as offering an unfavourable environment for their daughter Lucie before this investigation started. However, none of the numerous psychiatrists in whose care she had been for twelve years had ever suggested that the 'schizophrenia' from which she 'suffered' was in any way intelligible. The view held was that Lucie... was 'suffering from chronic schizophrenia', and that her family unfortunately aggravated her condition.³²

From the case studies in Laing's work, it seems as though the powerful psychiatrists and relatively powerful (in relation to the child) parents collude with each other.

³¹ *ibid*, p.66

³² Laing, R.D, and Esterson, A, (1964), **Sanity, Madness and the Family, Vol.1: The Families of Schizophrenics**, (2nd ed), Harmondsworth, Penguin, p.51

Reznek himself shows a view similar to that presumably held by the previous psychiatrists of Lucie when he claims that ‘it is quite possible that it is trying to cope with the abnormal behaviour of the schizophrenic that makes the families abnormal.’³³ Here Reznek is giving the benefit of the doubt to the families rather than the individual who is seen as mad. In doing this, he rather undermines his own argument that psychiatrists are neutral and impartial, and will approach a possibly delusional person in such a manner. He also gives a further illustration of the cold, conservative psychiatric attitude that Laing criticises. Laing and Esterson counter this form of criticism in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, in the chapter on ‘The Abbotts’.

It might be argued... that [Maya’s] parents might have been reacting in an abnormal way to the presence of an abnormal child. The data hardly support this thesis. [sic] Her mother and father reveal plainly... that what they regard most as symptoms of illness are what we regard as developing... autonomy,... etc.³⁴

The fact that Maya’s parents thought that she had psychic powers, and experimented with her along those lines demonstrates further evidence that her family were not merely reacting in an unusual way to an insane child.³⁵ Additionally, Reznek suggests that no control groups were produced to support Laing’s idea that what comes to be viewed as schizophrenia may be the product of awful family situations.³⁶ Reznek mentions that this criticism originates from Sedgwick’s 1982 critique of Laing. I will look at Sedgwick’s critique later in this thesis. However, I feel that it is worth making clear now that it is a little-known fact that studies of normal families (the control

³³ Reznek, p.62

³⁴ **Sanity, Madness and the Family**, p.48

³⁵ *ibid*, p.37

³⁶ Reznek, pp.61-62

group) were actually done for *Sanity, Madness and the Family*.³⁷ This is why the full title of *Sanity, Madness and the Family* in its original editions contains the ending *Volume One – The Families of Schizophrenics*. Laing said that he found the normal families so boring that he could not bear to write up this second volume.³⁸ To be fair to Reznick, Mullan's book of conversations with Laing was not published until a few years after Reznick's critique.

The final aspect of Reznick's critique of Laing that I want to look at is another which I feel is worth dealing with early on. This is Reznick's reading of the last three chapters of *The Politics of Experience* as containing the argument that 'schizophrenia has valuable consequences.'³⁹ This is far too strong a statement of Laing's views in these chapters. This is possibly the most misinterpreted and misunderstood part of Laing's work, and the most heavily criticised. What Laing is really saying is that the 'voyage' through madness that a person may go on, could be of benefit to the person provided that the conditions were provided for them to do this. However, Laing argues that this is not likely to be the case 'because we are so busy 'treating' the patient...'⁴⁰ There are frequent caveats that appear in these chapters regarding madness as a journey that have been missed by Laing's critics. Here the criticism again can be reduced to a selective reading of Laing. Laing notes that the person may encounter 'grotesque presences'⁴¹ on this journey, and that 'not everyone comes back to us again.'⁴² There are also many occasions in the last chapter of *The Politics of Experience* – 'A Ten-Day

³⁷ Mullan, B, (1995), **Mad to be Normal – Conversations with R.D. Laing**, London, Free Association Books, p.274

³⁸ *ibid*

³⁹ Reznick, p.69

⁴⁰ Laing, R.D, (1967), **The Politics of Experience**, Harmondsworth, Penguin, p.102

⁴¹ *ibid*, p.109

⁴² *op. cit.*, p.114

Voyage' - where the account of madness by Jesse Watkins suggests that it was anything but a pleasant experience for him. Laing has not sanitised Watkin's account by removing Watkin's statements that 'it was an appalling sort of experience',⁴³ which he would be afraid of going through again.⁴⁴ These points are significantly omitted in critics such as Reznick's view of these chapters of *The Politics of Experience*.

Ultimately, Reznick's critique is more a critique of his interpretation of Laing, rather than a critique of Laing's actual work. Since Reznick's interpretation of Laing is severely flawed, due to poor reading, this means that his critique is also severely flawed. In order to produce a coherent critique, the totality of a theoretician's work needs to be read, and not simply a couple of passages taken out of context from only two books. Reznick does not engage with Laing's work in any productive way. He operates on the same assumptions held by conservative psychiatrists that Laing himself criticises. This means that Reznick's critique does not get anywhere. He cannot engage with the more radical elements of Laing's theory. Reznick's interpretation (or rather misinterpretation) of Laing over-simplifies Laing's arguments, and in doing so, tends to miss the point of what Laing was most probably trying to say. His approach to the various issues raised by Laing's work is also extremely simplistic.

Reznick's argument covers the same ground repeatedly, as though repeating a criticism will make it more valid. His argument is also very unclear. It requires further explanation, particularly with regard to his insistence that schizophrenia is a disease, even if it may be the product of disturbed social

⁴³ *ibid*, p.122

⁴⁴ *ibid*, p.132

relations, with no concrete biological basis. Reznick assumes that his argument is self-validated by his bio-medical perspective and examples. The fact that Reznick's argument is so unclear may be a product of his misunderstanding of Laing's work. The question may be asked: why have I bothered to spend this time reviewing Reznick's critique of Laing, when it is so poor? I have felt that Reznick's critique was worth a critical review because the problems with it may be reproduced by other critics. If this does occur, then I feel that this is worth noting, as there may be common mistakes in the criticism of Laing. Reviewing Reznick's critique has also given me the chance to clarify what I feel are some big misunderstandings regarding Laing's work early on in this thesis. Instead of Reznick's critique writing off Laing's work, as Reznick assumes, this critique highlights one of the qualities of Laing's work – the absence of a blind conservative attitude. There is the danger that poor critiques and 'interpretations' of Laing, such as Reznick's, become the received wisdom about Laing's work.

Clare's Critique of Laing

Anthony Clare's criticisms of Laing in *Psychiatry in Dissent* are found throughout various chapters of this book. There is no single chapter on his critique of Laing. It will be necessary for me to use some lengthy quotations from Clare to set out his critique. In his second chapter, 'Models of Mental Illness', Clare offers some discussion of various conceptions of mental illness. His first criticism of Laing (and of *The Politics of Experience*) appears in this chapter.

There is also the *psychedelic model* in which mental illness is viewed as a metaphorical 'trip', the patient proceeding through a state of 'super-sanity' and, if properly guided ,

emerging on the far side in a more enlightened and sensitive condition. This last view, popularized by the imaginative writings of Ronald Laing (Laing 1967), bears remarkable similarities to the highly romanticized view of tuberculosis which held sway during parts of the last century and which has recently been examined by Sontag (1979).⁴⁵

What is the validity of

Clare's criticism here of Laing? With Clare's first criticism of Laing – that Laing romanticizes mental illness in *The Politics of Experience* – I have already dealt with this sort of criticism in my previous section on Reznek's critique of Laing. The central issue here is how romanticized really is Laing's account of mental illness in this book? Only a highly selective reading of the last three chapters of *The Politics of Experience*, which misses out Laing's warnings in these chapters, can produce these sorts of criticisms. Clare does not supply any quotations from *The Politics of Experience* to support his interpretation of this book as presenting a romanticized view of mental illness. As a comparison alone, I find Clare's use of the old myths surrounding TB to be acceptable. However, it needs to be tied more concretely to Laing's work, for the criticism to have some weight. Clare also needs to explain his criticism further.

Those afflicted with TB were often portrayed as highly imaginative, sensitive, and artistic individuals, too cultured and cultivated to bear the horrors of a vulgar, coarse, and brutal world... It is worth noting that Sontag dates the destruction of the TB myth from the time when proper treatment for the condition was developed... The implications for the romantic metaphor of mental illness and its eventual decline are obvious.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Clare, A, (1980), **Psychiatry in Dissent: Controversial Issues in Thought and Practice**, (2nd ed), London, Routledge, p.42

⁴⁶ *ibid*, pp.42-43

The last sentence of the criticism above does seem rather ‘stuck on’. What Clare appears to be saying is that the romantic idea of mental illness will disappear when real treatment for it is discovered. However, at present, this does not appear to be very likely, given the disputed nature of both mental illness and forms of treatment for it. Clare seems to have just accepted the standard reception of *The Politics of Experience*, which is that it contains a highly romanticized view of mental illness. This view of this book is a misrepresentation, based upon misreading. Laing himself in his last published book, the autobiographical *Wisdom, Madness and Folly* (1985), provides his own response to this sort of criticism.

I have never idealized mental suffering, or romanticized despair, dissolution, torture or terror. I have never said that parents or families or society ‘cause’ mental illness, genetically or environmentally. I have never denied the existence of patterns of mind and conduct that are excruciating.⁴⁷

To be fair to Clare, *Wisdom, Madness and Folly* was published a few years after Clare’s second edition of *Psychiatry in Dissent*. However, the evidence against his reading of *The Politics of Experience* can be found within that text itself, had Clare taken more notice of Laing’s warnings. Clare is criticising the received ‘wisdom’ regarding *The Politics of Experience*, rather than giving a concrete criticism of that text itself.

Clare demonstrates a better interpretation of Laing for the most part in his assessment of Laing’s re-evaluation of Kraepelin’s account of one of his patients in *The Divided Self*.⁴⁸ This occurs in a chapter on ‘The

⁴⁷ Laing, R.D, (1985), *Wisdom, Madness and Folly – The Making of a Psychiatrist 1927-1957*, London, Macmillan, p.8

⁴⁸ *The Divided Self*, pp.29-31

Diagnostic Process.’ Here Clare agrees with Laing’s critique of Kraepelin’s approach to some extent. However, Clare takes issue with Laing’s explanation of Kraepelin’s patient’s behaviour.

In the case described above, it is not because the patient resents and does not understand what is happening (Laing’s suggested ‘explanation’ for his behaviour) that he is diagnosed a schizophrenic. It is because he exhibits certain psychological and behavioural phenomena...that his condition is so classified.⁴⁹

Clare’s criticism of Laing’s explanation of Kraepelin’s patient’s behaviour is problematic. There is evidence to suggest that Kraepelin does take his patient’s resentment and lack of understanding of the situation as the basis for a diagnosis of schizophrenia. Laing interprets Kraepelin’s patient’s behaviour in the following way.

What does this patient seem to be doing? Surely he is carrying on a dialogue between his own parodied version of Kraepelin, and his own defiant rebelling self... Presumably he deeply resents this form of interrogation which is being carried out before a lecture-room of students. He probably does not see what it has to do with the things that must be deeply distressing him. But these things would not be ‘useful information’ to Kraepelin except as further ‘signs’ of a ‘disease’.⁵⁰

Clare has missed Laing’s point with his criticism. Laing is suggesting that Kraepelin does take his patient’s distress as symptoms of schizophrenia, when the patient’s distress is really an intelligible reaction to the unpleasant situation that he is being put in by Kraepelin. It is interesting that Clare chose to look at Laing’s critique of Kraepelin in *The Divided Self*, and not

⁴⁹ **Psychiatry in Dissent**, p.84

⁵⁰ Laing, R.D, (1960), **The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness**, (2nd ed), Harmondsworth, Penguin, p.30

his critique of Kraepelin in *The Politics of Experience*⁵¹, which is equally as incisive. In a radio interview that Clare conducted with Laing, Clare admits that he was ‘enormously influenced’ as a young psychiatrist by *The Divided Self*, and its project of demystifying madness.⁵²

Clare seems to assume that *The Divided Self* is worthy of less criticism than the rest of Laing’s work. It is the book which, out of all those by Laing, attracts the most praise and the least criticism. However, it is worth noting that this criticism that Clare makes of this part of *The Divided Self* is only a minor criticism. Clare uses this section by Laing to show the problems involved with diagnosis in psychiatry, and makes the point that Laing’s critique of diagnosis here is ‘valid’.⁵³ Laing himself offers the best criticism of *The Divided Self*. In the preface to the Pelican edition of this text, dated 1964, Laing states that:

...even in focusing upon and attempting to delineate a certain type of schizoid existence, I was already partially falling into the trap I was seeking to avoid. I am still writing in this book too much about Them, and too little of Us.⁵⁴

Laing criticises *The Divided Self* for retaining a certain level of distance from the patient. This maintenance of more conventional boundaries may provide one of the reasons for the praise of the text from conservative standpoints.

Later in his chapter on ‘The Diagnostic Process’, Clare presents some criticisms of *Sanity, Madness and the Family*.

⁵¹ **The Politics of Experience**, pp.88-90

⁵² Clare, A, (1996), Interview with Laing, **In the Psychiatrist’s Chair**, BBC Radio 4, (original interview with Laing 1984)

⁵³ **Psychiatry in Dissent**, p.105

⁵⁴ **The Divided Self**, p.11

But don't define the concept [of schizophrenia] at all, say the critics. It is reductive, destructive, and dehumanizing. Such a view is implicit in much of Laing's writings and indeed is explicitly stated in the introduction to the study of eleven families conducted by himself and Esterson (1964)... Yet their study is a clear case of having your classifying cake and eating it; they disagree with the whole idea of the concept of schizophrenia yet one crucial factor that is common to the families in question is that such a diagnosis has been applied to a family member.⁵⁵

Unfortunately he here returns to making criticisms of Laing which are somewhat unclear, and only tangentially related to the points that Laing and Esterson were attempting to make in this text. Offering a clear definition of schizophrenia was not Laing and Esterson's task in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. Indeed, a thorough reading and interpretation of this text should make this abundantly clear.

It may instead be more the case that Laing and Esterson are suggesting that the diagnosis of schizophrenia (however it is defined) does little to actually help the person so diagnosed. Again, Clare needs to provide further evidence in the form of quotations from the text to support his argument here. Since Clare does not do this, this may suggest that his interpretation could not be supported in this way, as there is a disparity between the actual text and Clare's reading of it.

'We are concerned with persons, the relations between persons and the characteristics of the family as a system composed of a multiplicity of persons.' This declaration appears to suggest that the deductions they make can be applied to family life *in general*, that they are not *specific* to families containing schizophrenic members. In which case, of course, any psychopathology they unearth in the family dynamics does not cast any helpful light on why some of the family members manifest their disturbance in the *form* of

⁵⁵ *ibid*, p.112

hallucinations, persecutory delusions, obsessive-compulsive rituals, and ruminations, etc.⁵⁶

The only quotation that Clare uses from *Sanity, Madness and the Family* in the quotation above is, in a similar manner to Reznek, ‘lifted out’ of its wider context in the text it inhabits. ‘We are concerned with persons, the relations between persons, and the characteristics of the family as a system composed of a multiplicity of persons,’⁵⁷ is not, as Clare takes it, a statement by Laing and Esterson meaning that their ideas in this book are applicable to all families in general. It is instead, a statement with which they begin setting out their method in this book. This means that Clare’s criticism here, again, is more a criticism of his interpretation of *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, rather than a criticism of the actual text.

A good response to this sort of criticism can be found in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* itself. In the preface to the second edition of this book, Laing and Esterson state that:

There have been many studies of mental illness and the family. This book is not of them, at least in our opinion. But it has been taken to be so by many people. The result is that much of the considerable controversy that the first edition of this book has occasioned is entirely irrelevant to our own stated aims and method.⁵⁸

Clare’s criticism does seem to be of this order. He does indeed ignore the central question of *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, which Laing and Esterson explain in the following quotation.

⁵⁶ *ibid*, pp.112-113

⁵⁷ **Sanity, Madness and the Family**, p.19

⁵⁸ *ibid*, p.11

This is the position from which we start. Our question is: are the experience and behaviour that psychiatrists take as symptoms and signs of schizophrenia more socially intelligible than has come to be supposed? [...] ⁵⁹

This severely undermines his criticism, because he is criticising Laing and Esterson for not doing things which were irrelevant to their project. They show an awareness of this problem with the reception of *Sanity, Madness and the Family* in the preface to the second edition.

A common reaction has been to forget *our* question, and then to accuse us of not going about answering other questions adequately. Eleven cases, it is said, all women, prove nothing. There are no controls. How do you sample your data? What objective, reliable rating scales have you employed? And so on. Such criticism would be justified if we had set out to test the hypothesis that the family is a pathogenic variable in the genesis of schizophrenia. But we did not set out to do this, and we have not claimed to have done so. ⁶⁰

It could be argued that Clare used a first edition of this book, which did not contain this preface to the second edition. However, their central question is still clearly stated in the original introduction. ⁶¹

Clare's ignorance of this shows poor scholarship on his behalf. Surely a critique of something must engage with what is being criticised in such a way that it properly takes into account the main point of what is being criticised. Not doing this produces criticism that is invalid, and irrelevant. Clare ignores Laing and Esterson's clear explanation of the focus of their research within *Sanity, Madness and the Family*.

We set out to illustrate by eleven examples that, if we look at some experience and behaviour without reference to family

⁵⁹ op.cit., p.12

⁶⁰ ibid, p.12

⁶¹ ibid, p.27

interactions, they may appear comparatively socially senseless, but if we look at the same experience and behaviour in their original family context they are liable to make more sense.⁶²

There are also serious problems with Clare labelling Laing as an ‘anti-psychiatrist’.

At times, Laing and other self-styled anti-psychiatrists appear to be denying *any* valid basis to the diagnostic process in psychiatry.⁶³

Firstly, it is a gross over-simplification of Laing’s position to say that he is simply against psychiatry. Laing was concerned with showing the inhumanity of psychiatric treatment, and the problems involved in psychiatry, but this does not mean that he thought that psychiatry should be simply done away with. The labelling of Laing as an anti-psychiatrist is a recurrent problem, which shows a big misunderstanding of Laing. Kotowicz insists on using the term in the title of his book on Laing, despite the fact that he acknowledges that there are problems with this label.⁶⁴ In *Wisdom, Madness and Folly*, Laing includes some responses to being called an ‘anti-psychiatrist’. In a footnote, Laing reminds the reader that:

The term ‘anti-psychiatry’ was coined by the psychiatrist David Cooper because he felt that psychiatry as the theory and practice of medical psychiatry was and is predominantly repressive, anti-psychiatric in the sense of the science and art of mental healing.⁶⁵

⁶² *ibid*, p.12

⁶³ *ibid*, p.114

⁶⁴ Kotowicz, Z, (1997), **R.D. Laing and the Paths of Anti-Psychiatry**, London, Routledge, pp.4-5

⁶⁵ **Wisdom, Madness and Folly**, p.2

There does seem to be some confusion between Laing's work, and that of his colleague David Cooper. This confusion can be found within the criticism of Laing, with Clare calling Laing an 'anti-psychiatrist' as an example. Perhaps Laing became rather sick of this confusion, and included the following in *Wisdom, Madness and Folly* to try and clear this up.

I have never called myself an anti-psychiatrist, and have disclaimed the term from when first my friend and colleague, David Cooper, introduced it. However, I agree with the anti-psychiatric thesis that by and large psychiatry functions to exclude and repress those elements society wants excluded and repressed.⁶⁶

The confusion of Cooper and Laing's work causes serious problems, when criticism directed at Laing should perhaps more appropriately be directed at Cooper's work. No doubt there are substantial differences between their positions. However, this is not my main concern in this thesis. What is my concern is to take note of whether criticism directed at Laing is appropriate in terms of actually matching up with Laing's position itself. So far, Clare's criticism of Laing can be found lacking in this respect.

However, Cooper's work

itself supports Laing's account of it in the above quotations, and demonstrates differences from that of Laing, which I will summarise here. I wish to note some general distinctions first of all. Laing himself never directly published anything with the phrase 'anti-psychiatry' in the title, nor does this phrase actually feature in his texts. In my later section on Sedgwick's critique of Laing, it is noted that Laing was extremely unhappy with the publication of the collection of essays

⁶⁶ *ibid*, pp.8-9

entitled *R.D. Laing and Anti-Psychiatry* (1974)⁶⁷ precisely for this reason. The only directly co-authored piece by Laing and Cooper is the introduction to *Reason and Violence*. The other chapters of that text were written separately. The fact that Laing and Cooper address the same, or very similar themes, is not a sufficient justification for presenting these authors as identical, due to the key differences which I will now outline.

Cooper presents his arguments in a much stronger manner than Laing. For example, Cooper is much more forceful in expressing his comments regarding the idea that normality is merely a form of conformity. Cooper argues in *Psychiatry and Anti-Psychiatry* (1967) that ‘most people are developmentally arrested in this state of normality.’⁶⁸ He suggests that a minority are able to progress onto sanity, whereas others break down into madness.⁶⁹ Cooper does not pull his punches in the manner that Laing does. Ironically, Cooper’s written style is arguably much clearer than Laing’s. It is more scholarly and less poetic. An important difference is the fact that Cooper is much quicker than Laing to move his discussions on to criticise the larger social scale. Society is Cooper’s target much more than Laing’s.

...If one attempts to break out of the system of false rationality of the family, particularly when this system is reinforced by the collusion with the family of agents of the wider society, then one runs the risk of being called irrational... To a quite remarkable extent the “illness” or the illogicality of the schizophrenic has its origin in the illness of the logic of other people.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Boyers, R, (ed), (1974), **R.D. Laing and Anti-Psychiatry**, New York, Octagon Books

⁶⁸ Cooper, D, (1967), **Psychiatry and Anti-Psychiatry**, London, Tavistock, in Brown, P, (ed), (1973), **Radical Psychology**, London, Tavistock, p.131

⁶⁹ *ibid*

⁷⁰ *ibid*, p.142

The argument that families and psychiatrists collude is present in Laing.

However, Cooper moves beyond this to include general practitioners and the police.⁷¹

Cooper's work contains far more explicit social criticism than that of Laing. Cooper is happier than Laing to move from the family on to the larger social scale. An example of this is provided in the quotation below.

One very obvious manifestation of the operation of unseen, or insufficiently seen, internalized family structures is in political demonstrations where the organizing group is lacking in vision of this sort of reality in themselves. So we find demonstrators getting unnecessarily hurt because they unknowingly project bits of their parents in their negative, punishing, powerful aspect onto the police.⁷²

Cooper's argument here is rather bizarre. He appears to be claiming that the projection of negative aspects of individuals' parents on to the police serves as an explanation for violence at protests. I am not convinced by this. This quotation appears in a chapter where Cooper is concerned with '...the power of the internal family...'⁷³ Following the above discussion, Cooper proceeds to claim the following.

If we are to regard paranoia as a morbid state of existence in any sense any more, I think that the only place in which we find this as a social problem is in the minds of policemen, administrators of the law, and the consensus politicians of the imperialist countries.⁷⁴

Cooper appears to have been less conscious of the difficulties involved in moving from the micro-social to the macro-social scale

⁷¹ *ibid*, p.149

⁷² Cooper, D, (1970), **The Death of the Family**, London, Penguin, in Brown, P, (ed), (1973), **Radical Psychology**, London, Tavistock, p.164

⁷³ *ibid*, p.162

⁷⁴ *op. cit.*, p.165

than Laing. He describes both the family and psychiatry as ‘...imbued with the frightened archaeo-ideology of the bourgeois watchdog...’⁷⁵ I am aware of nothing within Laing’s work that quite matches the venom of Cooper’s social criticism, even if it is misguided in some respects. It is vitally important for the reader to take note of this substantial difference between Laing and Cooper. This distinction is also apparent in Cooper’s arguments that madness has a revolutionary use, and that therapy could also serve such a purpose. He suggests, with regard to those suffering mental distress, that:

...the people so stigmatized may find a social revolutionary use for their “aberrations” instead of letting them sink into a private neurosis which always confirms “the system” and plays endless, joyless games with it.⁷⁶

Cooper claims that such a revolutionary moment could occur through a radical ‘...destructuring of the family...’⁷⁷ There is some substance in this argument, since a significant change in the structure of the nuclear family would alter society. However, later in this chapter Cooper presents a rather more controversial line of thought in a discussion of the possibility of undoing repressive processes of socialisation through psychotherapy. ‘If this happens on a wide enough scale, therapy becomes dangerous to the bourgeois state and highly subversive because radically new forms of social life are indicated.’⁷⁸ This latter argument is entirely that of Cooper and not Laing. This latter difference is highly relevant to Jacoby’s misguided criticisms of Laing in Chapter Eight, where Jacoby makes criticisms of Laing which more accurately pertain to Cooper. In summary, Cooper and Laing’s work should not be viewed as identical since

⁷⁵ *ibid*, p.166

⁷⁶ *ibid*

⁷⁷ *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ *ibid*, p.170

Cooper presents arguments which are either absent from Laing's work, or are not developed by Laing in the more explicitly socially critical direction that Cooper's work takes.

Laing gives further clarification of his position on psychiatry in *Wisdom, Madness and Folly*. He states that he wanted to try and change the practice of psychiatry, not get rid of it, as would be suggested if he was indeed an 'anti-psychiatrist'.

I wanted to clear a space where people, either defined as patients or not (that is a matter of *etiquette*), could be treated by me, if they wanted to be treated by me, in completely different ways, in many respects the *opposite* ways, from those in which I had been trained to treat them. Then we would see what happened. But, I was told, how can you? You are abdicating your medical responsibilities. It's like refusing to give a diabetic insulin. To encourage a schizophrenic to talk to you is like encouraging a haemophiliac to bleed. I knew that eventually I would have to have the courage of my lack of psychiatric convictions.⁷⁹

It is easy to understand how a simplistic reading of Laing's work could produce the misunderstanding that he is actually 'anti-psychiatry'. Those who are psychiatrists themselves may more easily jump to this conclusion, because of Laing's fierce attack upon their profession. Clare's mistake here is at least understandable, more so than those made by Reznek.

Further misunderstandings

that can be generated by allocating Laing the 'anti-psychiatric' label, are that Laing is completely against the use of psychiatric drugs, and that he thinks that a person should just be left alone if they are suffering from some sort of mental illness. Again, responses to this sort of comment are provided in *Wisdom, Madness and Folly*. Here Laing argues that: 'Drugs can be a great boon in

⁷⁹ *Wisdom, Madness and Folly*, p.19

psychiatry or any other style of mental healing. It all depends on how they are used or abused.’⁸⁰ He also suggests that: ‘I would welcome intervention from others whether I liked it or not if I went into some of the hypermanic states I’ve seen in which I would die of exhaustion if I were not stopped.’⁸¹ Laing also gives voice to these lesser-known opinions of his in the radio interview that he gave with Clare. Laing must have felt that these sort of criticisms of his work required responses and further clarification on his behalf. However, Laing’s explicit statement that he is not an ‘anti-psychiatrist’ in *Wisdom, Madness and Folly*, was not published until five years after the second edition of Clare’s *Psychiatry in Dissent*. Nevertheless, I feel that this is an important matter to clear up early in this thesis.

A problem with Clare’s critique of Laing that occurs within the chapter entitled ‘Causal Factors in Schizophrenia’ is the very title of that chapter itself. Again, Laing deals with this sort of criticism in the first quotation that I have used in this section from *Wisdom, Madness and Folly*, where Laing states that he has never said that families, etc, cause schizophrenia. To the careful reader of Laing, it should be apparent that the language of cause and effect is absent from Laing’s work. This throws doubt upon the remainder of Clare’s critique which proceeds upon the lines that Laing does say that families cause schizophrenia. Clare argues that:

If Laing claims that certain types of family communications can *cause* schizophrenia then this can only be tested by having some operational definition of what ‘schizophrenia’ is and

⁸⁰ *ibid*, p.23

⁸¹ *ibid*, pp.25-26

then looking for the allegedly pathological patterns in families with schizophrenic members and families without them.⁸²

Clare's critique here is based upon a misinterpretation and misreading of Laing's actual work. With Clare's first criticism of Laing in this chapter, that Laing supposedly claims that families can cause schizophrenia, this criticism is based upon the idea that Laing is claiming something which he does not. This criticism by Clare is very similar to one made by Reznick, which I have evaluated in the previous section. It can be seen at this early stage of this thesis that mistakes in the criticism of Laing are indeed being reproduced by different critics. Laing and Esterson's responses to these types of criticism which I have noted earlier are sufficient to address these criticisms. The point of *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, as they argued themselves, was not to say simplistically that families cause schizophrenia.

Clare further reproduces mistakes committed by Reznick in his section on 'Family Life and Schizophrenia', where he attempts to criticise *The Politics of Experience*. Here Clare also lifts a quotation from this book out of its wider context, and takes it as more representative of Laing's position on the family than it really is.

Some analysts, such as Laing, do appear to hold the view that the contemporary family is a 'pathogenic' institution. Such a view hardly tells us much about what kind of family psychopathology 'specifically' predisposes its members to develop schizophrenia. 'We are all prostitutes and murderers now', Laing once declared passionately (1967).⁸³

⁸² *ibid*, pp.170-171

⁸³ **Psychiatry in Dissent**, p.192

Laing's statement that: 'We are all murderers and prostitutes...'⁸⁴ does not even occur in one of the chapters of *The Politics of Experience* that deals with Laing's views on the family. It occurs in the introduction to the book. This invalidates Clare's criticism of this statement, which proceeds as follows.

Such a judgement, stressing as it does our common innate potentialities to self and mutual despair and destruction, does not provide us with any helpful discriminating information as to what it might be inside the family which provokes, of all possible responses, the schizophrenic response.⁸⁵

This is a further example

of the cheap, unproductive criticism of Laing produced by conservative psychiatrists. *The Politics of Experience* does seem to be particularly beyond their comprehension. The only way that conservative psychiatrists can attempt to criticise this book is on the basis of a complete lack of engagement with the ideas in this text. Clare does, at the very least, show some awareness that *The Politics of Experience* is a book about alienation and repression. However, this awareness does not broaden out to inform his critique of Laing. The remainder of Clare's criticism suffers from very much the same problems that I have pointed out earlier in relation to his misunderstanding that Laing's work is based upon a cause and effect relation.

The other question which remains to be resolved concerns the difficulty of separating *cause* from *effect*. Confronted by evidence of serious family psychopathology and a member manifesting schizophrenic symptoms, one may be tempted to opt for a cause-and-effect model and 'diagnose' the family disturbance as the *cause* of the schizophrenia. But confronted

⁸⁴ **The Politics of Experience**, p.11

⁸⁵ **Psychiatry in Dissent**, p.192

by any vicious cycle, the diagnostician has a thorny task in deciding which causes what!⁸⁶

It is too strong a reading of Laing to argue that his work contains a ‘gigantic insistence... that it *is* the family who has driven the schizophrenic mad...’⁸⁷ As I have already argued, Laing’s work avoids the use of simplistic determinism. Clare’s criticism here may be the result of his efforts to impose a deterministic cause-and-effect relation onto Laing’s work. Clare also puts forward the argument that:

...the family model of causation in schizophrenia labels, scapegoats, and stigmatizes every bit as much (and more?) as the much-maligned medical model. In the family model, however, the targets for blame tend to be the parents, the family, and to a lesser extent society whereas in the medical model the targets, in so far as there are any, are the largely impersonal ones of brain, biochemistry and blood levels.⁸⁸

This gives a further example of the problems with the conservative psychiatric view. I cannot see the worth in Clare’s idea here that it is better to ‘blame’ impersonal biological things for mental illness, rather than ‘blaming’ actual human beings. Clare shares our culture’s assumption that the family can only be a good thing, and that it deserves to be a cherished institution. This leaves him without enough of a critical position when it comes to evaluating Laing’s theories involving schizophrenia and the family.

Clare’s attempted critique of Laing is slightly better than that by Reznick. Earlier in *Psychiatry in Dissent*, Clare shows that he agrees with Laing’s argument in *The Politics of Experience* that living in a capitalist society may lead to people experiencing mental distress.

⁸⁶ *ibid*, p.192

⁸⁷ *ibid*, p.194

⁸⁸ *ibid*, p.195

Clare notes that ‘it is a common belief that we are all a little mad.’⁸⁹ He continues:

A more spirited version of such a view is that provided by R.D. Laing in *The Politics of Experience*. ‘The madness that we encounter in “patients”’, he insists, ‘is a gross travesty, a mockery, a grotesque caricature of what the natural healing of that estranged integration we call sanity might be’ (1967: 119). A number of epidemiological studies would seem to bear out such a vision of widespread madness.⁹⁰

The quotation from Laing that Clare uses here is from one of the heavily criticised last three chapters of *The Politics of Experience*. The fact that Clare is in agreement with this shows a further similarity with Reznick, who also agrees with this idea of Laing’s. Conservative psychiatrists seem to accept the notion that cultures can be pathological. However, this is as far as they appear to go with engaging with any critical arguments put forward by Laing.

Laing himself, in an interview from 1978, offers a reason for the psychiatric establishment’s criticism of, and lack of agreement with his ideas. I will be reviewing further examples of criticism of Laing found in interviews with him in the next section.

Putting himself in his ex-colleagues’ places, Laing can see why they remain silent even if they also deprecate the present state of psychiatry: “They’ve got to keep their mouths shut so they don’t lose their jobs or find themselves never getting promotion.”⁹¹

There is the matter of conventional psychiatrists not wanting to end their careers at an earlier stage than they would like, and perhaps becoming unable to draw salaries to which they are accustomed. This lends these sorts of criticisms an aura

⁸⁹ *ibid*, p.30

⁹⁰ *op. cit.*, p.31

⁹¹ Hennegan, A, (1978), Interview with Laing, *Gay News*, No. 153, 19th October (The page number is not discernible in the photocopy provided by the inter-library loan service.)

of expediency. This also may be why Laing's theories that radically challenge the conventional bio-medical psychiatric view come in for such a great attack from these quarters. Conservative psychiatrists probably do not want their profession to be completely invalidated.

Clare also states that his section on 'Family Life and Schizophrenia' is not intended to:

...dismiss family approaches, for that way we return to ideological confrontation and polarization. Family studies have provided and are providing systematic insights into family communications and relationships which may yet have immense implications for psychiatry in the future.⁹²

Clare does at the very least show some respect for Laing, a feature which is completely absent from Reznick's chapter. In the radio interview Clare conducted with Laing, Clare says that 'everyone in contemporary psychiatry owes something to Ronnie Laing', and that 'even his many critics would admit he was one of the most controversial and influential psychiatrists of modern times.'⁹³

Clare does show some evidence of actual engagement with Laing's work. Nevertheless, there are still massive problems with his critique of Laing. In a similar vein to Reznick, his critique is based upon a received idea of Laing's work, rather than the critique proceeding through a demonstration of Laing's actual work through a scholarly reading. The aforementioned radio interview between Laing and Clare was used as evidence against Laing by the General Medical Council. The GMC took Laing's candid admissions of depression and alcoholism as evidence sufficient for him to be struck off the doctors' register as unfit to practice. In a commentary on the original interview by Laing's son

⁹² **Psychiatry in Dissent**, p.195

⁹³ Clare, A, (1996), Interview with Laing, **In the Psychiatrist's Chair**, BBC Radio 4, (original interview with Laing 1984)

Adrian, he suggests that that interview ‘unwittingly contributed to [R.D.] Laing’s downfall.’⁹⁴

Criticism of Laing by the Psychiatric Establishment in Interviews

Additional examples of the sort of criticism directed at Laing by the psychiatric establishment are found in interviews with Laing. In an interview from 1973 in *Rolling Stone*, Jonathan Cott argues that after reading Laing’s work, ‘...it became easy for [him] to understand why many psychiatrists were calling Laing himself a paranoid schizophrenic, for his books functioned in part as a kind of mirror that reflected the reader’s own delicate balance. I mean, if Laing’s thoughts were a product of a deluded mind, why get upset or hurl names?’⁹⁵ Here Cott is suggesting that these types of criticism of Laing may have more to do with whoever is actually producing the criticism, rather than Laing himself. The psychiatric establishment have utilised almost any possible method to criticise Laing, including *ad hominem* attacks. Attacking the person rather than the theory is an even lower form of criticism than those attempts I have reviewed earlier. At the very least Reznick and Clare try to criticise Laing’s theory, rather than making personal attacks upon the man himself, even if their attempts are based upon profound misreadings. As Cott says, there would be no need for the psychiatric establishment to get so upset about Laing’s ideas if they were merely the result of a person in a state of mental distress.

⁹⁴ *ibid*

⁹⁵ Cott, J, (1973), *Knots, Tangles, Fankles, and Whirligogs: A Conversation With R.D. Laing*, *Rolling Stone*, 30th August, p.40

In *Wisdom, Madness and Folly*, Laing puts

forward the argument that many respected philosophers are also seen as mentally ill by the psychiatric establishment.

I cajoled one of my psychiatric superiors to read Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death* [sic]. He did. 'Thank you. Very interesting. A very good example of early nineteenth-century schizoid psychopathology,' he commented. At the same time, I dreaded much more than ever becoming like them and felt an enormous relief and sense of gratitude that I was not one of them. What was I to do, under these circumstances? Insofar as my mind was akin to Kierkegaard's, it suffered from the same psychopathology, schizoid, or worse. My mind went along also with such diagnosed psychotics as Nietzsche, Joyce, even *Artaud!* Worse! Definitely. I had been trained to diagnose myself as schizophrenic... I had been trained to diagnose myself as psychotic.⁹⁶

In a footnote to this piece from Laing he includes the following:

On reading this passage in the typescript Dr Leon Redler wrote me the following note:

When I was a psychiatric resident at Metropolitan Hospital in New York City (1963-65) the consultant on ward rounds used as a criteria for diagnosing a man schizophrenic that he could not understand what he was talking about. A fellow resident, now on the faculty of the Harvard Psychiatry Dept., commented that he had real difficulty understanding what Hegel was talking about. Would the consultant, if he had similar difficulty and indeed could not fathom Hegel, thereby diagnose Hegel as schizophrenic? The consultant psychiatrist replied: 'I certainly would.'⁹⁷

These examples suggest that the psychiatric establishment view as pathological anything that they do not understand. This may be an explanation for their view of Laing's work as the creation of a distressed mind. This demonstrates a very

⁹⁶ Laing, R.D, (1985), **Wisdom, Madness and Folly – The Making of a Psychiatrist 1927-1957**, London, Macmillan, pp.12-13

⁹⁷ *ibid*, p.13

simplistic approach. Laing himself suggests that psychiatric training leads to a rather closed view of the world.

A further example of criticism of Laing from the psychiatric establishment is found in an interview from 1978 in *Gay News*.

R D Laing is no longer relevant to modern psychiatry. He knows so, because the *British Journal of Psychiatry* told him. "This book has nothing to say to psychiatry" pronounced the *Journal's* reviewer, writing of Laing's recent work, *The Facts of Life*. Other people still listen though. Even his own profession can't dismiss him entirely. "Books like *The Divided Self* and *The Self and Others* they have to take account of. They teach them at the London School of Economics, you see," Laing explains dryly, poker-faced. He continues to see patients, though two colleagues who applied for licenses to work with him were told licenses wouldn't be necessary, "because their work with me would not involve practising psychiatry."⁹⁸

Out of Laing's ten published theoretical works, I find *The Facts of Life* (1976) to be arguably the weakest. I will offer some further discussion of this later in my critique of Laing. The most significant problem with *The Facts of Life* is that the book has no central focus. It jumps between Laing's speculations on how birth may affect the later personality, autobiographical recollections, and the critique of science and psychiatry. No main thread through these disparate aspects of this book is provided to enable the reader to piece together these different views in any coherent way. As a result, the stronger and more critical parts of this text become submerged within the overall lack of structure. After reading the book, I was left with the impression that Laing had been rather sloppy with regard to organizing and editing this text.

⁹⁸ Hennegan, A, (1978), Interview with Laing, *Gay News*, No. 153, 19th October (The page number is not discernible in the photocopy provided by the inter-library loan service.)

However, the issue here is whether it is relevant to psychiatry. The reviewer from the *British Journal of Psychiatry* mentioned in the above quotation seems to have missed Chapter Eleven of *The Facts of Life – ‘A Lecture’*. This is by far the strongest chapter of this book. It is relevant to psychiatry because in this chapter Laing continues his critique of psychiatry. The material on electro-shock ‘therapy’ and its origins is particularly gruesome. The fact that the reviewer thought that this book has ‘nothing to say to psychiatry’ does seem rather arbitrary given the quality of this chapter. Perhaps the reviewer had committed the same crime that I highlighted earlier with Reznick and Clare’s critiques, that of not doing their reading properly.

Nevertheless, this particular criticism of Laing may have been generated because Laing’s criticism of ECT within *The Facts of Life* was not making any original criticism about this method of treatment. In Clare’s critical but balanced assessment of ECT in *Psychiatry in Dissent*, a number of critiques of ECT which pre-date that in *The Facts of Life* are noted.⁹⁹ A full evaluation of the history of the critique of ECT is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it is clear that Laing’s critique of this form of treatment was not necessarily offering anything new to the psychiatric profession, who were fully aware of the problems with this treatment at the time that *The Facts of Life* was published. Therefore, this may offer a coherent reason for the above criticism. It is also possible to see why the people who applied for licenses to work with Laing did not have to acquire them because Laing ‘was not practising psychiatry’. I can see some validity in this, as Laing’s views on what may help a distressed person, and the psychiatric establishment’s views on what

⁹⁹ **Psychiatry in Dissent**, p.252, 256, 270

help can be given, are very different. Perhaps it is almost some sort of backhanded compliment to Laing that he was not seen as practising conventional psychiatry.

Laing himself hits back at the criticism mentioned in this interview.

As far as Laing is concerned most of the ex-colleagues who have rusticated him aren't practising psychiatry, either. "Institutional psychiatry in this country keeps people in prisons, drugs them, gives them electric shocks. It demeans them and subjects them to humiliating experiences. It puts them in situations which even those in their right minds would find shaking. If it does anything, it helps to drive people a little more crazy – and we call that 'psychiatry'."¹⁰⁰

A consistently bizarre aspect of the criticism of Laing from the psychiatric establishment is the lack of any reflexive awareness in their criticism. It is assumed that the conventional psychiatrist's point of view is simply correct, and that no counter-argument can undermine their own views. It may be the case that accepting any radical challenge to psychiatry would be enough to shatter their framework of beliefs. I cannot help but feel that Laing's comments at the end of this interview are indeed directed at the psychiatric establishment.

"I hope to live long enough to get my revenge on those characters who say I'm finished by letting them have a bit more of the stuff they don't like to hear and by writing stuff which, even if *they* don't like it, other people find worth reading and listening to!"¹⁰¹

This review of the critiques of Laing by conservative psychiatrists has shown that there are a number of problems with their criticism. It has been a relatively simple task, given my familiarity with Laing's texts and ideas, to demonstrate the errors made by these critics. There are

¹⁰⁰ Hennegan, A, (1978), Interview with Laing, *Gay News*, No. 153, 19th October

¹⁰¹ *ibid*

a number of methodological principles required to produce a sound, scholarly critique which are lacking in the psychiatric critiques. Reznek and Clare have shown that their reading of Laing's work is inadequate. This then leads to the production of poor interpretations of Laing's ideas and theories. Their imprecise reading causes them to take quotations from Laing's work out of context, and argue that these quotations are more representative of Laing's position than they in fact are. Their arguments are not properly supported by reference to clear examples from Laing's actual work. Additionally, misreading by these critics produces fundamental misunderstandings on their behalf with regard to Laing's work. These inadequacies lead to these authors criticising either the standard reception of Laing's work, or their own incorrect interpretation of his work, and not Laing's specific texts themselves. Therefore these critiques are rather instead more like pseudo-critiques. All of the above strongly suggests that Reznek and Clare provide indirect criticism of Laing, because they do not engage with Laing's theory properly on its own terms. A fair critique of an author must take into account the author's intentions with regard to their work, the author's own definitions of their projects, and interpret their position correctly. It must not claim that the author makes arguments which they do not. Clare and Reznek demonstrate only a limited or non-existent engagement with Laing's theories in their critiques. A critique of an author's work could be used to move a theory forward by acknowledging problems and suggesting solutions. However, Reznek and Clare's critiques cannot be used in this way, since they are unproductive due to their poor scholarship. They only advance Laing's contributions in a negative way, as Laing's work has much greater quality and depth than is shown in these pseudo-critiques.

4) Deleuze and Guattari's Laingian Voyage

This chapter will evaluate the commentary on Laing's work provided by Deleuze and Guattari within their 1972 text *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Some critiques of Laing's theories are offered within this text. However, the reception of Laing within *Anti-Oedipus* is more positive overall than that provided by the conservative psychiatric establishment. Strictly speaking, this section should appear later in this thesis when I examine the left-wing critiques of Laing. Nevertheless, Deleuze and Guattari's engagement with Laing's work provides an interesting counterpoint to the conservative psychiatric critiques. Aspects of Laing's theories which are critiqued by the latter group are praised and developed within *Anti-Oedipus*. The tension between these two opposing receptions of Laing's work means that a more coherent discussion of these divergent views will be enabled by these chapters following each other. The discussion within this section is centred on the chapters of *Anti-Oedipus* which refer to Laing directly.

Deleuze and Guattari's Commentary on and Praise of Laing's Work

In addition to commending aspects of Laing's ideas, Deleuze and Guattari also offer some general comments on his work. Their critique of Laing will be examined in the section following this one. Their comments and praise regarding Laing's work are largely centred around Laing's exposition of the schizophrenic journey or voyage within *The Politics of Experience*. This aspect of Laing's ideas is viewed by Deleuze and Guattari in a positive light, in sharp contrast to the

severe criticism of this notion by conservative psychiatrists which was reviewed in the previous chapter. Deleuze and Guattari contend that:

R.D. Laing is entirely right in defining the schizophrenic process as a voyage of initiation, a transcendental experience of the loss of the Ego, which causes a subject to remark: “I had existed since the very beginning...from the lowest form of life [the body without organs] to the present time,...I was looking ...- not looking so much as just *feeling* – ahead of me was the most horrific journey.”¹

Instead of rejecting this concept outright without further consideration as Reznick does, for example, much of the material within the chapters of *Anti-Oedipus* that concern Laing’s work seeks to develop this idea of the schizophrenic journey or ‘process’ as it is referred to within this text.

In this way, Deleuze and Guattari attempt to advance Laing’s ideas concerning the journey within *The Politics of Experience*. Reznick’s critique of this aspect of Laing’s work as making the claim that ‘schizophrenia has valuable consequences’² is viewed from an alternative perspective by Deleuze and Guattari, who see the much-maligned last three chapters of *The Politics of Experience* as containing insights into the experience of the schizophrenic. Laing notes towards the end of the chapter entitled ‘A Ten-Day Voyage’, which provides an account of a schizophrenic journey largely from the perspective of the person who went through it, that ‘there is a great deal that urgently needs to be written about this and similar experiences,’³ but that he has only covered a few ‘fundamental’ matters in relation to this subject.⁴ Deleuze

¹ Deleuze, G, and Guattari, F, (1972), **Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia**, (trans. R.Hurley, M.Seem and H.R. Lane), London, Continuum, p.84. Their quotation here from **The Politics of Experience** refers to pp.126-127 of the edition that I am using, with their addition of ‘the body without organs’.

² Reznick, L, (1991), **The Philosophical Defence of Psychiatry**, London, Routledge, p. 69

³ **The Politics of Experience**, p.136

⁴ *ibid*

and Guattari's discussion of this concept builds upon Laing's comments in a manner which engages with Laing's work on a higher level than the critiques provided by conservative psychiatrists.

The above quotation from Deleuze and Guattari, and many of their additional comments, serve to unpick the line of thought behind the conservative psychiatric establishment's rejection of the schizophrenic voyage. Deleuze and Guattari describe the schizophrenic journey as 'a transcendental experience of the loss of the Ego'.⁵ Ego-loss tends to be viewed as pathological from a conservative psychiatric standpoint. The loss of the ego within forms of psychosis illustrates the limit that psychoanalysis reaches in terms of being an appropriate, useful form of analysis for the treatment of these forms of distress. Psychoanalysis requires an individual to be in possession of a 'normally' functioning ego in order for the analysis to occur. The psychoanalytic distinction between neurosis and psychosis points up this characterisation of psychosis as involving the loss or splitting of the ego. Laplanche and Pontalis explain the role of the loss of the ego in psychosis in Freud's work.

Whereas in neurosis the ego bows to the demands of reality (and of the super-ego) and represses instinctual claims, in the case of psychosis a rupture between ego and reality occurs straight away, leaving the ego under the sway of the id...⁶

In Freud's other conception of psychosis as involving the splitting of the ego, only a part of the ego loses its relation to reality.⁷ According to Laplanche and Pontalis, Freud never considered these explanations of psychosis to be

⁵ **Anti-Oedipus**, p.84

⁶ Laplanche, J, and Pontalis, J.B, (1973), **The Language of Psychoanalysis**, (trans. D. Lagache), London, Karnac, p.372

⁷ *ibid*, p.427

satisfactory. In his later work he attempted to uncover a ‘better’ explanation for psychosis by means of the disavowal of castration.⁸

However, both Laing and Deleuze and Guattari view these interpretations of psychosis as completely inadequate. The self-referential nature of psychoanalysis means that it cannot move beyond its own terminology, even when this jargon is limiting of its explanatory power, as in the case of psychosis. Laing argues that psychiatric and psychoanalytic jargon:

...consists of words which split man up verbally in a way which is analogous to the existential splits we have to describe here. But we cannot give an adequate account of the existential splits unless we can begin from the concept of a unitary whole, and no such concept exists, nor can any such concept be expressed within the current language system of psychiatry or psycho-analysis.⁹

Whilst Laing (at least in his earlier work) is happy to explain schizophrenia in terms of the splitting of the self, he is not content to limit his analysis to the closed framework of psychoanalysis. For Laing, the self cannot be adequately described within Freud’s topography of the id, the ego and the super-ego, nor can the splitting of the self that may occur within schizophrenia. Deleuze and Guattari share Laing’s discontent with psychoanalytic jargon in terms of its inadequacy to explain forms of psychosis. For the psychotic to be suffering from the disavowal of castration, psychosis must therefore be explicable in terms of the Oedipus complex. However, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that this is a ‘false criterion’¹⁰ with which to view psychosis. They note that psychoanalysis here follows ‘...an idea dear to traditional psychiatry: that madness is fundamentally

⁸ *ibid*, p.372

⁹ **The Divided Self**, p.19

¹⁰ **Anti-Oedipus**, p.123

linked to a loss of reality.’¹¹ They then proceed to question where and how this loss of reality occurs.

Could it be that the loss of reality is not the effect of the schizophrenic process, but the effect of its forced oedipalization, that is to say, its interruption? Must we... suppose that some tolerate oedipalization less well than others? [The schizophrenic] ...is ill because of the oedipalization to which he is made to submit...and which he can no longer tolerate.¹²

Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the psychotic loss of reality is not a symptom of an illness, but rather a reaction on behalf of the person to having a psychoanalytic frame of reference imposed upon their experience, which the person cannot cope with. Deleuze and Guattari utilise some of their analysis in *Anti-Oedipus* in expanding upon Laing’s idea in *The Politics of Experience* that the schizophrenic voyage is rarely or never allowed to proceed through its own course without being arrested in some manner.

As Laing says, they are interrupted in their journey. They have lost reality. But when did they lose it? During the journey, or during the interruption of the journey?¹³

Within *The Politics of Experience*, Laing offers some reasons as to why the voyage is interrupted. He refers to an introduction to an autobiographical account of schizophrenia written by Gregory Bateson, in which Bateson puts forward the idea of the schizophrenic journey as similar to an initiation ceremony found in other cultures.

What needs to be explained is the failure of many who embark upon this voyage to return from it. Do these encounter

¹¹ ibid

¹² op.cit.

¹³ ibid, p.124

circumstances either in family life or in institutional care so grossly maladaptive that even the richest and best organized hallucinatory experience cannot save them?¹⁴

Following this quotation from Bateson, Laing states that he is ‘in substantial agreement with this view.’¹⁵ Bateson’s quotation cleverly turns the focus away from the distressed person as the one suffering from a failure of adaptation to the wider social context around the person being the locus of maladaptation. This is similar to a view I have heard expressed regarding disability, where rather than the person having the disability, it is instead the society that has the disability because it cannot adapt to a person who is ‘abnormal’. Here Laing, through Bateson’s quotation, suggests that the wider social context cannot support the self-healing of the individual who has embarked upon the voyage. It is noted in the above quotation, and within the chapter of *The Politics of Experience* entitled ‘A Ten-Day Voyage’, that there are accounts of people who have been through the schizophrenic journey, and who have eventually returned to collective reality afterwards, with no outside interference in this process occurring.

With regard to

the voyage, Laing argues the following:

Sometimes (not always and not necessarily) these unusual experiences that are expressed by unusual behaviour appear to be part of a potentially orderly, natural sequence of experiences.

This sequence is very seldom allowed to occur because we are so busy ‘treating’ the patient...¹⁶

¹⁴ Bateson quotation taken from **The Politics of Experience**, pp.97-98, Laing’s italics

¹⁵ *ibid*, p.98

¹⁶ *op.cit.*, p.102

Laing suggests that the treatment that the person may receive has the effect of interrupting their journey, which then may serve to worsen their condition. No doubt psychiatry has a vested interest in stopping this voyage, because if it was found that schizophrenics, for example, may eventually ‘come round’ without any help (provided that they were in a safe environment) then psychiatry would be of little remaining use. The problem is that it is no doubt seen as an abdication of medical responsibility not to treat a person who is severely distressed, and the wider social context cannot support this. Jesse Watkins, whose experience of a schizophrenic journey forms most of ‘A Ten-Day Voyage’, states that in order for the voyage to be facilitated, the person requires ‘...some sort of sheet anchor which is holding on to the present – and to himself as he is...,’ with the addition of the person having other people there to look after them whom they trust.¹⁷

Deleuze and Guattari also note that it is rare for a person to complete the voyage, as Watkins did. ‘Very few people accomplish what Laing calls the breakthrough of this schizophrenic wall or limit: “quite ordinary people,” nevertheless. But the majority draw near the wall and back away horrified.’¹⁸ The lack of support for such a journey outside of a medicalised environment cannot but make this more difficult for a person. The very culture that we inhabit, with its focus upon experience in the outer rather than the inner world, makes the likelihood of a person encountering a full completion of the journey into an impossibility. With regard to the voyage, Laing states that:

I have listed very briefly little more than the headings for an extended study and understanding of a natural sequence of experiential stepping stones that, in some instances, is submerged, concealed, distorted and arrested by the label

¹⁷ *ibid*, p.134

¹⁸ **Anti-Oedipus**, p.135

‘schizophrenia’ with its connotations of an illness-to-be-cured.¹⁹

It is clear that, as I have mentioned earlier, Deleuze and Guattari saw a great deal of intrinsic merit in Laing’s work on the journey because (from my reading of the text) many of the chapters of *Anti-Oedipus* that cite Laing contain a fair amount of exposition which furthers Laing’s comments on this topic. ‘Laing’s importance lies in the fact that, starting from certain intuitions that remained ambiguous in Jaspers, he was able to indicate the incredible scope of this voyage.’²⁰ In a direct juxtaposition to the psychiatric establishment’s criticism of this idea as ‘romanticising’ madness, Deleuze and Guattari view Laing’s sketch of the voyage as one of his major contributions. Unfortunately a full comparison of the ways in which they add to Laing’s discussion of this concept is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Deleuze and Guattari note that:

In the whole of psychiatry only Jaspers, then Laing have grasped what process signified [sic], and its fulfillment – and so escaped the familialism that is the ordinary bed and board of psychoanalysis and psychiatry.²¹

Following this comment, they proceed to give a long quotation from *The Politics of Experience*, taken from two of the last three chapters of that text.²² The above quotation from *Anti-Oedipus* illustrates why Deleuze and Guattari see so much importance in Laing’s setting out of the nature of the schizophrenic voyage. They view that particular concept as a way of moving beyond the focus on the family which is found within psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Since the voyage involves

¹⁹ **The Politics of Experience**, p.107

²⁰ **Anti-Oedipus**, p.362

²¹ *ibid*, p.131

²² In the edition of **The Politics of Experience** that I am using the quotations appear on pp.107, 110, 113, and 118-119.

the person moving into a state which transcends the individual's typical perception of reality, the person experiencing the voyage (from the accounts given by Jaspers and Watkins in *The Politics of Experience*) shifts into a state beyond family-bound experience.

Deleuze and Guattari are highly critical of the focus on the family within psychiatry and psychoanalysis, which they see as excluding wider social, political and historical factors which impact upon the individual and their experience of distress. The question of what really it is that makes the schizophrenic ill in some manner is a recurring one throughout *Anti-Oedipus*.

...What reduces the schizophrenic to his autistic, hospitalized profile, cut off from reality? Is it the process, or is it rather the interruption of the process, its aggravation, its continuation in the void? What forces the schizophrenic to withdraw to a body without organs that has become deaf, dumb and blind?²³

As I have noted earlier in this chapter, as Deleuze and Guattari's argument progresses, they decide that it is not the process itself (the voyage) that makes the schizophrenic ill, but rather its interruption or 'oedipalization'. They critique the focus on the family within psychiatry and psychoanalysis because 'all delirium possesses a world-historical, political, and racial content,'²⁴ which Deleuze and Guattari suggest is ignored within the familialism of psychiatry and psychoanalysis. They view it as an error to lead '...the historical and political content of the delirium back to an internal familial determination.'²⁵ This is a key element of their critique of the Oedipal complex. They consider this Freudian concept as closing off the influence of wider factors upon the individual.

²³ *Anti-Oedipus*, p.88

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ *op. cit.*, p.89

As I have already noted, Deleuze and Guattari argue that only Laing and Jaspers have provided illustrations within their work of what the schizophrenic journey may consist of. Laing refers to the account of the voyage given by a patient of Jaspers' in his *General Psychopathology* (1962) within *The Politics of Experience*.²⁶ The process of ego-loss is described within this account which is provided in Jaspers' work: it involves the loss of the '...protective and successful deceit of the feeling of personal existence.'²⁷ In a similar nature to the account given by Watkins in 'A Ten-Day Voyage', the journey itself does not appear to be a pleasant experience, although this individual found some benefit from having experienced it, in the form of the achievement of a 'higher self'.²⁸ However, Laing critiques the comments that Jaspers makes following the account of the journey that he cites.

Jaspers still speaks of this experience as morbid, and tends to discount the patient's own construction. Yet both the experience and construction may be valid in their own terms.²⁹

Jaspers views the account of the voyage provided by the patient as simply a delusory experience which is a symptom of schizophrenia. Unlike Laing, Jaspers is not happy to let the patient's view of their experience stand on its own, without dismissals, interpretations or the imposition of a disease-entity upon the account. Laing's willingness to let patients' self-descriptions of their experiences stand without further interference is a theme that runs through all of his theoretical work. A parallel can be made here between the psychiatric action of stopping the journey (by drugs, for example), and between the psychiatric and psychoanalytic

²⁶ **The Politics of Experience**, pp.110-112

²⁷ Jaspers, cited in *ibid*, p.110

²⁸ *ibid*, p.112

²⁹ *op. cit.*

tendency to act upon the other's experience by making interpretations, imposing a disease categorisation upon the experience, and so forth. Again, the philosophical influence of phenomenology upon Laing's work is apparent in this attempt to view the experience of the person without interpreting it in a classically psychiatric or psychoanalytic fashion.

There are occasions (particularly within *The Divided Self* and *Self and Others* (1961)) where Laing provides psychoanalytic interpretations of patients' experiences. Nevertheless, at other points in his discussions he notes that making interpretations in this manner is unnecessary, and may be unhelpful to the patient. Chapter Five of *Self and Others* contains a case-study of a woman who underwent the experience of 'The Coldness of Death'³⁰ (which is the title of this particular chapter). Following this case-study provided both in Laing's and the woman's own language, Laing argues that: 'confronted with this woman's experience, clinical psychiatric terminology... is completely inadequate.'³¹ He continues:

One glimpses here the naked, intricate actuality of the complexity of experiences that those of us who do not deny what we cannot explain or even describe are struggling to understand. Theory can only legitimately be made on behalf of experience, not in order to deny experience which the theory ignores out of embarrassment.³²

With regard to the schizophrenic voyage, the negative reaction (or over-reaction) to this aspect of Laing's work by the conservative psychiatric establishment may have been occasioned by Laing's willingness to move beyond the closed systems of psychiatric classification and the jargon of psychoanalysis.

³⁰ Laing, R.D, (1961), **Self and Others**, (2nd ed), Harmondsworth, Penguin, p.69

³¹ *ibid*, pp.74-75

³² *ibid*, p.75

In *The Divided Self*, in a discussion following another case-study of a woman who experienced anxiety when she felt alone, Laing sets out a psychoanalytic interpretation of her complaint. However, he then proceeds to demonstrate the irrelevance of a psychoanalytic interpretation in terms of grasping and addressing the root of this individual's distress.

...The central or pivotal issue in this patient's life is not to be discovered in her 'unconscious'...

The pivotal point around which all her life is centred is her *lack of ontological autonomy*. If she is not in the actual presence of another person who knows her, or if she cannot succeed in evoking this person's presence in his absence, her sense of her own identity drains away from her.³³

Both Laing and Deleuze and Guattari can be seen as critics of Freud, although Laing is more sympathetic to Freud, in some respects, than Deleuze and Guattari. Despite their critique of Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex, and of the focus on the family within psychiatry and psychoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari still retain the usage of such psychoanalytic terms as the unconscious and preconscious within *Anti-Oedipus*. I found their use of such terms to sit rather uneasily within their scathing critique of other aspects of Freudian theory.

With regard to the schizophrenic voyage, it is not noted either by the conservative psychiatric critics of this concept, nor by Deleuze and Guattari that the idea of the journey and of schizophrenia as some form of 'breakthrough', have a history which runs from the very beginning of Laing's work. These notions are not found within *The Politics of Experience* alone as tends to be assumed. They originate from *The Divided Self* and *Self and Others*, which tend to receive much less criticism than *The Politics of Experience*

³³ **The Divided Self**, p.56

itself. Within *The Divided Self*, Laing makes a statement that is akin to his arguments in the heavily-criticised last three chapters of *The Politics of Experience*. Laing suggests that it is paradoxical that there are many dangerous people within our society which are not regarded as psychotic, and puts forward the notion that he is:

...aware that the man who is said to be deluded may be in his delusion telling me the truth, and this in no equivocal or metaphorical sense, but quite literally, and that the cracked mind of the schizophrenic may *let in* light which does not enter the intact minds of many sane people whose minds are closed.³⁴

In *Self and Others*, Laing refers to ‘...the possibility that what we call psychosis may be sometimes a natural process of healing...’³⁵ There are lines of development of certain ideas which run throughout the majority of Laing’s theoretical work. These recurring concepts can only be identified by a careful reading of the entirety of his work. The fact that both the ideas that there is something of worth within the experience of madness, and the conceptualisation of this as a process or journey occur early on within Laing’s *oeuvre* renders the conservative psychiatric critiques of these ideas as even more groundless. Additionally, the cheap tactic of isolating fragments of text away from their context increases the likelihood of such critics missing these lines of development of concepts throughout Laing’s work. The next section will evaluate Deleuze and Guattari’s direct criticism of Laing, and will additionally contain some comments on their critique of anti-psychiatry, which is bound up with their criticism of Laing.

³⁴ **The Divided Self**, p. 27

³⁵ **Self and Others**, p.74

Deleuze and Guattari's Direct Criticisms of Laing

There are two main criticisms of Laing made by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*. Their first criticism occurs within a section which criticises the anti-psychiatric movement.

Most of the modern endeavors – outpatient centers, inpatient hospitals, social clubs for the sick, family care, institutions, and even antipsychiatry – remain threatened by a common danger, ... how does one avoid the institution's re-forming an asylum structure, or constituting perverse and reformist artificial societies, or residual paternalistic or mothering pseudo-families?³⁶

Deleuze and Guattari here express the concern that alternative communities or housing for those experiencing mental distress, such as Kingsley Hall (which Laing was involved with) may only serve to replicate the same problems that are encountered by conventional asylums and institutions. They are also concerned that the structure of the social relations within such places may form another group which is similar to that of the family, with an individual or individuals taking the place of an authority over the rest of the group. From Laing's own account of Kingsley Hall in *Mad to be Normal* (1995), Mullan's collection of discussions with Laing, an attempt was made to try and run the household with all who were living there (whether they were seen as insane, or were therapists) having an equal say in how the place was to function.

This avoidance of a
traditional structure of authority in Kingsley Hall brought its own problems as
Laing recounts.

³⁶ *Anti-Oedipus*, p.319

The contradiction was that without an authoritative structure anyone could do almost anything. But everyone was so daft! [Laing then tells the story of how one resident would go round slamming doors as hard as he could between two and four o'clock in the morning, which greatly irritated a therapist called Noel Cobb.] ...Noel said that he wanted to get a night's sleep. So, this guy who was doing this was articulate enough to argue that 'time and space' belonged to everyone and why should he [i.e. Cobb] impose his silence rather than him having the right to make a noise...³⁷

One can clearly see here the profound issues that can occur without any system of authority functioning within a group. If all have an equal say, then no one has the right to tell another individual what they can or cannot do, and it is unlikely that people will always agree with one another. These sorts of problems form what Deleuze and Guattari call 'impasses' in terms of the structuration of a group within an alternative therapeutic household such as Kingsley Hall.

However, their critique of Laing, which follows this raising of the problematic nature of such households, occurs on a more theoretical level.

The only thing that can save us from these impasses is an effective politicization of psychiatry. And doubtless, with R.D. Laing and David Cooper antipsychiatry went very far in this direction. But it seems to us that they still conceive of this politicization in terms of the structure and the event, rather than the process itself.³⁸

I have critiqued the labelling of Laing as an anti-psychiatrist earlier in this thesis, in my section on Clare. The mistake made by other critics of conflating Laing and Cooper's work is not as blatantly apparent within *Anti-Oedipus*, since they

³⁷ Mullan, B, (1995), **Mad to be Normal – Conversations with R.D. Laing**, London, Free Association Books, p.183

³⁸ **Anti-Oedipus**, p.320

do make a distinction between the two earlier within the text.³⁹ Laing suggests that many French psychiatrists and theorists did confuse him with Cooper because Cooper spent some time living in France.⁴⁰ In the above quotation, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that Laing and Cooper could have gone further than they did in terms of politicizing the schizophrenic journey, or process, itself rather than only politicizing the event of becoming mad or the structure of the experience. I consider it to perhaps be rather arbitrary to split off the voyage itself from its being viewed as an event, and from its structure. However, Deleuze and Guattari's criticism here provides a reason for their own exploration of the journey, which does consider it in a political nature.

Nevertheless, from my reading of Laing, I consider this criticism to be over-stated because Laing does place the voyage within a wider social and political context. The journey has to be a form of experience itself. Throughout the last three chapters of *The Politics of Experience*, Laing does consider the political implications of those within a culture who do not experience the world in the same, shared way as the other individuals within that culture.

The person going through ego-loss or transcendental experiences may or may not become in different ways confused. Then he might legitimately be regarded as mad. But to be mad is not necessarily to be ill, notwithstanding that in our culture the two categories have become confused.⁴¹

Laing argues that a person who is experiencing the world in a radically different way to other people tends to become labelled as ill, whether this experience is symptomatic of an illness or not. It would be of benefit if Deleuze and Guattari

³⁹ *Anti-Oedipus*, p.95

⁴⁰ *Mad to be Normal*, p.365

⁴¹ *The Politics of Experience*, p.113

had further explained this aspect of their critique of Laing, as it is somewhat incoherent. They move far beyond Laing's considerations of the voyage in making claims that the voyage itself has revolutionary potential.

The schizo is not revolutionary, but the schizophrenic process ... is the potential for revolution.⁴²

Deleuze and Guattari view the voyage as a means of casting off the shackles of repression. In making such assertions they provide a bigger target than Laing in terms of claiming that 'schizophrenia has valuable consequences', to again twist Reznick's phrase against itself.

Deleuze and Guattari's next criticism of Laing immediately follows the above criticism where they suggest that Laing does not adequately politicize the process itself.

Furthermore, they [i.e. Laing and Cooper] localize social and mental alienation on a single line, and tend to consider them as identical by showing how the familial agent extends the one into the other.⁴³

For Deleuze and Guattari, Laing does not make a sufficient distinction between social and mental alienation, and they consider the family to be utilised within Laing's work as a way of showing how these two forms of alienation are related. The above criticism is followed by a footnote to a piece of Cooper's work.⁴⁴ The problem of the differentiation between social and mental alienation, and between different social contexts, are sound points to raise. Laing provides a statement regarding this issue in his paper entitled 'The Obvious', which he presented at The Dialectics of Liberation conference in 1967, alongside Cooper and Marcuse.

⁴² **Anti-Oedipus**, p.341

⁴³ *ibid*, p.320

⁴⁴ Cooper states that: 'Social alienation comes for the most part to overlap the diverse forms of mental alienation...' **Anti-Oedipus**, p.320

We have a theoretical and practical problem of finding the mediations between the different levels of contexts: between the different systems and metasystems, extending all the way from the smallest micro- to the largest macro-social systems.⁴⁵

Laing clearly was aware that there is no simplistic, neat fit between social and mental alienation. The family's role as a mediator between the social and individual levels can be contested. A family may not share the wider social norms of the culture that they live in. Deleuze and Guattari's suggestion for a way of viewing this relation is that it is 'an *included disjunction*.'⁴⁶ This idea suggests that there is a relationship between social and mental alienation, but that this relation is a complex one.

The impression that social and mental alienation are considered in a linear relation, and are viewed as almost identical through the transmission of these forms of alienation by the family misses Laing's critique of the educational system in *The Politics of Experience*, which is as fierce as his critique of the repressive nature of the family. Laing views schooling itself as a means of creating self-alienation.

The condition of alienation...is the condition of the normal man.

Society highly values its normal man. It educates children to lose themselves and to become absurd, and thus to be normal.⁴⁷

Laing's critique of schooling here contains a great deal of critical insight. The activities which children have to perform at school usually have little wider relevance to their own lived experience. With the length of the day spent at

⁴⁵ Cooper, D, (ed), (1968), **The Dialectics of Liberation**, Harmondsworth, Penguin, p.16

⁴⁶ **Anti-Oedipus**, p.320

⁴⁷ **The Politics of Experience**, p.24

school virtually replicating the length of the average working day in this country, and with both work and school usually entailing the performance of abstract tasks, the alienation produced by schooling can be seen as a preparation for the alienation that many people may experience whilst at work. Later in *The Politics of Experience*, Laing makes use of some quotations from Jules Henry which highlight the use of education for socialising children into a brutally competitive culture.⁴⁸ The education system, like the family, is another mediating force between the individual and the wider society.

Here Deleuze and Guattari seem to have fallen slightly into the very trap that they identify – that of viewing the family as all-encompassing, and of transposing this view onto Laing’s work. Their above criticism adequately applies to the quotation from Cooper that they provide, but seems tangential in relation to Laing’s work. However, because their reading and interpretation of Laing’s work throughout *Anti-Oedipus* are considerable improvements upon those attempted by the conservative psychiatric critics, this criticism occurs on a more adequate overall level. The impression could remain with the reader that Laing is making a simplistic relation between social and mental alienation. Nevertheless, I would argue that this involves confronting a major theoretical problem of mediating between different levels of social contexts, which was not Laing’s primary concern in his work. As a result, he should not be critiqued on this basis. Laing also demonstrated his awareness of this issue in ‘The Obvious’, as I have earlier stated. However, despite the fact that Laing was aware of the macro-context, and its influence on mediating

⁴⁸ *ibid*, pp.57-61

agencies, such as the family and schooling, he does not closely analyse their relation.

Deleuze and Guattari's next direct criticism of Laing also follows some criticism of anti-psychiatry, and of approaches to the family such as '...Bateson's "double impasse" or double bind".'⁴⁹ After their criticisms of these perspectives, Deleuze and Guattari argue that:

If there is a veritable impasse... it is the one into which the researcher himself is led, when he claims to assign schizophrenogenic social mechanisms, and at the same time to discover them within the order of the family, which both social production and the schizophrenic process escape.⁵⁰

This criticism of these theories relates to Deleuze and Guattari's view, which I noted earlier, that the focus on the family within psychiatry and psychotherapy creates a form of reification where the focus on the family ignores the wider social and cultural context. In the above quotation, they suggest that 'schizophrenogenic social mechanisms' cannot alone be found within the family because both social production and the schizophrenic process are not reducible to the familial order.

Deleuze and Guattari then relate this argument to Laing's work.

This contradiction is perhaps especially perceptible in Laing, because he is the most revolutionary of the antipsychiatrists. At the very moment he breaks with psychiatric practice, undertakes assigning a veritable social genesis to psychosis, and calls for a continuation of the "voyage" as a process and for a dissolution of the "normal ego," he falls back into the worst familialist, personological, and egoic postulates, so that the remedies invoked are no more than a "sincere corroboration among parents," a "recognition of the real

⁴⁹ *Anti-Oedipus*, p.360

⁵⁰ *ibid*

persons,” a discovery of the true ego or self as in Martin Buber.⁵¹

This particular criticism, in the latter part of the above quotation, is of *Self and Others*, as is stated in their reference to this book at the end of this quotation. The parts placed in quotation marks are not directly taken from this text, but reflect a paraphrasing of Laing’s work within the parts of *Self and Others* that Deleuze and Guattari are here referring to. There are a number of problems with regard to this critique of Laing. Deleuze and Guattari are essentially criticising *Self and Others* for not being *The Politics of Experience*. The fact that these two texts are radically different in terms of their focus, content and tone is unfortunately not addressed here. It is highly inappropriate to lump these texts together in this fashion, which ignores the lines of development of certain concepts within the majority of Laing’s work.

As I have previously mentioned in this chapter, both the idea of schizophrenia as some form of enlightenment, and the idea of the voyage originate within *The Divided Self* and *Self and Others*, but do not receive a fully comprehensive treatment until *The Politics of Experience*. The chronology of the publications of Laing’s texts is ignored here by Deleuze and Guattari. However, the order of publication of these texts in France may have been different to that in this country. In the ‘reference notes’ section at the end of *Anti-Oedipus*, *Self and Others* is noted as having a later date of publication than *The Politics of Experience*. The latter text is given the publication date of 1967,⁵² which is the original date of first publication in this country, whereas *Self and*

⁵¹ op. cit.

⁵² ibid, p.387

Others is given the date of publication of 1970,⁵³ which is nine years later than its first publication in the United Kingdom. The above criticism may have originated from this different sequence of publication in France. *Self and Others* would no doubt be something of a deflation for theorists who have been so keen to engage with the more controversial and radical aspects of Laing's thought. However, an original date of first publication is usually provided within books in the information about the publisher, so it seems sloppy for Deleuze and Guattari not to make this chronological distinction between these texts, and between the level of development of the ideas contained in them.

A further issue with this particular criticism, and specifically the accusation that Laing falls back into familialism in *Self and Others*, is that it contradicts two other pieces of commentary on Laing by Deleuze and Guattari where they make the assertion that Laing does escape what they see as the trap of the exclusive focus upon the family within psychology and psychiatry. I have referred to one of these comments earlier, where Deleuze and Guattari claim that only Jaspers and Laing have truly understood the voyage, '...and so escaped the familialism that is the ordinary bed and board of psychoanalysis and psychiatry.'⁵⁴ Within an earlier section of critique of the view of the family as mediating wider social alienation through to the family member, Deleuze and Guattari state the following.

It seems to us that such a viewpoint is present even in Cooper. (In this respect Laing is better able to disengage himself from familialism, thanks to the resources of a flux from the Orient.)⁵⁵

⁵³ *ibid*, p.395

⁵⁴ *ibid*, p.131

⁵⁵ *op. cit.*, p.95

On two occasions, Deleuze and Guattari demonstrate large inconsistencies between their praise for Laing, and their criticism of his work. They do not make clear whether they consider Laing to escape closed familialism or not. An additional inconsistency lies between their positive consideration of Laing's Eastern influences upon his thought in the above quotation, and between the section that follows their critique of Laing as falling back into familialism in *Self and Others*.

Even more than the hostility of traditional authorities, perhaps this is the source of the actual failure of the antipsychiatric undertakings, of their co-optation for the benefit of adaptational forms of familial psychotherapy and of community psychiatry, and of Laing's own retreat to the Orient.⁵⁶

In a similar manner to Deleuze and Guattari's incoherence regarding the strengths and weaknesses of Laing's work in terms of its level of familialism, a contradiction is also present between their praise for the Eastern influence upon Laing's thought, and between the above critique. Here it could be argued that in the above quotation, they are referring more to Laing's actual time spent in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), which was (allegedly) a source of dissatisfaction to the Left at the time. This specific critique will be dealt with later on, when I examine Sedgwick's criticism of Laing.

However, these differing views on Laing's Eastern influences do not sit easily together. If this influence upon Laing's work is considered to be a benefit by Deleuze and Guattari, then why should they view Laing moving to that part of the world as a signal of failure? Would it not rather be an example of Laing's commitment to practising meditation, which can

⁵⁶ *ibid*, p.360

facilitate an individual moving beyond their ego-bound state, something which Deleuze and Guattari view as necessary? The main issue here is that Deleuze and Guattari have produced the effect of nullifying their own critique of Laing by containing arguments within *Anti-Oedipus* that directly contradict their criticism. This then renders their critique into a state of incoherence. I find this to be extremely disappointing, given the extent of their engagement and thinking with regard to Laing's ideas. It could be noted that *Anti-Oedipus* is a voluminous tome, and that these contradictions may have slipped under the authors' awareness. However, this cannot be justified on an academic level. It would be preferable if Deleuze and Guattari did not accuse Laing's work of suffering from a serious 'contradiction',⁵⁷ when one is apparent between their praise and criticism of Laing's theories.

I will now briefly summarise the nature of Deleuze and Guattari's direct criticisms of Laing. Their three main criticisms of Laing are as follows. 1) Within his work, the process itself is insufficiently politicized. 2) Social and mental alienation are viewed in a linear relation, with the family simplistically mediating wider social alienation through to the child or family member. 3) A paradox occurs within Laing's work between his transcendence of familialism in *The Politics of Experience*, and his alleged return to it in *Self and Others*. My previous review of these criticisms in this section has identified a number of weaknesses with regard to these critiques. These weaknesses severely undermine the validity of their attempted criticisms of Laing. Additionally, the distinction made between Laing and Cooper's work could be more precisely stated. Deleuze and Guattari's reference to Laing as an anti-psychiatrist does not

⁵⁷ *ibid*

aid this distinction being made with sufficient clarity. Their critique of Laing and Cooper as insufficiently politicizing the process appears to view these authors as one homogenous mass, whose ideas exactly replicate one another's. I have set out the key differences between Laing and Cooper's work in my previous section on Clare's critique of Laing. Given the nature of these differences, it is therefore a mistake to conflate Cooper's work with that of Laing. As a methodological principle for the operation of a grounded and valid critique, such distinctions must be made in order to avoid the error of criticising an author on the basis of another's work. In a similar manner, a coherent critique must also clearly distinguish between different aspects of different texts, recognise their original chronology, and show an awareness of the development of concepts throughout an author's work. These principles are lacking in Deleuze and Guattari's direct criticism of Laing, in addition to the further issues that I have raised in this section.

However, these criticisms can be seen as productive in some respects. Deleuze and Guattari's raising of the problematic issue of mediating between different levels of context introduces the notion of a gap within theoretical discourse with regard to this matter. As I have already stated, Laing should not be criticised on this basis, since he did not set out to address this issue as the main focus of his work. Deleuze and Guattari's criticism that Laing lapses into familialism could be supported (on a surface reading) by the fact that Laing produced a text entitled *The Politics of the Family* (1969). Nevertheless, I would like to argue that Laing's work, including the latter text,⁵⁸ does move beyond an

⁵⁸ See, for example, Laing's comments that schizophrenia may be iatrogenic in: Laing, R.D. (1969), **The Politics of the Family and Other Essays**, New York, Vintage, p.46

exclusive focus upon the family, even if comprehensive statements upon the relation of social alienation to the family are not provided and developed.

Some Additional Comments

The fact that *Anti-Oedipus* is arguably the most Laingian text that I have read by an author who was not a direct colleague of Laing's adds a further level of disappointment to the poverty of their critique of Laing.⁵⁹ The introduction to this text by Mark Seem refers to Laing a number of times.⁶⁰ Within the introduction, Seem notes that Deleuze and Guattari's view of the journey goes much further than Laing's does.⁶¹ A Sartrean influence is also apparent upon *Anti-Oedipus*, particularly the late Sartre of *Between Existentialism and Marxism* (1974) and *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). The latter text was summarised by Laing in his co-authored text with Cooper,⁶² *Reason and Violence* (1964), which Sartre praised as being '...a very clear, very faithful account of my thought.'⁶³ Deleuze and Guattari make a distinction in *Anti-Oedipus* between two different sorts of groups, the subjugated group, and the subject-group,⁶⁴ which has parallels with Sartre's analysis (as explained by Laing) in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* of the differences between the series, as a form of grouping, and the group-in-fusion.⁶⁵ This link is strengthened by a reference to *Critique of Dialectical Reason* within Deleuze and Guattari's

⁵⁹ For example, Esterson's **The Leaves of Spring** (1970) has a tone and style of writing which is almost identical to Laing's.

⁶⁰ **Anti-Oedipus**, pp.xvii, xix, xxii

⁶¹ *ibid*, p.xix

⁶² I wish at this point to remind the reader that only the introduction to this text is directly co-authored, and the other sections were written separately.

⁶³ Laing, R.D, and Cooper, D, (1964), **Reason and Violence: A Decade of Sartre's Philosophy**, London, Routledge, p.6 (Sartre's foreword trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith)

⁶⁴ **Anti-Oedipus**, p.377

⁶⁵ **Reason and Violence**, p.130

discussion of groups,⁶⁶ although the influence had become apparent to me whilst reading *Anti-Oedipus*.

In Deleuze and Guattari's formulation of these two groups, the subjugated group is self-explanatory. The subject-group, however, is a liberated, revolutionary form of grouping. In *Reason and Violence*, Laing sets out the differences between Sartre's alternate concepts of groups. The following example of a series as a group formation is given.

Consider a group of persons waiting for a bus... They are a plurality of solitudes... The girl in a hurry on her way to the office, the man absorbed in his newspaper, and the other members of the queue, are all in their own worlds, and they live their present relationship to each other as members of the queue negatively, that is, they take no notice of each other except as a number in a quantitative series.⁶⁷

The group as series is a formation of individuals who lack a true group unity, they only form a group because of a negative relation, such as waiting for a bus, in the above example. '...A series finds its tentative unity in an object held in common by each member of the series.'⁶⁸ Such seriality is expanded upon further in *Reason and Violence* as also encompassing forms of conduct and concepts.

The evidence of a serial idea is in my double incapacity to verify it or to transform it in the others. Its opacity, my powerlessness to change it in the other, my own and the other's lack of doubt about it, are offered as evidence of its truth. The ideas of racialism and colonialism are such serial ideas.⁶⁹

The group as series, and serial ideas are akin to forms of alienation. The concept of the serial idea links to reified notions, which have become ingrained ways of

⁶⁶ *Anti-Oedipus*, p.395

⁶⁷ *Reason and Violence*, pp.121-122

⁶⁸ *ibid*, p.123

⁶⁹ *op. cit.*, p.125

thinking. These unquestioned ideas have as their basis of ‘proof’ the very fact that they are accepted uncritically. The transformation of a series into a group proper occurs through the group becoming fused through praxis, through its own action, and through ‘...the resurrection of freedom.’⁷⁰ There is more of a parallel between the group-in-fusion and Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the subject-group, than straightforwardly between the series and the subjugated group. Nevertheless, the philosophical enquiry into the nature of the human group forms a major line of investigation which runs between Sartre and Laing’s work, and that of Deleuze and Guattari, which is worth noting. A subjugated group could take the form of a series, if the subjugated group was formed only through having an object held in common by its members.

A parallel between these authors also appears in Deleuze and Guattari’s reference to the chapter entitled ‘The Man with the Tape-Recorder’ in *Between Existentialism and Marxism* by Sartre.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that:

...the benevolent neutrality of the analyst is very limited: it ceases the instant one stops responding daddy-mommy. It ceases the instant one introduces a little desiring-machine – the tape-recorder – into the analyst’s office...⁷¹

‘The Man with the Tape-Recorder’ was originally published in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1969 and proved to be hugely controversial.⁷² It is composed of four texts, which centre around a transcription of a conversation entitled ‘Psychoanalytic Dialogue’ between a patient (‘A’, who provided the title for the

⁷⁰ *ibid*, p.132. It is worth noting that the influence of the later Sartre upon Laing is highly apparent in the use of the term ‘praxis’ in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, and within other theoretical developments.

⁷¹ **Anti-Oedipus**, p.312

⁷² Sartre, J-P, (1974), **Between Existentialism and Marxism**, (trans. J. Matthews), London, Verso, pp.198-223

piece) who made the decision to tape-record their discourse, and a psychoanalyst ('Dr X'), which occurs within the analyst's office. It is introduced by Sartre, with replies to his comments following the dialogue from Pontalis and Pingaud, both of whom were members of the editorial board of *Les Temps Modernes*, and disagreed with '...the journal's decision to publish the tape-recorded document in question.'⁷³ The context for the dialogue is that 'A' has been a patient of 'Dr X's' for some time, and whilst in a session with the analyst, 'A' decides to get out a tape-recorder because 'A' wants the analyst to explain why he has not been able to either help or cure 'A'. As 'A' puts it, he wants to '...make the psychoanalysts stand trial now...'⁷⁴ The 'benevolent neutrality of the analyst' (as Deleuze and Guattari call it) can be seen to evaporate as soon as the tape-recorder is introduced into the session. The analyst reacts badly to the bringing in of the tape-recorder, immediately becomes angry about it, and asks 'A' to 'cut it out'.⁷⁵ 'A' argues that the doctor is frightened of the machine and its implications, when the analyst tries to ring the police because of this situation, and then proceeds to accuse 'A' of being violent and dangerous.

This dialogue has

parallels with Laing's statement in *The Politics of Experience* (following his critique of Kraepelinian clinical examination) that:

A feature of the interplay between psychiatrist and patient is that if the patient's part is taken out of context... it might seem very odd...

⁷³ *ibid*, p.198

⁷⁴ *ibid*, p.219

⁷⁵ *op. cit.*, p.206. 'A' makes much fun of making parallels between the analyst asking him to 'cut it out', and the analyst's previous suggestion that 'A's' father wanted to cut off 'A's' penis, cf. p.207.

But if one ceases to identify with the clinical posture, and looks at the psychiatrist-patient couple without such presuppositions, then it is difficult to sustain this naïve view of the situation.⁷⁶

In the example of ‘The Man with the Tape-Recorder’, even without abstracting this conversation from its wider context, the analyst’s reactions to the use of the tape-recorder ‘seem very odd’, compared to the patient’s demands for an explanation of why he is kept in a powerless situation in relation to the analyst, and why no improvement to his condition has been made. Indeed, ‘A’ seems to be attempting to reclaim some power over this situation. The role reversal which occurs within this dialogue (which is noted in Sartre’s introduction⁷⁷), with the patient taking command and the analyst having to make the attempt to deal with this is striking. ‘A’s’ comments and questions seem far more coherent than the responses of the psychoanalyst, who ends up screaming for help at the end of the conversation.

The conversation is both hilarious and disturbing, with the latter aspect being most apparent in the dismal lack of reciprocity between these two individuals. The doctor may well have been frightened, and with some reason. The exact physical movements of the patient and doctor are only briefly outlined, with it being noted that the telephone had been knocked onto the floor after the doctor attempted to dial 999,⁷⁸ and with ‘A’ strategically leaning against the only door in the office later in the conversation,⁷⁹ to prevent the analyst’s escape. However, one wonders whether ‘Dr X’ could have made more of an attempt to explain to the patient exactly what his objections clearly were to the use of the

⁷⁶ **The Politics of Experience**, pp.89-90

⁷⁷ **Between Existentialism and Marxism**, p.202

⁷⁸ *ibid*, p.213

⁷⁹ *ibid*, p.217

tape-recorder, rather than over-reacting immediately. Sartre refers to Laing in his introduction to the conversation.

A..., the indisputable subject of this episode, might find valid interlocutors in England or in Italy: a new generation of psychiatrists are seeking to establish a bond of reciprocity between themselves and those they are treating.⁸⁰

A translator's note added to the above quotation states that this is 'a reference to the work of Ronald Laing and others in London, and of... Basaglia...'⁸¹ I am unaware of any direct allusion to 'The Man with the Tape-Recorder' within Laing's work, but given his immense knowledge of Sartre, he would have been aware of it.

I now wish to finish this chapter with some concluding comments on Deleuze and Guattari's use and critique of Laing, and with some further methodological comments upon the principles for an adequate critique. However, first I would like to note that Laing lists *Anti-Oedipus* in the bibliography for his last published theoretical work *The Voice of Experience* (1982).⁸² No direct quotations from *Anti-Oedipus* are found within *The Voice of Experience*, despite this listing. Guattari is also mentioned in the 'acknowledgements' section at the beginning of that text, as having participated in conversations with Laing on the themes of that book. Despite this, Laing is scathing with regard to Guattari in Mullan's *Mad to be Normal*. In a discussion about alternative therapeutic communities in other countries, Laing makes the following allegations about Guattari's efforts in that direction.

⁸⁰ op. cit., p.204

⁸¹ ibid

⁸² Laing, R.D, (1982), **The Voice of Experience**, New York, Pantheon, p.173

Guattari in Paris, he was the director of the so-called therapeutic community, and on the one hand he was playing this as a development of a Cooperesque anti-psychiatry sort of thing. But in *practice* it was fuck all, it was just like any other psychiatric clinic. He was using electric shocks.⁸³

It can be considered to be easier to be radical in theory than in actual practice.

Laing's criticism of Guattari continues later in *Mad to be Normal*. Laing claims that he and Guattari never really got on, and that he thought that *Anti-Oedipus* was '...just intellectual wanking.'⁸⁴ Laing then states that Guattari asked for his autograph, but Laing turned over the piece of paper and '...found out that it was a petition to the president of France to release a terrorist hijacker.'⁸⁵ Understandably, Laing was extremely angry about being tricked into nearly signing such a document. He continues:

I thought they were all completely phoney – all the things Szasz might have to say about the phoney radical salon revolutionary left, well this was them, the Guattari crowd.⁸⁶

There is an issue of my inability to verify what Laing is saying here. The issue of claims being made about Laing, and of Laing's responses to them, when these occur outside of his theory and actual texts, will be raised again later in this thesis with regard to Showalter's critique of Laing. The problem is that I cannot jump into a magical time-travelling machine and check the veracity of these statements myself. It is problematic to rely on these sorts of accounts totally. However, I will lend Laing the benefit of the doubt, as I am aware from life experience that it is all very well to make radical claims, but it is entirely another matter whether these individuals actually live out their radicalism. It is clear that

⁸³ **Mad to be Normal**, p.182

⁸⁴ *ibid*, p.365

⁸⁵ *ibid*

⁸⁶ *op. cit.*, p.365

between 1982 when *The Voice of Experience* was published, and 1988 when Mullan's interviews with Laing took place, Laing had lost some respect for Guattari. The above incident, with regard to the petition, is cited by Laing, however, as having occurred in the early 1970s,⁸⁷ so potentially Laing never voiced his views on Guattari prior to his interviews with Mullan.

As I have already

stated, I found Deleuze and Guattari's critique of Laing to be highly disappointing. Their engagement with Laing in terms of their development of the idea of the voyage does not extend into a thoughtful, relevant and direct critique. Their most serious error is to attempt criticism of Laing which contradicts other statements and praise that they have offered of his work within *Anti-Oedipus*. This cannot be seen as a valid manner of procedure for a critique. In a section of *Anti-Oedipus* where Deleuze and Guattari attempt to anticipate criticism of that text, they argue that: '...we don't know which is better, a bad reading or no reading at all.'⁸⁸ I do not consider the deficiencies of their critique of Laing to be the result of a poor or non-existent reading, because the extent of their interaction with Laing's work would not be possible if they had not properly read and thought about his theories. Deleuze and Guattari's above comment is more apt to describe the poverty of the conservative psychiatric critiques. I was hoping for Deleuze and Guattari to reach what can be considered as the higher level of the immanent critique. This is an idea that comes from Adorno.

Our critique of the ontological need brings us to an immanent critique of ontology itself. We have no power over the philosophy of Being if we reject it generally, from outside,

⁸⁷ *ibid*

⁸⁸ *Anti-Oedipus*, p.379

instead of taking it on in its own structure – turning its own force against it, in line with Hegel’s desideratum.⁸⁹

This concept of the ‘immanent’ can be defined as ‘operating from inside a thing or person: not external or transcendent.’⁹⁰ Therefore an immanent critique can be defined as a critique which operates from within a theory itself, ‘turning its own force against it’.

Deleuze and Guattari themselves mention a similar concept to the idea of the immanent critique when they refer to the notion of the ‘autocritique’, which involves leading a theory ‘...to the point of its self-critique.’⁹¹

Unfortunately their critique of Laing fails to embrace this idea. Although they are aware that there are differences between Laing and Cooper’s work, many of their criticisms seem more appropriately directed at Cooper, with the criticism of Laing tacked on to this. A further serious error committed by Deleuze and Guattari, other than manifesting a huge contradiction between their praise and criticism, consists in ignoring the original chronology of the publication of Laing’s work, as they do with criticising *Self and Others* as lapsing into what they view as problems that were transcended in *The Politics of Experience*. However, Deleuze and Guattari are stronger in their critique of anti-psychiatry, and raise some valid points for debate, such as the means of conceiving theoretically the nature of the relation between social and mental alienation. Their exegesis of the nature of the voyage is commendable. It is laudable to see some engagement with this concept. The next two chapters will investigate the feminist critiques of Laing.

⁸⁹ Adorno, T.W, (1973), **Negative Dialectics**, (trans. E.B. Ashton), London, Routledge, p.97

⁹⁰ Blackburn, S, (1996), **Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy**, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p.187

⁹¹ **Anti-Oedipus**, p.310

5) Feminist Critiques of Laing I

This chapter, along with the following one, will evaluate the feminist critiques of Laing by Juliet Mitchell in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), and Elaine Showalter in *The Female Malady* (1985). Furthermore, I will be presenting my own arguments for a feminist reading of Laing, in the seventh chapter, which is intended to argue against the feminist critiques. Mitchell's discussion and critique of Laing's work occurs within two substantial sections of *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. Her critique of Laing is much greater in scope and depth than those previously examined in this thesis. Her criticism avoids some common errors that I have identified in the critiques of Laing so far. Nevertheless, some aspects of her critique are problematic.

Mitchell's Critique of Laing

Mitchell's discussion of Laing forms the basis of seven chapters of *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, with an additional preceding section which places Laing's thought within the broader historical context of post-World War Two Britain. Her first theoretical chapter is entitled "A 'Science of Persons'", which is taken from the title of the first chapter of *The Divided Self*, and deals with the formulation of this within Laing's work.

Criticism of *The Divided Self* and *Self and Others*

I have noted previously, in my section on Clare, that *The Divided Self* tends to receive less criticism than Laing's later works. However, Mitchell suggests that this text is not as unproblematic as the lack of other critiques would suggest. She

provides a quotation from Laing's critique of Freud in *The Divided Self* where Laing suggests that Freud used his theories as 'an instrument of defence'¹ against the 'terrors' of dealing with mental distress. Mitchell argues that:

...at that stage Laing's wish to break down the defence-barrier between the scientist and the object of his research... extended only to empathizing and treating as authentic experience all that the psychotic claimed to feel; the psychotic is the person with misunderstood problems, but problems nonetheless.²

I do consider this criticism of Laing's first text to be valid. Within *The Divided Self* the reader is taken on a journey into what the experience of the schizophrenic is like, but there is a distancing that occurs where Laing's presentation of the material suggests that schizophrenia is something that happens to others rather than to the reader, the author or other 'normal' individuals.³ However, in the praise of *The Divided Self* it is never mentioned that this is an extremely dark and claustrophobic book in terms of its tone, which is undoubtedly occasioned by the content of the text.

Mitchell puts forward an additional similar criticism of *The Divided Self* later in this chapter.

At this stage in Laing's thought schizophrenic symptoms may certainly be intelligible, but the schizophrenia is still *there*, and that minority of people who thus regard themselves as automata 'are rightly regarded as crazy'.⁴

Again, I regard this as a legitimate criticism of this text. Since *The Divided Self* is the closest to conventional psychiatry of all Laing's works, it may have received

¹ *The Divided Self*, p.25

² Mitchell, J, (1974), **Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical Reassessment of Freudian Psychoanalysis**, Harmondsworth, Penguin, (2000 edition), p.234

³ Laing himself noted this in his self-criticism of this text, which I have referred to in my section on Clare.

⁴ *ibid*, p.242

less criticism than his more radical works. As it was his first published work, as a young psychiatrist, Laing's thinking in this text has yet to make the substantial breaks with standard psychiatric thought that are found in his later work.

Nevertheless, some aspects of *The Divided Self* do make important advances, such as the attempt to enter into the patient's world and to not discount their experiences and speech as invalid.

It is worth noting that Laing stated in a 1978 interview that he had written *The Divided Self* as an expression of his discontent with his chosen profession of psychiatry. "If I hadn't had the capacity to express myself in writing, I would have blown my top."⁵ *The Divided Self* can be viewed as a transitional work, where the tensions between Laing's criticism of psychiatry and his interest in the subject have yet to evolve into his transcendence of conventional psychiatric thought. Mitchell's critique of Laing is based upon a thorough reading of all of Laing's work up until the date of first publication of *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* in 1974. Mitchell's reading of Laing is admirable as it enables her to avoid some (but not all) of the pitfalls that I have identified with the previous critiques of Laing that I have analysed. For the most part, her interpretation of Laing's theories is correct, and is supported by textual evidence in the form of direct quotations from Laing which are not abstracted from their context. Mitchell's reading of Laing is not restricted to his most well-known texts. She additionally evaluates texts such as *Reason and Violence*, and *Interpersonal Perception* (1966), which are not usually considered by critics of Laing. This substantial reading of Laing's *oeuvre* enables Mitchell to trace the lines of development of ideas throughout Laing's work, which I identified in the

⁵ Hennegan, A. (1978), Interview with Laing, *Gay News*, No. 153, 19th October (page number not discernable on the photocopy provided to me through the library service)

previous chapter as a necessary component of a scholarly critique of an author's texts.

Mitchell suggests that there is a considerable change in thought that occurs between the viewpoints and concepts presented in *The Divided Self* and *Self and Others*. She argues that in *The Divided Self*, the patient's

...symptoms express a way of interacting; but by the next book... *Self and Others* ... the way of interacting is the 'disease'. This shifting emphasis – indeed, changing conception – is marked by a new definition of the field: the relationship between how we behave and how others experience our behaviour and we experience theirs.⁶

Mitchell identifies earlier in this chapter that the relation between behaviour and experience is a key aspect of Laing's 'science of persons'.⁷ *The Divided Self* and *Self and Others* certainly are very different texts. However, these works were originally intended by Laing '...to be one book or one book in the form of volume one and volume two. But the publishers wanted them separated as two books.'⁸ The differences between these texts are composed from the different objectives of each one. *The Divided Self's* purpose is to make schizophrenia comprehensible through offering a theory of the splitting of the self, and through a phenomenological account of the experience of the condition. The purpose of *Self and Others* is to offer an interpersonal theory of human relations in terms of both experience and action. The latter text, in a similar vein to *The Divided Self*, tends to receive little critique, with the exception of Deleuze and Guattari.

Nevertheless, Mitchell offers some criticism of *Self and Others*. She argues that the distinctions that Laing makes with regard

⁶ *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, p.242

⁷ *ibid*, p.236

⁸ *Mad to be Normal*, p.262

to the falsity and / or truth of behaviour and experience are not clearly drawn within *Self and Others*, and that thus ‘...Laing’s language gets a bit confused.’⁹ It is fair to say that on occasions Laing does not fully explain what he means, and that his sentence construction can be over-long. Mitchell provides an example from Laing’s work to illustrate her criticism.

If we examine carefully Laing’s use of the term ‘experience’ we can see that he uses it in two ways which often have a tendency to be either contradictory or mutually exclusive. ‘Experience’ as a noun, is thus Laing’s existential, essentialist ‘existence’ – always ‘true’ – and experience as a verb is to perceive or conceive of something and these conceptions can play us true or false.¹⁰

This point raised by Mitchell is not something that had struck me before with regard to Laing’s use of the term ‘experience’. It is common for words to have more than one typical usage in the English language, and these different uses are not then seen as contradictory. I am happy to share Mitchell’s concern that some of Laing’s writing could be more precisely stated. However, I do not consider his specific use of the term ‘experience’ to be problematic in the way that Mitchell states. Nevertheless, her semantic quibbling here and the progress that her argument takes following the above quotation introduces two lines of critique which are present throughout her two large sections on Laing entitled ‘R.D. Laing: The Family of Man, I and II’. The first is her argument that a confusion and a lack of clarity is present in Laing’s work. The second is that Laing’s ‘science of persons’ is insubstantial and not really a science at all. I wish to deal with this latter line of critique first.

⁹ *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, p.243

¹⁰ *ibid*

Criticism of Laing's 'Science of Persons'

Mitchell argues that due to her perceived problem with Laing's use of the term 'experience' as a verb, this has the result of degrading Laing's 'science of persons' to a lesser status than an evaluation of the relation between behaviour and experience.

So really Laing's achieved 'science of persons' amounts to his *demonstrating* the difference between behaviour and perception of behaviour – the project he set himself to analyse. Given his premises, it is ultimately only possible to show, at the most, the degrees of disjuncture that occur...¹¹

The implicit criticism here is that Laing's 'science of persons' is a limited undertaking. A recurring problem with the criticism of Laing (and one that I will return to later in this chapter) is that Laing appears to be expected to have done absolutely everything, and to have covered all possible angles of research. I find it probable that if a theorist has made some important contributions, as Laing has, then this sort of expectation is more likely to be generated. It is understandable that critics should raise such points, as their own views are brought to bear upon Laing's work. However, this cannot form the basis of a valid critique of Laing. The limited nature of his 'science of persons' as set out by Mitchell achieves a sufficient level of analysis to highlight the issues that arise when a person's behaviour is perceived as the result of an illness, rather than as an intelligible response to being placed in an intolerable interpersonal situation.

Mitchell's

critique of Laing's 'science of persons' includes the criticism that confusion is present within Laing's schemata for this concept. This next critique is located

¹¹ op. cit.

within a chapter entitled 'Laing and Psychoanalysis', which is valuable in terms of its analysis of the relationship between Laing's work and that of Freud.

Mitchell puts forward the argument that:

The nature of the 'object' is the primary confusion in Laing's 'science of persons'. It is precisely what makes it *not* a science, or even the beginnings of one. Looking at a person and saying 'that's our object' is like looking at the sky. Laing has got caught up in his protest against treating a person as 'an object'... and merely transposed his 'cleansed' object into the object of science.¹²

Her criticism here appears to be directed at Laing's statement in *The Divided Self*

that:

If it is held that to be unbiased one should be 'objective' in the sense of depersonalizing the person who is the 'object' of our study, any temptation to do this under the impression that one is thereby being scientific must be rigorously resisted.¹³

Mitchell's conception of science, which she criticises Laing for not adhering to, is far closer to conventional positivist science than Laing's suggestions for the principles of a 'science of persons'. Here she omits the influence of phenomenology upon Laing's work, which provides the reason for Laing's refusal to view the individual within standard scientific methodology. Mitchell argues that: 'An *a priori* existent object, in this case a person, is not an 'object' of science until it is transformed by the knowledge that is brought to bear on it.'¹⁴ She then proceeds to put forward the view that only when the defining feature of the object of study has been isolated can it become a correct object of scientific study.¹⁵ One can see the point that she is making, in that a specific aspect of a

¹² *ibid*, p.258

¹³ **The Divided Self**, p.24

¹⁴ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.258

¹⁵ *ibid*

person requires definition before it can become an object of scientific investigation.

However, it is a principle of Laing's 'science of persons' that the researcher must take care in this respect that they are not simply imposing a view onto their object of study, under the illusion that they are therefore being scientific. This is an issue of special relevance when it comes to the study of the human being, as to extrapolate certain features of the person means to ignore other inter-related elements. As Laing notes:

There is a common illusion that one somehow increases one's understanding of a person if one can translate a personal understanding of him into the impersonal terms of a sequence or system of *it*-processes.¹⁶

Mitchell's criticism here has the unusual aspect of criticising Laing on the basis of what he himself criticises. By a 'science of persons', Laing is not referring to the creation of another form of conventional science. The transformation of the object of study into its defining features is not the aim of Laing's 'existential-phenomenological' method. The aim of this method runs in the opposite direction to that stated by Mitchell, as Laing's project is to attempt to investigate the phenomena of schizophrenia, without placing unnecessary constructions upon it.

Existential phenomenology attempts to characterize the nature of a person's experience of his world and himself. It is not so much an attempt to describe particular objects of experience as to set all particular experiences within the context of his whole being-in-his-world.¹⁷

¹⁶ **The Divided Self**, p.22

¹⁷ *ibid*, p.17

There are further problematic elements contained in this particular critique of Mitchell's. Firstly, given her considerable reading of Laing's work, these issues with this specific criticism should have been apparent to her. Mitchell provides a quotation from *The Politics of Experience* where Laing makes an explicit statement regarding his views on the composition of a science in her chapter on the 'science of persons'. He states that:

Natural science is concerned only with the observer's experience of things. Never with the way things *experience* us...

Natural science knows nothing of the relation between behaviour and experience... But this relation is the copula of our science – if science means *a form of knowledge adequate to its subject*.¹⁸

Since Laing has identified that positivist science is an inadequate method for the study of human mental distress, he puts forward the argument that to be scientific means using a form of inquiry which is appropriate in terms of what is being studied. Mitchell's above criticism runs counter to her previous identification of Laing's views on the nature of a 'science of persons', and the fact that she correctly elucidates Laing's critique of science in relation to the study of the human itself.

Laing makes three quite clear objections to previous scientific procedure: the language of science dissects the whole man – in his total selfhood; all sciences treat the individual as isolated from other individuals; human sciences mimic natural sciences in treating people as 'mechanical things', simply because they are the *objects* of study...¹⁹

¹⁸ **The Politics of Experience**, p.17. **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.236. The last two sentences of this quotation are used by Mitchell.

¹⁹ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.238

However, there is some limited validity to Mitchell's criticism, if it is taken to refer to a plea for greater clarity on behalf of Laing in terms of stating what aspects of the human he is analysing.

A further problematic facet of this element of Mitchell's critique is her assumption that psychoanalysis itself is a science, and is more scientific than Laing's theories. She presents the assertion that Freud's concept of the unconscious has a greater scientific basis than Laing's 'science of persons'.²⁰ She then proceeds to argue that:

It is not, in fact, Laing's radicalism that is antithetical to the spirit of Freud's work; it is its 'scientific' claims that go counter to psychoanalysis as to other sciences. As Freud said: 'The true beginning of scientific activity consists... in describing phenomena and then in proceeding *to group, classify and correlate them*. But Laing...does everything he can to restore things to their pristine, unanalysed condition.'²¹

This provides an additional example of Mitchell's ignorance of the aims of phenomenology, despite her awareness of this influence upon Laing's work.²²

Her consideration that psychoanalysis is more scientific than Laing's theories appears to have the sole foundation that psychoanalysis attempts to mimic positivist science, in a way that phenomenological studies seek to avoid. As

Laing argues:

Too many, not all, psychoanalysts plunge right in and out of a revolving door at the threshold of phenomenology, and a second lunge carries others right away from science of any kind.²³

²⁰ *ibid*, p.258

²¹ *ibid*, p.259

²² *op.cit.*, p.237, pp.250-251

²³ **Self and Others**, p.29

The *modus operandi* of phenomenology is not to place unnecessary constructions upon what is being studied. The methods of grouping, classifying and correlating, especially when carried out through the doctrine of psychoanalysis, run entirely counter to Laing's intentions for the study of the human individual. As Mitchell's career changed from that of an academic to training as a psychoanalysis a few years before the publication of *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*,²⁴ she appears to let her regard for Freud's work nullify any greater reflexive awareness in terms of her comparison of the scientific basis of Freud and Laing's work.

The view that psychoanalysis constitutes a science has become a serial (or received) idea. Laing himself critiques this notion.

Freud's development of metapsychology... drew its impetus from the attempt to see man as an object of natural scientific investigation, and thus to win acceptance for psychoanalysis as a serious and respectable enterprise. I do not think such a shield is now necessary; or even, that it ever was. And the price paid when one thinks in metapsychological terms is high.²⁵

Mitchell has become confused by the imitation of science by psychoanalysis, and by the adoption of scientific methods by psychoanalysis, to the extent that she considers psychoanalysis therefore to be a science. One of Laing's contributions to the critique of psychoanalysis is his identification of these shields and defence mechanisms contained within psychoanalytic theory. This is put forward in the above quotation, and in the instance referred to earlier, in *The Divided Self*, where Laing argues that:

²⁴ *ibid*, p.xvi

²⁵ **The Politics of Experience**, p.41

Freud... carried with him his theory as a Medusa's head which turned these terrors [of dealing with mental distress] to stone... We must see if we can now survive without using a theory that is in some measure an instrument of defence.²⁶

The mimicking of the methods of natural science, and the operation of a dogmatic theoretical system by psychoanalysis are identified by Laing as ways that it tries to defend itself and assume a respectable guise. It should have been apparent to Mitchell, given her reading of Laing, her awareness of his criticism of positivist science, and largely correct interpretation of Laing's work, that Laing's 'science of persons' was never intended to be a science in the standard meaning of that term. It is surprising that a full comprehension of this is never achieved in her analysis.

There are no concrete grounds for her assumption that psychoanalysis is more of a science than Laing's theories. Deleuze and Guattari's critique of psychoanalysis is worth recalling here, as they argue that psychoanalysis is in fact highly unscientific.

At its most autistic, psychoanalysis is no longer measured against any reality, it no longer opens to any outside, but becomes itself the test of reality and the guarantor of its own test...²⁷

Psychoanalysis, from my perspective, is largely an example of hypostatization, of treating something conceptual as though it were real. The unconscious itself, which Mitchell claims as one of Freud's most scientific discoveries²⁸, is a good example of this. Laing's critique of the idea of unconscious experience in the first chapter of *Self and Others* raises the problem that psychoanalysis itself is

²⁶ **The Divided Self**, p.25

²⁷ **Anti-Oedipus**, p.313

²⁸ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.258

based upon inferences. This is because a person cannot experience the experience of the other. 'Yet the whole of psychoanalytic theory rests upon the validity of such inferences; if they are wrong, everything built upon them loses its *raison d'être*.'²⁹ Additionally, Laing argues here that because of the requirement to make such inferences, psychological theories are dealing with phenomena that lie outside of the realm of natural science. 'No branch of natural science requires to make the peculiar type of inferences that are required in a science of persons.'³⁰ In consideration of this fact, the suggestion can be presented that such inferences may be liable to have a greater validity if they are not made through the use of a closed theoretical system such as psychoanalysis because of the danger, that Laing sets out, of making interpretations which are incorrect, and which have no relevance to the individual concerned.

Mitchell's psychoanalytic persuasion produces a related set of criticisms of Laing which proceed along the line that he does not engage sufficiently with psychoanalytic theory on its own terms. Despite her consciousness that Laing sets '...himself up in opposition to most generally accepted tenets of psychoanalysis',³¹ including the idea of the unconscious, Mitchell nevertheless criticises Laing for not taking into account specific aspects of Freudian theory. She draws some similarities between Laing and Freud in terms of the assertion of both of '...the continuum between sanity and madness...' She then goes on to suggest that Laing does not make a substantial difference between neurosis and psychosis in his work.³² This clearly was not Laing's aim. The study of the neuroses has received more attention than

²⁹ **Self and Others**, p.30

³⁰ *ibid*, p.28

³¹ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.253

³² *ibid*, p.260

that of the psychoses historically within psychiatry and psychology. Laing's focus is on making forms of psychosis, such as schizophrenia, comprehensible, rather than on studying types of neurosis. Mitchell then suggests that:

It is, of course, possible that Laing, in company with some other analysts, implicitly regards psychosis merely as a more severe form of neurosis. Such a position seems to me not to recognize that the later event of the Oedipus complex – the nucleus of the neurosis – is an ever-in-waiting 'overlay'.³³

Such a criticism would be appropriate had Laing attempted to fit his theories into a psychoanalytic framework. However, Laing does not do this, and the Oedipus complex is not referred to in his work in any positive manner. Therefore, Mitchell either needs to explain further why she considers that Laing should use this concept, or she needs to acknowledge the fact that Laing would not have used this idea, due to the fact that he regards psychoanalytic concepts as obscuring more fundamental issues in patients' lives. Instead, Mitchell assumes that the imposition on her behalf of a psychoanalytic frame of reference on to Laing's work has a self-evident validity. This constitutes one of her most serious errors in her critique of Laing, which is compounded by her (otherwise) fairly accurate explanation of his work. It is as though Mitchell's respect for psychoanalysis blinds her to Laing's critique of it, which she deals with only very briefly.

Earlier in her chapter on 'Laing and Psychoanalysis', Mitchell criticises Laing for '...conflating some Freudian concepts with more generally debased and popular notions deriving from these.'³⁴ Here I am reminded of Fromm's retort to Marcuse's critique of his work in *Eros and*

³³ op. cit. Mitchell also criticises Laing for ignoring the Oedipus complex later in this chapter, p.266, along very similar lines.

³⁴ ibid, p.255

Civilisation (1956). Fromm accuses Marcuse of making ‘...elementary mistakes in presenting Freudian concepts.’³⁵ It appears to be a popular response to make the claim that an author’s interpretation of psychoanalytic ideas does not conform to the orthodox view. No doubt such issues are likely to arise with psychoanalysis making use of such a complex jargon.³⁶ However, it is not my concern here to engage in an investigation of whether Laing’s use of such ideas in the paragraph from *Self and Others* that Mitchell cites³⁷ conform to the standard psychoanalytic doctrine. What is my concern is to identify the arbitrary nature of the criticisms that Mitchell makes through her failure to bring to bear Laing’s critique of psychoanalysis on to her analysis of Laing’s work.

She takes

issue with Laing’s criticism of the concept of the unconscious, and his reframing of it as ‘...*what we do not communicate, to ourselves or to one another.*’³⁸

Mitchell considers that therefore:

Laing thus wants to change the whole meaning of the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious, making sure that there is nothing distinctive about it... what he is in fact doing destroys the entire concept.³⁹

Here she fails to recognise that destroying the concept of the unconscious was precisely what Laing wanted to do, as he considered it to be useless in terms of comprehending the individual. With regard to the failure of psychoanalysis to achieve a substantial theory of psychosis, which I have referred to earlier, in my

³⁵ Fromm, E, (1971), **The Crisis of Psychoanalysis**, in Bronner, S.E, and Kellner, D, (eds), (1989), **Critical Theory and Society: A Reader**, London, Routledge, p.248

³⁶ The use of such jargon may be a way that psychoanalysis presents itself as a ‘scientific’ enterprise. However, science and impenetrable complexity are two different matters.

³⁷ **Self and Others**, p.29, second paragraph, Mitchell’s quotation begins with ‘Beyond the mere attribution of agency...’

³⁸ *ibid*, p.32. Laing’s italics

³⁹ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, pp.255-256

chapter on Deleuze and Guattari, Mitchell notes that Freud did have an ‘...emergent theory thereof. Some recognition of a point of departure from the tentative tenets of psychoanalysis could then be expected and yet Laing offers no such recognition.’⁴⁰ This provides a further example of Mitchell’s omission of Laing’s critique of psychoanalysis. Whilst it is clear that Laing respected Freud’s work, Laing’s work attempts to offer a radically different means for the study of mental distress to that of Freud. Therefore, given the extent of his critique of psychoanalysis, why would Laing seek to employ such bizarre ideas as the disavowal of castration in his work? Such a concept runs counter to Laing’s wish to engage with the patient in the language of persons, rather than the jargon of psychoanalysis. Mitchell’s critique of Laing also critically assesses this attempt on behalf of Laing to use the language of persons, which will be reviewed shortly.

During Mitchell’s criticism that Laing’s ‘science of persons’ is not a science, she elucidates a perceptive aspect of this element of Laing’s work. In a chapter entitled ‘The Schizophrenic World’, she observes the following.

Laing’s ‘science of persons’ would, he hoped, be a perfectly homologous structure. That is, the ‘science’ would reflect its object. Its ‘object’ is the ‘person’ and the science must thus be personal... Such a *reflection* is not *science*... A science must, from within its own domain, offer the possibility of consistency and some form of proof.⁴¹

With regard to the latter aspect of the above quotation, I consider my preceding discussion to be sufficient as a response. Nevertheless, Mitchell’s identification of the ‘homologous structure’ of Laing’s ‘science of persons’ is a particular aspect which I have not previously seen in other work on Laing. Her pin-pointing

⁴⁰ *ibid*, p.261

⁴¹ *ibid*, pp.272-273

of this enables her to then apply a critical view as to whether Laing does fully achieve his aim of viewing the person in personal terms.

...Such an echoic relationship between the object and its science is, as we have seen, Laing's aim: a 'science of persons' uses a language of persons. Except, of course, in... becoming 'technical' it doesn't: process, praxis, series, nexus, totalization...⁴²

This criticism of Mitchell's is located in a chapter called 'The Various Scientific Methods', which deals with Laing's engagement with Sartre's late work within *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, and *Reason and Violence*. The chapter additionally investigates Laing's use of mapping. With regard to the latter aspect, Mitchell produces a critique of this.

The mathematical formulations of *The Politics of the Family* must seem to most people to be further removed from an ordinary 'language of persons' than the 'defensive' and depersonalizing way of expressing things that Laing originally objected to in Freud.⁴³

The system of mapping, or the 'topological scheme',⁴⁴ as Mitchell refers to it is utilised in *The Politics of the Family* (1969) within the second section of the text. However, this method of notation of the varying perspectives held of each other by two or more people originates within *Self and Others* in the appendix 'A Notation for Dyadic Perspectives'.⁴⁵ Mitchell does not note this within her chapter on 'The Various Scientific Methods'. However, it is feasible that this appendix may have been added in later editions of *Self and Others*.

It is fair to say

that Laing's use of mapping is most prominent within *Interpersonal Perception*

⁴² op. cit., p.245

⁴³ ibid, p.248

⁴⁴ ibid

⁴⁵ **Self and Others**, pp.174-180

and *The Politics of the Family*, as Mitchell states. Her critique here of Laing benefits considerably from her tracing of the lines of development of concepts throughout his work. Her main criticism at this point involves the argument that Laing's aim in his early work of addressing the person in personal terms becomes lost in the middle period of his publications. This is a relatively sophisticated method of critique, as Mitchell endeavours to criticise Laing's work in such a way that she evaluates his work through the aims and methods that Laing set for himself. With regard to Mitchell's criticism of Laing that mapping itself is further removed from a language of persons than the aspects of psychoanalysis that Laing criticises, I find this debatable. This is a further example of Mitchell's psychoanalytic influences lessening her awareness of the problems with that perspective. I would argue that a 'layperson' would have the capacity to find Laing's use of mapping intelligible, as it is sufficiently explained within his work for that to occur. The jargon of psychoanalysis, however, requires far more specialist knowledge for it to be interpreted.⁴⁶

Nevertheless,

Laing's use of mapping is arguably one of the lines that run through his work that I dislike the most. However, my discomfort with this form of notational representation may provide the reason for this. I can perceive that there is some value in having a method whereby the disjunction between the perspectives of two or more people can be noted and analysed. Since Laing's studies of families frequently found such disjunctions, it is unsurprising that he would want to make use of such a method. Nevertheless, I do consider this overall criticism of Laing's work to be fair, despite my issue with Mitchell's framing of it within the

⁴⁶ I find Laplanche and Pontalis' **The Language of Psychoanalysis** (1973) to be valuable in this respect.

last quotation from her that I have used. In some ways, Laing does move away from the language of persons within the middle period of his *oeuvre*. However, it could be argued that this is a result of the changing aims of his work as his career progressed, but I feel that there is value in Laing's early attempt to meet with the individual on personal terms.

The issue remains that Laing utilises mapping and the Sartrean terms that he develops from *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in order to make important advances in terms of his theory. To only use the quotidian language of persons in his work would have restricted Laing in this manner. Laing's use of 'praxis' and 'process' in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* does not occur in such a way that a non-specialist in such thought would find these terms to be alienating. Indeed, these concepts, and Laing and Esterson's deployment of them to explain how the family interactions, and the position of the person designated as 'mad', become much more comprehensible are a key aspect of this study. Mitchell correctly recognises this.

What [Laing] takes from Sartre's *Critique* was formulated as a method for making behaviour intelligible: what you have to do is to find out who did what and why; you have to 'personalize' the apparently impersonal, restore 'the process' to 'the praxis'.⁴⁷

Mitchell is more critical of the use of mapping within Laing's work than of his development of late Sartrean concepts. The extent of her engagement with this aspect of Laing's work is unrivalled as far as I am aware. This is demonstrated in her chapter 'Dialectics and Totalizations', where she again makes use of a fairly sophisticated method of critique.

⁴⁷ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.244

Laing's Deployment of Sartrean Concepts

Mitchell argues that: '...given the preoccupations of the body of Laing's work, we can quite legitimately apply his explanation of what interests him in Sartre's thought to his own position.'⁴⁸ She is correct in noting that:

Laing... is interested in finding a dialectical method of *totalization*. This latter concept runs through his work like a theme-song. In first trying to attain 'totalization', that is to say a view that looks at the whole in its entirety without destroying the parts, Laing deploys Sartre's 'dialectical' method.⁴⁹

Mitchell's approach within this chapter moves close to the aims of an immanent critique. She sets herself the task of using the influence of the late Sartre upon Laing's work as a method of evaluation, and a basis for critique. She avoids the pitfall of picking out decontextualised snippets of Laing's work for critique through her reading and awareness of the majority of Laing's work, up until the date of first publication of *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. Her first criticism of Laing within this chapter is directed at his very use of dialectics itself, and is additionally directed at Reich's use of dialectics as the two sections prior to those on Laing in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* are concerned with Reich's ideas. In her explanation of the use of dialectics within *Reason and Violence*, she states that 'dialectic, as used in these instances, without the concept of contradiction, is meaningless.'⁵⁰

With regard to this specific criticism, it is not clearly stated by Mitchell whether this is a criticism more of Sartre's use of dialectics, as set out by Laing in the section that he was responsible for from *Reason and Violence*,

⁴⁸ *ibid*, p.249

⁴⁹ *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ *ibid*, p.250

rather than a direct critique of Laing himself. Laing's contribution to the latter text is a summary of Sartre's *Critique...* as opposed to an original piece by Laing. A full inquiry into this is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, Mitchell appears to view the concept of the dialectic as encompassing alone Hegel's original formulation of this idea.

Hegel thought that all logic and world history itself followed a dialectical path, in which internal contradictions were transcended, but gave rise to new contradictions that themselves required resolution. Marx and Engels gave Hegel's idea of dialectic a material basis...⁵¹

Laing's explanation of Sartre's thought in *Reason and Violence* does note a similarity with the above quotation, when Laing states that '...dialectical reason... is seen in the material conditions of history.'⁵² Nevertheless, the notion of contradiction does not take a central place within Sartre's theory, with the exception of the concept of counter-finality. Laing puts forward Sartre's argument that:

...we must try to understand the nature of the relation of the material field to many of the passive actions... whereby materiality exercises power over men, in returning to them the praxis that they have put into it, but now as though stolen from them and coming back to them as a contra-finality, as an end that contradicts the ends of man...⁵³

Counter-finality can be defined as the '...tendency of matter to channel the labour it absorbs in directions that run counter to those intended by the people

⁵¹ Honderich, T, (ed), (2005), **The Oxford Companion to Philosophy**, (2nd ed), Oxford, Oxford University Press, p.212

⁵² **Reason and Violence**, p.100

⁵³ *ibid*, p.113

whose labour it is...'⁵⁴ Therefore a contradiction occurs between the intended aims of the human praxis and the result that eventually takes place.

Many

instances of counter-finality can be seen at this stage in history. For example, an individual may decide to drive to work rather than taking the bus, as public transport is expensive compared to car use, is over-burdened at peak hours, and time can be saved by driving as the person can drive directly to their work place as opposed to walking between bus stops. However, the increasing use of cars in this country is adding to road congestion, which then leads to greater traffic jams, slowing down travelling times. The pollution derived from exhaust fumes adds to the threat posed to our species from environmental devastation. Sartre makes the argument that counter-finality '...occurs precisely because the action in question is that of isolated individuals.'⁵⁵ The example given by Sartre is that of the deforestation of Chinese land, which has had the unintended result of rendering the land incapable of holding silt and topsoil in place, therefore raising river levels and leading to flood disasters.⁵⁶ In this manner, '...the worker can become his own material fatality, in that he produces the inundations that ruin him.'⁵⁷ This notion of counter-finality is one of the most striking concepts found within *Reason and Violence*, and the idea of contradiction forms a key aspect of this. Mitchell does not refer to this concept in her chapter on 'Dialectics and Totalizations'.

⁵⁴ Levy, N, (2002), **Sartre**, Oxford, Oneworld, p.127

⁵⁵ *ibid*, p.127

⁵⁶ *op. cit.*, **Reason and Violence**, p.116

⁵⁷ **Reason and Violence**, p.116

Lasch identifies in his extensive notes to *The Minimal Self* (1984) that ‘...Mitchell clings to a Leninist conception of politics...’⁵⁸ It may be the case with her criticism of Laing and Sartre’s use of dialectics that, in a similar manner to her clinging to psychoanalytic orthodoxy, Mitchell is adhering to an old-fashioned conception of socialism and dialectical materialism. Sartre’s use of dialectics arises from a critique of such orthodoxy, and through criticism of Hegel and Engels. With regard to counter-finality, Laing notes that ‘this dialectic is lost in simplistic Marxism’.⁵⁹ In the introduction, a distinction between the ‘dogmatic dialectic and critical dialectic’ is drawn. The argument is proposed that ‘there are certain basic principles of dialectical materialism... But these are principles not dogmas.’⁶⁰ Dogmatism is identified in this chapter as having led to a ‘theoretical paralysis’⁶¹ in Marxist theory. Engels comes in for a substantial amount of critique here.

Engels’s error was to suppose that he could derive dialectical laws of nature from procedures which were themselves non-dialectical: comparisons, analogies, abstractions, inductions.⁶²

Hegel is later criticised for having suppressed ‘...matter as the mediator between individuals.’⁶³ Mitchell, in a similar vein to her omission of Laing’s full critique of psychoanalysis, fails to include this critique of existing conceptions of the dialectic in her chapter on this subject. Her criticism that the use of dialectics in Laing and Sartre’s work is meaningless without the concept of contradiction is made in a footnote to a quotation from *Reason and Violence*. This is one of the

⁵⁸ Lasch, C, (1984), **The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times**, New York, Norton, p.294

⁵⁹ **Reason and Violence**, p.113

⁶⁰ *ibid*, p.93

⁶¹ *op. cit.*, p.94

⁶² *ibid*, p.100. See also p.98.

⁶³ *ibid*, p.110

most disappointing aspects of her critique of Laing. Her avoidance of certain key lines of critique (because she is sympathetic to what has been criticised) has the unfortunate result of generating criticisms that fail because they are presented from a standpoint that has already been critiqued by the very author that she is attempting to criticise. If a crucial aspect of a theory is missed in a critique, this has the tendency to displace at least some aspects of the criticism, as they lack the foundation derived from the element that has been ignored. From my perspective, through Laing's summary of Sartre's thought in *Reason and Violence*, substantial contributions, such as the concept of counter-finality are offered by Sartre, which cannot simply be written off as 'meaningless'.

Mitchell's

next criticism of Laing in this chapter follows an investigation on her behalf into how truth is constituted in his work. She argues that Laing makes use of '...a romantic concept of truth for his 'science of persons'',⁶⁴ which involves the '...Greek notion of truth as an unveiling.'⁶⁵ Mitchell links this latter conception of truth to the idea of 'phenomenological truth',⁶⁶ which she argues provides a means for Laing to do away with the problem of the relation between the person conducting the study and the individual or group being studied.

Phenomenological truth thus gets rid of 'artificial' structures, it gets rid of the doctor and rid of the patient. It gets rid of the sane and of the mad. All is communication – good or bad...⁶⁷

Mitchell then provides some further discussion of Laing's use of the idea of experience.⁶⁸ She then makes the following criticism.

⁶⁴ *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, p.250

⁶⁵ *ibid*

⁶⁶ *op. cit.*

⁶⁷ *ibid*

As a breaking of boundaries was his original project, it should come as no surprise that any categories of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’, health/ psychosis, ultimately all but disappear for Laing... But it seems to me that it is Laing’s *basic philosophical position* that eradicates the locatable ‘disease’ schizophrenia; not, as is usually contended... his empirical demonstration of its absence – his elucidation of its intelligibility.⁶⁹

This is an interesting criticism because it achieves a level of operation above the standard critique of Laing that claims that schizophrenia is a disease after all, despite Laing’s arguments. This is an achievement on Mitchell’s behalf, as she attempts to engage with Laing in terms of his philosophical influences.

However, is

this a valid criticism? I do consider there to be some legitimacy to this claim, because the phenomenological view as an attempt to investigate a phenomena does make the effort to perceive what is being studied without placing constructions, such as the label of schizophrenia, on to the person being studied. Therefore, this perspective extirpates the disease of schizophrenia by not viewing the person in that primary manner. Nevertheless, is it not the very point of Laing’s methodology that the perspective used enables this eradication of schizophrenia in this way? Rather than providing a criticism, the above quotation from Mitchell serves to highlight the value of the existential-phenomenological method. However, Mitchell’s suggestion that this is the primary reason for Laing’s destruction of schizophrenia as a disease entity, rather than the intelligibility of the situation of the labelled person, is something that I take issue with. I would suggest alternatively that the former facilitates the latter – by not imposing the view of the person as ill upon the individual, the comprehensibility

⁶⁸ I have examined her critique of the use of this term within Laing’s work earlier in this chapter.

⁶⁹ *ibid*, p.251

of their social context becomes apparent. Mitchell's comments on Laing are frustrating in this manner. She raises issues which operate on a more complex level than many of Laing's critics and commentators, only to confound the central matters through slight misunderstandings and omissions of some aspects of Laing's work.

Mitchell ultimately does not achieve her aim in this chapter of turning what interests Laing about Sartre into a coherent critique of Laing himself. Nevertheless, she does achieve the highlighting of some aspects of Laing's work that are not usually recognised in the standard reception of Laing. Following her criticism that I have cited above, Mitchell claims that in Laing's work 'the demand for intelligibility is as such a merely truistic one.'⁷⁰ This stands in contradiction to some aspects of her praise for Laing, which I will review later in this chapter. As an example, later on in Mitchell's sections on Laing, she puts forward the argument that he: '...lucidly exposes for us how most of us in Western capitalist culture live, the terms of our lives, what constitutes our illusions, our reality, our hopes and despairs.'⁷¹ It can be argued that viewing the experiences which become categorised as schizophrenia as an illness is a peculiar aspect of Western capitalist culture itself. Laing himself notes this in the last chapter of *The Divided Self*, the psychobiography of Julie. With regard to schizophrenia, he suggests that: 'I am, however, describing something that occurs in our... Western world, and perhaps not, in quite the same terms, anywhere else.'⁷² If Laing's efforts at rendering schizophrenia intelligible are 'merely truistic', then Mitchell's praise for his work on the family and his wider cultural criticisms become negated by her own critique. From my perspective,

⁷⁰ *ibid*, p.252

⁷¹ *ibid*, p.273

⁷² **The Divided Self**, p.180

Laing's work in terms of making madness comprehensible has a more substantial basis than Mitchell here accords it. This element of Laing's work provides a central aim for many of his studies, so it seems rather trite for Mitchell to write this off so easily, even despite her perceptive identification of this aspect. Deleuze and Guattari argue that there is an extremely close relation between capitalism and psychoanalysis, which they explain through some criticism of Reich.

When Reich denounces the way in which psychoanalysis joins forces with social repression, he still doesn't go far enough, because he doesn't see that the tie linking psychoanalysis with capitalism is not merely ideological, that it is infinitely closer, infinitely tighter... Oedipus as the last word of capitalist consumption...⁷³

I find their argument to be valid. Mitchell's defence of psychoanalysis renders her unable to comprehend that Laing's critique of this theory is central to his wider cultural criticisms, as psychoanalysis has arisen precisely out of capitalist culture. '...Psychoanalysis is content to live off Oedipus, to develop and promote it, and to give it a marketable medical form.'⁷⁴

Criticism of Laing's Case Studies

Earlier in this chapter I referred to two main lines of critique of Laing which are made on Mitchell's behalf: that his 'science of persons' is not really a science, and that a confusion and a lack of clarity are present in Laing's work. An example of this latter line of critique is found towards the end of her chapter on 'Dialectics and Totalizations'.

⁷³ **Anti-Oedipus**, p.312

⁷⁴ *ibid*, p.365

What is needed is... some explanation that accounts for why one thing leads to another, why a certain response to a certain situation produces this and not that particular result.⁷⁵

Mitchell here shows herself to be in some agreement with this form of critique which has been produced (and evaluated already in this thesis) by Clare.

However, Laing does suggest that there is one particular aspect of the social context surrounding the person who comes to be regarded as schizophrenic that aggravates their condition – the lack of any available person to confirm what is really going on for the ‘schizophrenic’ individual. In ‘The Ghost of the Weed Garden’ in *The Divided Self*, within a discussion of Julie’s ‘bad’ phase (from around the age of fifteen), Laing states the following.

What I feel must have been the most schizophrenogenic factor of this time was not simply Julie’s attack on her mother, or even her mother’s counter-attack, but the complete absence of anyone in her world who could or would see some sense in her point of view, whether it was right or wrong.⁷⁶

Later in this chapter I will return to Laing’s discussions of Julie’s family in order to assess the validity of Mitchell’s criticisms that Laing is ‘prejudiced’ against women, and mothers in particular, and blames the latter group solely for creating schizophrenic individuals.

It is additionally made clear in some of the case studies in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, that this lack of a person to confirm the ‘mad’ individual’s point of view served to increase their confusion. In the chapter on ‘Family Two: The Blairs’, Laing and Esterson state that, with regard to Lucie:

⁷⁵ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.252

⁷⁶ **The Divided Self**, p.192

Her inability to find significant others with authority to confirm or validate her point of view left her, as we saw, mistrusting the fabric of her experience. More than this, it left her disheartened and dispirited.⁷⁷

I am sure that I am not unique in having experienced situations where either another person or myself was being kept in a state of mystification by others. Laing's above statement from *The Divided Self* is arguably the closest that he gets to providing a fully explicit statement with regard to what he sees as the main maddening aspect of the families of schizophrenics. I find it intelligible that being kept in such a condition of having no bearings by which to orient oneself in a social situation, particularly within the family, where the parents have complete control over their children (which they abuse in many cases cited by Laing), could lead an individual to become 'disheartened' and withdrawn.

Another statement by Laing and Esterson regarding what they view as particular about the families of schizophrenics is provided in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*.

Our impression, comparing the families of schizophrenics with other families, is that they are relatively closed systems, and that the future patient is particularly enclosed within the family system.⁷⁸

It is probable that Mitchell, and other critics, would like to see more of these kinds of statements on Laing's behalf. However, I have never found this to be a major deficiency with Laing's work, because I have always found it clear within Laing's work that if a child is placed within a suffocating, closed family environment, that stifles their personal development, and that if the family

⁷⁷ *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, p.64

⁷⁸ *ibid*, pp.224-225

continually mislead the child, then the child stands little chance of achieving some degree of happiness in their life. As Laing puts it:

...what can happen if the mother's or the family's scheme of things does not match what the child can live and breathe in? The child then has to develop its own piercing vision and to be able to live by that... or else become mad.⁷⁹

What I find the most surprising is that critics such as Mitchell and the conservative psychiatric critics cannot understand the impact of such an environment and treatment upon a young, vulnerable person. It is also likely that not all case studies will follow a simplistic 'one-thing-leads-to another' format, and that there may be no easy way of expressing exactly what is the key factor for all cases, as this will ignore the specificities of each one. As I have stated earlier with regard to Clare's critique, reductive cause-and-effect explanations operate on a level below the aims of Laing's work. Therefore they do not provide a valid means of critique of his work.

Mitchell provides some specific criticisms of the case studies in *The Divided Self* and *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, which are worth an evaluation at this point. In her second section on Laing, in a chapter entitled 'Rebels with a Cause', she again provides examples of her criticism that Laing's work is unclear in some respects. Mitchell suggests that in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, Laing only manages to remove the schizophrenic label from the person so diagnosed in order to transfer the 'denigratory value judgement'⁸⁰ to the rest of the members of the family. Mitchell appears to view this as a theoretical conjuring trick, rather than an evaluation of the family environments by Laing and Esterson. She sees this as problematic to an extent

⁷⁹ *The Divided Self*, pp.189-190

⁸⁰ *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, p.282

that has never arisen to me, since I am fully aware that human groups, with the family as an example, can act in ways which cannot be described as ‘sane’. Therefore, it is not a matter of ‘transposing distinctions’⁸¹ for the sake of it, but rather of setting out the conditions of the family nexus that encircled the individual who came to be seen as ‘mad’. Mitchell then puts forward the argument that in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, Laing

...by drawing into the same strange bag *all* the members of the nexus,... often fails to point out what is really ‘odd’ – at least from the standpoint of our society.⁸²

Here Mitchell is operating on the assumption that the majority of our society regard keeping children in a state of mystification, and snuffing out their developing autonomy and sense of themselves as separate from their family, which I regard as two main characteristics of the families studied in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, as not unusual practices. This may well be the case. However, her failure to note these (to my mind) glaring similarities between the eleven families, in order to make the criticism that Laing and Esterson do not distinguish some key unusual aspects of them, does not enable her to reach this level of awareness. Such a failure of a reflexive examination of her own assumptions, and how these influence her critique, is one of Mitchell’s greatest deficiencies.

From my reading of *Sanity, Madness and the Family* there are some prime examples of the treatment by these families of their daughters in ways which, arguably, many of our society would view as odd. Ruby, in the case study of ‘Family Five: The Edens’, became pregnant at the age of sixteen, and ‘...had a

⁸¹ *ibid*

⁸² *op. cit.*

miscarriage at four months.’⁸³ It is not stated in this chapter whether the miscarriage was the result of the following treatment she received (essentially a forced attempted abortion) from her family.

As soon as they could after hearing about it from Ruby, *mummy* and *mother* got her on the sitting-room divan, and while trying to pump hot soapy water into her uterus, told her with tears, reproaches, pityingly and vindictively at once, what a fool she was, what a slut she was...⁸⁴

No definitive statement is provided of whether Ruby herself would have liked to have kept the baby. However, it seems clear that her family would not have let her make up her own mind about that (let alone whether such a family would have provided a decent environment for a baby). Her ‘cousin’ (who was really her brother) stated in an interview that she was ‘...not allowed to make a decision.’⁸⁵ In the case study of ‘Family Six: The Fields’, the mother mentions in an interview that because June (her daughter) had a ‘congenital dislocation of the hip’⁸⁶ and thus had to wear a special plaster cast to correct this, the mother proceeded to tie her with dog leads to a bed in order to stop June from wearing out the plaster.⁸⁷ From the account given, this went on for at least two years.⁸⁸ Here I find it debatable whether Laing truly needs to point out what exactly is odd about these families. Is it standard practice for families to give their daughters forced home abortions, or to tie them up? Whilst I am conscious that the family in our society is far from the Disney portrayals in reality, nevertheless these chilling examples may well be seen as odd from the standpoint of our

⁸³ **Sanity, Madness and the Family**, p.133

⁸⁴ *ibid*, p.134

⁸⁵ *op. cit.*, p.140

⁸⁶ *ibid*, 146

⁸⁷ *ibid*, p.148

⁸⁸ *op. cit.*

society. What is additionally disturbing is that both the families in these cases failed to see anything wrong with treating their daughters in such a manner.

Mitchell ignores these instances in order to make her criticism, but provides examples from *Sanity, Madness and the Family* and *The Divided Self* which she sees as bolstering her argument. She does mention Ruby's family, but fails to include the above horrifying incident. Instead Mitchell decides to pick upon the confusion occasioned by Ruby's family's lies about their real identities.

...The factor that seems to me to have been a constant problem... is not even commented on by Laing and Esterson: this child has simultaneously a 'mummy' and a 'mother' – surely an obtrusively abnormal state of affairs in our society?⁸⁹

It is a correct statement that no further comment on this state of affairs in the manner suggested by Mitchell is provided by Laing and Esterson. Ruby was taught by her family to address them by titles other than those that actually corresponded to her relations' real biological status to her. For example, she was trained to refer to her biological mother as 'mummy', and to her aunt as 'mother'.⁹⁰ This was presumably due to the fact that Ruby was an 'illegitimate child'.⁹¹ However, Laing and Esterson do provide a table of Ruby's family where her relatives' biological status is noted next to the names that Ruby was taught to call them. In the following discussion, the former set of names are given in standard typescript, and the latter are given in italics. Both of these clarifications of a highly mystifying situation are provided by Laing and Esterson 'in order to spare the reader the initial confusion of the investigators, not to say of this

⁸⁹ *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, p.283

⁹⁰ *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, p.133

⁹¹ *ibid*

girl...'⁹² Therefore, an awareness of the bizarre nature of this family context is given by Laing and Esterson. It could additionally be argued that the complex dislocation between each family members' biological status and the names that Ruby was taught to use for them, as a totality, is at least as unusual as having both a 'mummy' and a 'mother'.

In one example of Mitchell's praise for Laing, she argues that '...Laing's work has the merit of lucidly giving us new (and forgotten old) aspects... for future analysis.'⁹³ However, I consider this to provide a greater insight into some of Mitchell's reasons for criticising Laing, rather than offering a substantial commendation of Laing's work. She criticises Laing, through her ignorance of the aims of phenomenology, for not sufficiently interpreting the case studies that he uses. With regard to her above criticism of the study of Ruby's family, and in the following quotation, Mitchell critiques Laing for not providing any analysis of gender relations. The quotation below refers to Laing's use of the descriptions of her illness given by Joan in chapter ten of *The Divided Self*.

Joan in her 'separated' persona always refers to herself as 'he'; later, almost by accident, in the general analysis we learn her parents had wanted a boy – but surely the persistently transposed gender was worth a specific comment?⁹⁴

It is of note that Joan's account was not provided directly to Laing himself, but was reported by two other authors.⁹⁵ Mitchell's above criticism is not supported by any textual evidence in the form of direct quotations or references providing an indication of the exact pieces that she is critiquing. Her attempt at elucidating

⁹² *ibid*, p.132

⁹³ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.273

⁹⁴ *ibid*, p.283

⁹⁵ **The Divided Self**, p.160

some feminist criticism of Laing appears to involve selecting some incidences where Laing could have made some further comment on gendering. This clearly was not Laing's main project, and he cannot be criticised on the basis of this.

However, the above criticism by Mitchell is erroneous according to my reading of *The Divided Self*. When Joan uses the term 'he', she is not referring to herself, but to an ideal, generalised patient which she uses as a means of explanation of her experience of schizophrenia. For example, Joan states that 'the patient hates the doctor for opening the wound again and hates himself for allowing himself to be touched again.'⁹⁶ Joan also refers to the generalised doctor in her statements as 'he'. This is not the only example where Joan refers to a patient in general as 'he'.⁹⁷ At other stages in this chapter Joan clearly demonstrates an awareness of the fact that she is female.

If you had actually screwed me, it would have wrecked everything... It would have meant that you were using me like a woman when I really wasn't one... It would have meant you could only see my body and couldn't see the real me which was still a little girl.⁹⁸

When Joan uses 'I' she clearly refers to herself as female. Mitchell fails to note this, which provides a further instance of her unfortunate tendency to erase aspects of Laing's work and texts in order either to make a criticism or to attempt to support one. Whether Joan's use of 'he' as referring to a patient in general was prompted by the doctors that she conversed with originally is not stated by Laing.

⁹⁶ *ibid*, pp.166-167

⁹⁷ *ibid*, pages 172 and 175

⁹⁸ *op. cit.*, p.166. Further examples can be found on p.173.

‘Feminist’ Criticism of Laing

These ventures by Mitchell into criticising Laing on the basis of ignoring gender relations demonstrate a tendency within her ‘feminist’ critique to criticise Laing on the basis of non-existent textual evidence, and to engage in what I call ‘playground feminism’,⁹⁹ where examples of the absence of an explicit statement by Laing on gender relations are taken as far more significant than they really are. Mitchell is far less interested in any analysis of gender relations when the individual in question is male. For example, David’s case study in *The Divided Self* contains some discussion of his acting and dressing in a feminine manner.¹⁰⁰ Mitchell’s discussion contains no reference whatsoever to this. It is not explained why she sees alleged gender confusion on behalf of a woman to be more significant than David’s case. I will later argue, in my section on a feminist reading of Laing, that Laing’s project of demystifying madness is itself of benefit to women, since we tend to receive a greater prevalence of the diagnosis of mental illness than men.

Mitchell demonstrates a further similarity between her critique of Laing and that of the conservative psychiatric critics when she suggests that Laing

...resists classifying the patient ‘schizophrenic’ only to classify those that drove him thus (and by classifying we tend to mean blame)...¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Additional examples of ‘playground feminism’ include women getting upset when they are referred to as ‘man’ or ‘guys’ in a casual manner of speech. How this advances women’s situation is beyond me.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*, p.101

¹⁰¹ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.283

I am unaware of any point in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* where Laing and Esterson explicitly state that they have classified any of the families in such a manner. Remarks such as those made in the following quotation do not constitute classification as such, but rather explain the family context of the individual concerned.

Neither of Lucie's parents had emerged from their relations with their parents as persons in their own right. Both had been hopelessly immersed all their lives in fantasy unrecognised as such.¹⁰²

Mitchell's interpretation of Laing's work sharply declines in its validity as her critique proceeds into attempts at feminist criticism. She operates on the assumption that the families of the individuals in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, and the mothers in particular, are seen as to blame for their daughter's condition. She seems to assert that mothers are blameless simply because they are female, and that females are blameless because Mitchell is a feminist. I do not consider feminism to comprise a blind defence of women simply for being women. Mitchell's above criticism highlights a further presumption on her behalf. She equates classification with blame. This is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, as I have stated, Laing does not classify, in the standard use of the term, the families that he studies. Secondly, the conflation of the former term with the latter is a misrepresentation of Laing's work. It is additionally something of a leap to equate one with another, even if Mitchell is here drawing upon Laing's theories of diagnosis and labelling as scapegoating an individual. Thirdly, no direct statements are provided by Laing and his co-author that the families or mothers are directly to blame in this way. Instead, this attribution of

¹⁰² *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, p.73

blame is something that Mitchell is reading on to Laing's work. There may be a greater danger of this occurring with work such as Laing's where explanations, in accordance with his phenomenological influences, are not presented as a finished totality. Nevertheless, this does not excuse imposing a view on to a text which cannot be supported by evidence from it. The following discussion will serve to illustrate these deficiencies in Mitchell's critique.

Mitchell argues that

'...Laing's... more concrete illustrations... seem, if in an elusive fashion, to blame parents, or more particularly the mother.'¹⁰³ She then provides a long quotation from *The Politics of Experience*, where Laing discusses the methodological break-through of considering the whole family nexus as opposed to simply the mother.

At first the focus was mainly on the mothers (who are always the first to get the blame for everything), and a 'schizophrenogenic' mother was postulated, who was supposed to generate disturbance in her child.¹⁰⁴

Mitchell then claims that 'as Laing's theory reverses the sane-mad situation...'¹⁰⁵ this has the result of making '...comparable conclusions...' to the schizophrenogenic mother '...inevitable, if implicit.'¹⁰⁶ Here I would consider it to be more the case that Laing's mother-blaming is 'elusive' or 'implicit' as Mitchell claims because it is non-existent. Her use of the above quotation from *The Politics of Experience* has the effect of undermining rather than reinforcing her assertions, as Laing explicitly states there that it is wrong to blame the

¹⁰³ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.279

¹⁰⁴ **The Politics of Experience**, p.93. Mitchell's quotation from this text includes the paragraph that this quotation is taken from, and the majority of the next paragraph, pp.93-94.

¹⁰⁵ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.279

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*, p.280

mothers alone. Laing's idea that the absence of any other validating point of view for the individual who comes to be seen as 'mad', which I have referred to previously, is not solely directed at the mothers. However, many people would expect the mother in a family to perform such a function, along with other family members. Neither is the indication given by Laing and Esterson that the families of schizophrenics are suffocating, closed environments presumed as the fault of the mother. How does Mitchell come to such a conclusion? She provides very little textual evidence to support her idea, other than the quotation from *The Politics of Experience*, which fails to bolster her views, and the examples below.

Mitchell states that in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, the only time that the father is criticised is in the chapter on 'Family Four: The Danzigs', where she claims that Sarah Danzig's father is let '...off the hook...' by Laing,¹⁰⁷ and that '...this is the only time the father is thus criticized.'¹⁰⁸ This comment appears in a chapter which is muddled by Mitchell's insistence that Laing ignores '...the absence of the Oedipal father',¹⁰⁹ in a way which does not further her analysis of Laing, and which, in this aspect, contributes nothing but another forcing of psychoanalysis on to Laing's work on her behalf. With regard to this example, Mitchell is again twisting the material to fit her critique. Laing's comments found in his texts regarding the Procrustean nature of psychoanalysis, psychiatric theory and socialisation itself¹¹⁰ – that they all involve chopping off aspects which do not fit in, in the same manner as the Greek robber who cut off the limbs of travellers to hide them in his bed – can be

¹⁰⁷ op. cit., p.289

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.* The sections from **Sanity, Madness and the Family** that Mitchell provides quotations from appear in the edition that I am using on p.111 (point 5 – 'She was angry with her father...'), and p.118, the last sentence of the first paragraph, 'This involved him...'

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p.290

¹¹⁰ **The Politics of Experience**, p.62. The term is also used in **Sanity, Madness and the Family** on pages 149 and 160.

applied to Mitchell's critique. She uses a Procrustean method of criticism, where she chops off any ill-fitting aspects.

It is not Laing himself who lets the father of the Danzig family 'off the hook', but instead it is made clear in the study of this family that negative feelings towards the father had been generated by the mother and brother, and that Sarah Danzig was '...the one person who was *really* expected to comply with her father's wishes.'¹¹¹ Here it could be expected that Mitchell would take note of the recurring theme within *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, which an example is here provided of, that these families all seem to expect total compliance and obedience from their daughters, because they are daughters. However, she does note that:

...remaining in the family [is]... something in our culture that women are certainly supposed to do. Laing's descriptions show us forcefully the difficulty the girl will encounter when she must leave this family.¹¹²

This perceptive element which is raised by Mitchell here to me understates the extent to which the daughters in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* are expected to behave like docile robots that do as their families say. I will flesh this argument out further in my later section on a feminist reading of Laing. Mitchell makes some moves in that direction, but does not achieve a full discussion. Her above comment gets lost in a mire of psychoanalytic views that she relates to this material regarding how girls have a 'weaker superego', and so on.

In the example of the Danzig family, Laing and Esterson do not let the father escape uncriticised. Mitchell's misinterpretation of the material instead generates her

¹¹¹ *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, p.112

¹¹² *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, p.286

criticism of it, and the textual examples that she provides do not support her claim. Fathers do not receive as uncritical a treatment as Mitchell claims in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. Both the mother and the father of the Abbott family are criticised for regarding their daughter's developing autonomy as symptoms of an illness.¹¹³ The father of the Blair family is presented by Laing and Esterson as a highly unsavoury character.

Mrs Blair said that her husband watched over all Lucie's movements, required her to account for every minute she spent outside the house, told her that if she went out alone she would be kidnapped, raped or murdered... He would ridicule any feelings she had...¹¹⁴

Lucie herself states that her father '...doesn't believe in the emancipation of women.'¹¹⁵ Laing and Esterson are highly critical of this patriarchal, domineering father of the Blair family. 'Mr Blair appears to have made it quite clear what he wanted of Lucie, and he made it clear enough to us, without betraying the slightest impression that his expectations were unusual.'¹¹⁶ It is noted that the mother had effectively surrendered to the father's wishes.¹¹⁷

It was clear that Mr Blair did not feel his concern about his wife and daughter to be excessive, and it was clear to us what he wanted his daughter to be – a pure, virginal, spinster gentle-woman. His occasional physical and frequent verbal violence towards her were prompted by his view of her as sexually wanton.¹¹⁸

The example of the Blair family shows a father whose desire to control his family exceeds what can be considered as 'normal'. Mitchell fails to examine

¹¹³ *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, p.48

¹¹⁴ *ibid*, p.55

¹¹⁵ *op. cit.*, p.63

¹¹⁶ *ibid*, p.65

¹¹⁷ *ibid*, p.64

¹¹⁸ *op. cit.*, p.66

this case. I find the absence of discussion of this family, and the father in particular, on Mitchell's behalf to be significant. Her silence on certain aspects of Laing's work, and her selective identification of elements of it which are abstracted from other parts, facilitate her critique, whilst additionally undermining it.

It is Mitchell's contention that '...the absence of the Oedipal father'¹¹⁹ is apparent within Laing's case studies. She identifies examples which, from her point of view, reinforce this assertion. However, the father was all-too-present within the Blair family. Mitchell's comments on Julie's case study in *The Divided Self* operate on a greater level of validity. Nevertheless, the conclusion that she draws at the end of the following quotation is unwarranted.

...Laing comments: 'The father, indeed, as he said, had not much to tell me, because he had "withdrawn himself emotionally" from the family before Julie was born.' So Laing lets him withdraw once more, though surely this very statement by the father should have told him a lot that was worth pursuing? But Laing's prejudice is, in itself, very interesting.¹²⁰

I would agree with Mitchell that some interesting analysis could have been generated by further discussion on Laing's behalf of Julie's father. However, Laing does state that, as opposed to Julie's older sister, 'the father had a more obviously significant part to play.'¹²¹ It is made clear in the psychobiography that relations between Julie's parents had severely broken down prior to her birth. Given Mitchell's tendency towards a Procrustean method of critique, she seems to have avoided the issue that Julie's father's withdrawal from the family was

¹¹⁹ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, 290

¹²⁰ *ibid*, p.289. The quotation that Mitchell uses from **The Divided Self** appears on p.191 of that text.

¹²¹ **The Divided Self**, p.191

due to this, rather than it being a case of Laing being ‘prejudiced’ against women and mothers. If Laing was such a misogynist, would he have bothered to present the intelligibility of the female case studies that he makes use of?¹²² Given Mitchell’s attempts at a feminist analysis of Laing, one would expect some awareness to be shown of how gender roles are socially and culturally conditioned, and some bringing to bear of this upon her analysis. Mothers are, still, generally expected to perform child-rearing functions, even in this day and age. It may be the case that this withdrawal or absence of fathers, which Mitchell views as an intentional act on behalf of Laing as a writer, may be rather more boringly a statement of fact with regard to specific cases.

Mitchell’s view that

Laing blames the mothers alone for creating ‘mad’ children is based upon a number of assumptions. In her above discussion, she assumes that because Laing does not blame the fathers to the extent that she would like, therefore Laing must be blaming the mothers. Here I would like to add to this evaluation another mundane fact that Mitchell avoids – not all mothers will be good mothers, and some mothers may treat their children very badly. Her inclination to see all women as good, because she is a feminist and therefore wants to defend women, no doubt has good intentions. However, I would like to make it clear that this thesis would not have been written if Laing was as ‘prejudiced’ against women and mothers as Mitchell states. She attempts to support her view of Laing in this way through providing a long quotation from *The Divided Self* in which Laing states that the mother is the first mediator of the world to a child, and that the

¹²² It is a frequent misrepresentation of Laing that all of his case studies are of women. This is certainly not the case in **The Divided Self** and **Self and Others**.

father and other adults play a role in this in later stages of development.¹²³

Mitchell argues that in that quotation, ‘Laing... explicitly gives a different role to the two parents...’¹²⁴ It is fair to say that Laing places more emphasis upon the role of the mother in the quotation that Mitchell cites. However, the influence of his tutors, such as Winnicott, cannot be discounted in Laing’s early work. This will be discussed shortly.

Mitchell suggests that Laing implicitly includes these different parental roles in his later work.

...By the time of *Sanity, Madness and the Family* he seems to have so absorbed this feature as to echo it in his researches without either comment or conclusion therefrom, and by the time of *The Politics of Experience* he implies that he has outgrown such notions.¹²⁵

In this example, Mitchell’s tracing of the lines of development in and influences upon Laing’s thought goes astray. The very purpose of *Sanity, Madness and the Family* is to show that the whole family context is involved in encircling the individual who comes to be seen as ‘insane’. Nevertheless, she is correct in stating that Laing moves somewhat beyond that view in *The Politics of Experience*, although some comments on the family are provided therein. Her critique of Laing as blaming mothers sits uneasily with her additional line of criticism that runs through her second section on Laing, that he ignores the Oedipus complex. In this manner, Mitchell claims that Laing loses ‘...the particularity of the mother-child relationship’,¹²⁶ but then proceeds to criticise

¹²³ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.289. The quotation she uses is taken from **The Divided Self**, p.190. It begins: ‘It is out of the earliest loving bonds...’ and is directly quoted through to the end of the paragraph.

¹²⁴ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.289

¹²⁵ *ibid*, p.290

¹²⁶ *ibid*, p.288

him for discussing this very relation as (from Mitchell's perspective) Laing therefore blames the mother if this relation goes wrong. Furthermore, for a psychoanalyst to be criticising Laing on the basis of his alleged 'prejudice' against women, seems to be darkly amusing given Freud's noted sexism. There is also a considerable tension present between Mitchell's first chapter on Laing, a piece of social history entitled 'Social Psychotherapy and Post-war London', and these later criticisms made on her behalf. The influence of Object Relations Theory upon Laing, particularly in *The Divided Self*, is only noted in this chapter. It is by far the best by Mitchell in her sections on Laing, as the way in which gender roles were disrupted during World War Two, and then reinstated in their conservative form following the war is highly informative. Her bringing to bear of this historical context upon Laing's work becomes lost as she proceeds.

The following quotation from Mitchell regards the *zeitgeist* of the late 1950s.

Within psychology the stress was all on mother-care; from the psychoanalyst John Bowlby, whose work was popularized on radio and in women's magazines, we learned that a person sucked his emotional stability literally with his mother's milk.¹²⁷

Mitchell criticises this as being part of '...a heritage of a mother-child obsession.'¹²⁸ She additionally briefly reviews Winnicott and others who formed part of the Tavistock Clinic. Mitchell suggests that Laing's work was produced as a reaction to the focus on the infantile mother-child relationship within Object Relations Theory.¹²⁹ With regard to Winnicott she claims that his:

¹²⁷ op. cit., p.228

¹²⁸ ibid, p.229

¹²⁹ ibid, p.231

...very sensitive work nevertheless had an effect somewhat like Bowlby's in its earliest popularizations. Paeans to the family obscured its more interesting content though his later work in the sixties... was, I think, exempt from this.¹³⁰

At this stage I consider a review of Winnicott's thought in terms of making a contrast between the extent of mother-blaming within Winnicott's and Laing's work to be valuable. This evaluation will additionally illustrate that some residues of the influence of Object Relations Theory remain in *The Divided Self*. The examples from Winnicott's work that I will be using are from publications in the 1960s and early 1970s. Mitchell's above quotation does not clearly state whether the work that she is referring to from the 1960s was researched or published during that decade. If she is claiming that Winnicott's published work in the 1960s and 1970s is free from 'paeans to the family', the following examples, which concern the mother-child relationship, throw this into doubt.

The first paper by Winnicott that I wish to examine dates from 1960, and is titled 'Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self'.¹³¹ There are some considerable similarities between Winnicott's and Laing's conceptions of the true and false self, particularly with regard to Laing's views on this in *The Divided Self*. However, a full review of this would take me far out of the orbit of my present discussion, although some parallels will be drawn. The development of a false self is regarded within this theoretical tradition as a key aspect that is involved in schizophrenia. In this paper, Winnicott explicitly places the full focus upon the mother in terms of the generation of a false self within the infant.

¹³⁰ op. cit., p.229

¹³¹ This paper is found in the collection: Winnicott, D.W, (1965), **The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development**, London, Hogarth Press, pp.140-152

It is necessary to examine the part played by the mother, and in doing so I find it convenient to compare two extremes; by one extreme the mother *is a good-enough mother* and by the other the mother *is not a good-enough mother*.¹³²

Winnicott provides clear examples of his consideration that not good-enough mothering is to blame for the creation of a false self within the child.

The mother who is not good enough... repeatedly fails to meet the infant gesture; instead she substitutes her own gesture which is to be given sense by the compliance of the infant. This compliance on the part of the infant is the earliest stage of the False Self, and belongs to the mother's inability to sense her infant's needs.¹³³

There are some similarities between the above statement by Winnicott and Laing's analysis of Julie's case study in the last chapter of *The Divided Self*, particularly in Laing's reconstructions from the mother's accounts of Julie's behaviour as a baby and a young child. Julie's mother recalls:

...that she played a 'throwing away' game with the patient. Julie's elder sister had played the usual version of this game and had exasperated Mrs X by it. 'I made sure that *she* (Julie) was not going to play that game with me. *I* threw things away and she brought them back to *me*,' as soon as she could crawl.¹³⁴

Laing comments upon this example that: 'it is hardly necessary to comment on the implications of this inversion of roles for Julie's failure to develop any real ways of her own.'¹³⁵ The above quotation from *The Divided Self* clearly

¹³² Winnicott, D.W, (1960), Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self, in Winnicott, D.W, (1965), **The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development**, London, Hogarth Press, p.145

¹³³ *ibid*

¹³⁴ **The Divided Self**, p.185

¹³⁵ *ibid*

demonstrates a child who is having to comply with the mother in the way that Winnicott sees as characteristic of the ‘not good-enough’ mother.

However, a significant point of divergence occurs between Winnicott and Laing in terms of their consideration (or the absence of it) of the rest of the family nexus as additionally playing a part in reinforcing the situation of the individual who comes to be viewed as schizophrenic. Winnicott, in a far more strident manner than Laing, assigns different ‘natural’ roles to the father and mother. Here Mitchell would have perhaps aided her critique of Laing through an acknowledgement that Winnicott presents such views in a far more absolute and conservative fashion than Laing. An example of Winnicott’s views on this topic is provided in the following quotation.

The assumption made by me in this paper is that, in health, the mother who becomes pregnant gradually achieves a high degree of identification with her infant... This special orientation... not only depends on her own mental health, but also it is affected by the environment. In the simplest case the man, supported by a social attitude which is itself a development from the man’s natural function, deals with external reality for the woman, and so makes it safe and sensible for her to be temporarily in-turned, self-centred.¹³⁶

At the very least Winnicott exposes his main assumption of his paper in this quotation. However, further assumptions are bound up in the rest of his discussion. He regards the mother, and the mother alone as having a ‘special orientation’ in terms of having the ability to identify with the child. The father is allocated a different role of dealing ‘with external reality for the woman’. Winnicott’s ideas here seem like something dating from 1860 rather than 1960, particularly in contemporary times, where many women work whilst pregnant,

¹³⁶ Winnicott, *Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self*, p.147

and where economic pressures mean that two incomes are required. In this quotation, Winnicott also states that the identification of the mother with her infant is something that occurs if the mother is in a state of good mental health. This placing of absolute responsibility upon the mother for the child's future welfare does essentially promote the idea (far more than Laing does) that the mother is the key problem if a child eventually becomes 'mad'. In Winnicott's work, women appear only as producers of babies and as their carers. Men, however, have to deal with the 'real' world. This assigning of 'natural' gender-based roles to the parents by Winnicott additionally cements his blaming of mothers, as does his label of the 'not good-enough' mother. One would expect fathers also to identify with their new-born children, yet Winnicott sees this as a maternal role alone.

No consideration is made on Winnicott's behalf of the impact of siblings and other family members upon the infant. The mother is all. However, Winnicott does provide reasons for this early on in his paper on the true and false self.

I leave out infant-father relationships in this context because I am referring to early phenomena, those that concern the infant's relationship to the mother, or to the father as another mother. The father at this very early stage has not become significant as a male person.¹³⁷

I have no means of corroboration of whether young children do recognise their parents early on as gendered. Winnicott offers no supporting evidence for his assertion.¹³⁸ Laing's studies far surpass those of Winnicott in terms of the consideration of the influence of the wider family network. Even in *The Divided*

¹³⁷ *ibid*, p.142

¹³⁸ I have often thought that much child psychology is highly speculative in this way, and therefore dubious in some respects as a young child cannot corroborate the inferences of another.

Self, which, as I have previously mentioned, stands the closest of all of Laing's work to conventional psychiatry, comments are made which note the collusion of the rest of the family in maintaining the compliant and subordinate status of the individual who comes to be regarded as 'mad'. Indeed, the considerable influence of Winnicott upon this work provides a reason for its conventionality in some respects.

In the case study of Julie, Laing refers to all of her family, including her aunt in the following manner.

...None of the adults in her world know the difference between existential life and death. On the contrary, being existentially dead receives the highest commendation from them.¹³⁹

Julie's profound inability to develop a sense of herself as autonomous was supplemented by all of her family regarding this as being 'good'. Laing further comments that: '...all of the others in [Julie's] world took this very feature as a token of goodness and stamped with approval the absence of self-action.'¹⁴⁰ Mitchell seems to assume that Laing's 'mother-blaming' is simply an arbitrary product of what she sees as his desire to not blame the person who is labelled as 'insane'. However, in Julie's case, according to Laing's version of events, neither can her mother be considered to be blameless. Julie's mother cannot be considered to have treated her child in a 'normal' fashion, since she too saw Julie's lack of autonomy as nothing to raise alarm. Nevertheless Laing's statements from *The Divided Self* illustrate the aspect of his theory that I have identified earlier – the lack of any other individual to confirm what is happening for the person designated as 'mad'. Julie's mother is not alone singled out for

¹³⁹ **The Divided Self**, p.183

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.184

criticism. From my perspective, rather than this case study providing an example of Laing's implicit 'mother-blaming', as Mitchell views this, it alternatively gives us an example of Laing's implicit social criticism. The assumption made by Julie's family that the inability to act independently on one's own behalf therefore constitutes being 'good' speaks volumes about the way in which some families may not want their children to become their own people, and instead may encourage them to merely conform to the family's demands. No comment on this aspect is made by Mitchell. The possibility may exist that psychoanalysts may not be so keen to criticise the family itself, as it is the very foundation of much of psychoanalytic theory.

In a later text by Winnicott, published in 1971, he provides a further explicit statement that the mother is to blame for not being 'good-enough' if the child then develops a mental illness. '...There is no health for the human being who has not been started off well enough by the mother.'¹⁴¹ This statement occurs in a chapter on 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena'. It condemns possibly many individuals to a state of mental ill-health, as whether many mothers would be considered 'good-enough' by Winnicott is subject to debate. It is such a sweeping statement, allied to his comments that I have reviewed so far, that Winnicott's discussions of mothering contrast with Laing's to the extent that the former could generate anxiety, guilt and feelings of blame if a mother were to attempt to judge herself by those standards. It could be argued that the very term of the 'good-enough' mother is intended to include the proviso that the mother only has to be reaching the minimum standards for adequate mothering. However, as the term remains

¹⁴¹ Winnicott, D.W, (1971), **Playing and Reality**, London, Tavistock, p.11

couched in studies which are laden with conservative assumptions about the ‘natural’ mothering inclinations of women, it connotes a greater degree of mother-blaming than anything that I am conscious of in Laing’s work. There is a difference between blame where it is due, and Winnicott’s above universalising statement. It is a credit to Laing’s achievements that the fact that his work and that from Winnicott, which has been subject to this brief review, were contemporaneous seems remarkable. As I have previously argued, Winnicott’s work seems like a prehistoric relic in comparison to Laing’s work, which I still find to be fresh and of value in present times.

Mitchell claims regarding the advances and corrections that Laing’s work makes over Object Relations Theory seem misguided in the light of the above review. Winnicott’s work from the 1960s and 1970s still heralds the conventional family as the bastion of the production of mentally well individuals. Her description of Winnicott’s work as ‘very sensitive’¹⁴² ignores his mother-blaming, which is an aspect that she finds to be unacceptable in Laing’s work. Another member of the Tavistock Clinic in the post-war era was Susan Isaacs, who is subject to some blistering criticism from Laing in *Self and Others* with regard to her concept of ‘unconscious experience’.¹⁴³ The following quotation from Mitchell concerns Isaacs’ work.

...She would write of how the mother, feeling her child as a possession, also therefore saw it as an extension of herself, rather than as a person apart. One can see that when the reaction set in with Laing and others in the vanguard, it was to this sort of formulation perhaps as much as anything else that they were objecting.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.229

¹⁴³ **Self and Others**, pp.17-32 (Chapter One)

¹⁴⁴ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.229

I am not knowledgeable of Isaacs' work, so I therefore am unable to assess whether Mitchell's comment on her work is correct.

However, despite his critique of Isaac's work, Laing's case studies reveal similarities with the above quotation in that the mothers concerned fail to see their children as separate individuals. Julie's case study in *The Divided Self* contains this element, as do some of the case studies in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. For example, in the chapter on 'Family Three: The Churches', Laing and Esterson provide this statement. 'One notes here the imperviousness of the mother to the daughter as a person separate and different from herself. She cannot understand that her daughter does not seem to like what she likes.'¹⁴⁵ In the chapter on 'Family Nine: The Irwins', the recurring theme of the text that the daughter's developing autonomy is taken as signs of a mental illness is again apparent. Laing and Esterson state the following.

This is by now a familiar story. What Mrs Irwin finds particularly upsetting is the developing distance between herself and Mary. They used to be the same, and now they are different. It is this difference that, for her mother, seems to be the essence of the illness.¹⁴⁶

One wonders whether Mitchell had written her first chapter on the historical context surrounding Laing's work prior to reading any of it. Her summary of Isaacs' work rather neatly parallels these case studies from Laing, in direct opposition to Mitchell's claim that Laing was reacting against this.

In a similar vein, her claim that Laing '...attempted to discredit the location of psychosis in

¹⁴⁵ *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, p.86

¹⁴⁶ *ibid*, p.208

the child's *infantile* relationship with the mother',¹⁴⁷ does not sit easily with certain examples from Laing's work where he indicates that the problematic mother-child relation does begin with the very young child. The clearest expression of this is found again within Julie's psychobiography in *The Divided Self*. This life history begins from Julie as a baby, and Laing makes it clear that her profound lack of autonomy was in existence from the very beginnings of her life.¹⁴⁸ In *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, there is not such a great emphasis upon taking histories of the infancy of the individuals who come to be seen as 'mad'. However, there are occasions where such information is provided. I have referred earlier to 'Family Six: The Fields', where the mother of the family saw fit to tie up her daughter, due to her daughter's hip problem. In this section, some discussion is devoted to the daughter's early years.¹⁴⁹ This is additionally the case in three further chapters of this text.¹⁵⁰ These studies of the early years of the individuals parallel Julie's case study in the respect that a lack of self-action and autonomy were present in these cases from the very beginnings of their lives. However, Mitchell's statement may be referring to Laing's broadening of the time-span in which psychosis is alleged to occur. Object Relations Theory, with Winnicott as an example, tends to place an emphasis in this respect upon the infantile stage of life alone. However, some further clarifying discussion would benefit Mitchell's comments in this area.

With regard to the specific criticism that Laing blames mothers for the generation of psychosis within their children, my most important objection to this, other than the lack of textual evidence to

¹⁴⁷ *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, p.231

¹⁴⁸ *The Divided Self*, pp.182-187

¹⁴⁹ *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, pp.146-149

¹⁵⁰ *ibid*, pp.160-162, p.195, pp.206-207

support this, is that I feel that it is an easy criticism to make of Laing's work. From my perspective, the accusation made by Mitchell that Laing engages in mother-blaming is a product again of her forcing a particular interpretation on to Laing's texts. If his work is read in such a manner that the assumption of mother-blaming is heavily foregrounded in the reader's mind, then the interpretation of the text in such a manner becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is especially the case with critiques operating from a feminist perspective, as any aspects relating to women within Laing's work run the risk of being inappropriately selected for a greater amount of attention than they truly deserve. There is the additional issue, which I have confronted briefly before in this thesis, that Laing's criticism of the family strikes at the heart of one of this culture's most cherished institutions. An individual who I had a fruitful discussion with regarding Laing, as she is an older person who did her degree at the time of Laing's fame, suggested that Laing's critical work on the family received such a large degree of critique because it speaks a truth that this culture does not like to hear.¹⁵¹

I do feel that some of the criticism of Laing is reactionary in this manner, and is produced because his critics dislike the way in which Laing's ideas challenge conventional assumptions, such as the idea that all families adequately nurture their offspring. At some unfortunate stage in our history, the truth became controversial. Laing's conception of truth is that of negative truth, what is true is what is not the case. As an example, in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, the truth contained in this text is that it is not the case that the individuals studied therein are suffering from a biological disease. Rather it may be more the case

¹⁵¹ I would like to extend my thanks to Patricia, who I met at the Eclectic Criticism conference at Nottingham University on 18/4/08, who suggested this point to me.

that they are suffering from their family's inability to let them become their own individuals. Laing's work is counter-intuitive in this fashion, and is therefore subject to a greater degree of misinterpretation if this aspect is not comprehended. It is facile to claim that Laing blames mothers, if one goes looking for this and ignores the ways in which the whole family environment reinforces the individual's position.

A further counter-intuitive, but nevertheless highly perceptive and unpleasant, element that Laing identifies with regard to the families that he studied is how the attribution of illness is used by the families to relieve the blame from their shoulders. Julie's mother states that: 'In a way, I blame myself but, in a way, I'm glad that it was an illness after all, but if only I had not waited so long before I took her to a doctor.'¹⁵² An additional example of the way in which the child's alleged illness is used by the parents to relieve the blame can be found in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*.

Mrs Abbott finally told us (not in Maya's presence) that she prayed that Maya would never remember her 'illness' because she (Mother) thought it would upset her (the daughter) to do so. Indeed, she felt this so strongly that, that it would be 'kindest' if Maya never remembered her 'illness', even if it meant she had to remain in hospital!¹⁵³

Here Mrs Abbott appears to have forgotten that people tend to be in hospital because they are ill. This quotation demonstrates a further example of the mother's lack of recognition of the daughter as a person with the capacity for autonomous thought. I also find this statement to be highly unnerving, as whether 'what is best for Maya' is a substitution for 'what is best for us, the parents'

¹⁵² *The Divided Self*, p.181

¹⁵³ *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, p.47

appears to be all but explicitly stated. The accusation of mother-blaming rather neatly reinforces the status quo, and the subordinate daughter's position.

One would expect a feminist analysis to identify this as a matter for critical analysis. Why are daughters expected to conform to their families' wishes? Mitchell simply writes this off as giving '...support to teenage protest...',¹⁵⁴ whereas I consider this to be a more telling aspect than Laing's supposed 'mother-blaming'. As Mitchell ignores this, I will address this absence in Chapter Seven. A comparative situation to Mrs Abbott's above comments is described by Laing in *The Politics of Experience*. Laing discusses the study of the individual within their wider social nexus.

Something is wrong somewhere, but it can no longer be seen exclusively or even primarily 'in' the diagnosed patient.

Nor is it a matter of laying the blame at anyone's door... Very seldom is it a question of contrived, deliberate, cynical lies or a ruthless intention to drive someone crazy, although this occurs more commonly than is usually supposed. We have had parents tell us that they would rather their child was mad than that he or she realize the truth.¹⁵⁵

This is another unpleasant matter that Laing raises for consideration. The very idea that Laing places blame on to the mothers of the families that he has investigated is, to summarise, either an attribution of blame where it is due,¹⁵⁶ or is the product of the imposition of this point of view on to his work. Mitchell assumes that Laing blames mothers because he is prejudiced against women. Whilst it may not be nice to ponder the idea that mothers may severely mistreat their children, nevertheless this is liable to be the case in some instances. Laing's

¹⁵⁴ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.279

¹⁵⁵ **The Politics of Experience**, p.96

¹⁵⁶ I find it remarkable that Mitchell does not see the problems with the mothers' treatment of their children in **Sanity, Madness and the Family**.

critics, with Mitchell as an example, would fare better if their critiques were not based upon naïve assumptions, such as that held by Mitchell that all mothers are good mothers and are therefore blameless. A further problem with the issue of blaming an individual, such as the mother, for the situations described by Laing is that it reduces any analysis of his work to a rather puerile level. I find it intelligible that a reader of his case studies may then decide to try and identify ‘the cause’ of it, or ‘who is to blame’. However, it is a credit to Laing (and Esterson) that such simplistic notions are avoided through their presentation of the material. It is liable that, as Laing states in the above quotation, no one is to blame in the conventional sense of the term, because the individuals concerned do not realise the damage that they are occasioning.

Mitchell further criticises

Sanity, Madness and the Family in the following manner.

...The number of interviews with the patient’s mother far exceeds those of the father, who receives in almost all cases two interviews, whilst the mother may be given as many as twenty-nine.¹⁵⁷

This criticism is simply a re-statement of a problem with the methodology of the research which is acknowledged fully in the text by Laing and Esterson. ‘As such, the focus remains somewhat on the identified patient, or on the mother-daughter relationship,... rather than on the nexus itself.’¹⁵⁸ Their self-critique of *Sanity, Madness and the Family* in the introduction goes much further than the above problem. They note that ‘...an interview is itself not a naturally occurring family situation’,¹⁵⁹ that they are dissatisfied with their method of recording the

¹⁵⁷ *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, p.290

¹⁵⁸ *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, p.26

¹⁵⁹ *ibid*, p.25

interviews,¹⁶⁰ and that the material is intentionally limited, particularly in terms of making interpretations ‘...whether existential or psychoanalytic.’¹⁶¹ This latter point is of relevance to Mitchell’s views, since she critiques Laing for not offering further interpretations of the material that he makes use of. However, with a fair amount of problems identified by the researchers themselves, with regard to this text, Mitchell only sees fit to criticise it on the above grounds. In this way she amplifies one problem with the text, simply in an attempt to reinforce her claim that Laing is prejudiced against women.

Mitchell suggests that

‘...by chance, all Laing’s detailed accounts are of ‘schizophrenic’ women.’¹⁶² I argued in an earlier footnote that this is a misrepresentation of Laing’s work, since not all of Laing’s case studies are of women, and in *The Divided Self* and *Self and Others*, psychobiographies of male patients are highly prominent. In the former text, a great deal of attention is paid by Laing to the case study of James, who additionally shows a similarity in terms of a lack of autonomy with many of Laing’s other case studies. I referred to David’s psychobiography earlier in this chapter, due to his gender confusion issues, which are omitted by Mitchell. He also receives a substantial amount of attention within *The Divided Self*. An entire chapter is devoted to ‘The Case of Peter’. In *Self and Others*, two male examples are used in Laing’s chapter on ‘Complementary Identity’. Mitchell again appears to be engaging in her Procrustean method of analysis, where she cuts out any aspects which do not fit into her discussion. It is surprising that Mitchell did not see fit to criticise Laing on the basis of her claim that all of his lengthy psychobiographies are of women.

¹⁶⁰ op. cit.

¹⁶¹ ibid

¹⁶² **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.285

In Mitchell's 1999 introduction to

Psychoanalysis and Feminism, she produces one of her most coherent critiques of Laing's work. She notes that in an earlier essay, she had

...tried to intervene in those accounts of the family that presented it as a unit, either functional... or dysfunctional (as with the 1960s assaults on it typified by R.D. Laing). Such a unity echoed rhetorical positions and froze the concept of the family in any given time.¹⁶³

In the above quotation, Mitchell is suggesting that the family is presented in a reified form within Laing's work. I consider this to be a fair criticism of his work, as the relation of the family itself to the broader historical context is not explicitly commented on by Laing at any stage. This absence within his work is additionally identified by Scorpio in his 1969 interview with Laing. Scorpio puts forward the suggestion that the family was viewed then as in a state of near-breakdown,¹⁶⁴ and proceeds to enquire whether Laing thought that the form of the family would alter. Scorpio notes that in Laing's work he regards the family as '...a sort of primal unit... which will probably go on.'¹⁶⁵ Laing himself shows an awareness of this omission in his work.

I don't think I've ever written anything to the effect that I regard the family as we know it, the urban western nuclear family, two generations, parents and children, as anything else but a very unusual social form that has developed recently in particular socio-economic circumstances...¹⁶⁶

The discussion in the interview is highly informative regarding the nuclear family. We tend to regard the social arrangements that we inhabit as having

¹⁶³ *ibid*, pp.xvii-xviii

¹⁶⁴ These sorts of suggestions have clearly been in evidence for many years. In contemporary times, they tend to be made by right-wingers, who see a homology between the breakdown of the traditional family, and that of society. The evidence to support this is, however, unclear.

¹⁶⁵ Scorpio, F, (1969), Dr Ronald Laing Talks With Felix Scorpio, *IT*, No.59, July 4-17, p.7

¹⁶⁶ *ibid*

always existed. To think of the nuclear family as only having prevailed for around one hundred and fifty years¹⁶⁷ is a staggering thought, as is the fact that ‘...it still doesn’t exist anywhere else than in the industrialised complex.’¹⁶⁸

Nevertheless, with regard to Laing’s work, I regard this as an absence rather than as a matter for full critique. If this element is taken into account, Laing’s critique of the family therefore becomes criticism of this specific social form. However, if the recent and culturally specific nature of the nuclear family had been discussed at some point in Laing’s work, this may have added to his critique of it. Despite this, I consider Laing to have made a sufficient contribution in terms of his analysis of the peculiar and suffocating form that the nuclear family can take. The family as an agent of conformity is an idea that is present within Laing’s work. The relevance of this to the wider cultural expectations of our present society lies in the fact that repression and conformity are facts that we historically continue to endure in the wider world beyond the family, especially in the arena of paid employment. To consider the nuclear family as a recent and unusual social formation has large implications for psychoanalysis, which, other than in Freud’s theory of the primal family,¹⁶⁹ additionally considers the family in a reified form.

In the interview with Scorpio, Laing does suggest that the nuclear family will ‘...no doubt... come and go

¹⁶⁷ In the interview with Scorpio, Laing dates the nuclear family as having existed for ‘...not much longer than 100 years in Europe.’ Op. cit.

¹⁶⁸ *ibid*

¹⁶⁹ Freud, S, (1930), Civilization and its Discontents, in Freud, S, (1985), **Civilization, Society and Religion: Group Psychology, Civilization and its Discontents and Other Works**, (trans. J. Strachey), Harmondsworth, Penguin, pp.288-290

according to circumstances.’¹⁷⁰ Laing additionally suggests that the nuclear family itself puts a great deal of pressure upon the parents themselves.

...It’s difficult to think of any social form where so much is expected of two people by others, where they expect so much of each other and of themselves. These two people have got to find their total sexual satisfaction and any form of intimacy and most of their consolation and support... and delight in life from each other and no one else: I refer to what is still the ‘ideal’ in terms of which people still feel failures.¹⁷¹

A further aspect that is not commented upon in Laing’s work is the matter of why the parents, and the other family members, treat their children so badly. I consider this again as an absence, rather than as a matter for critique. The above quotation suggests that the huge amount of social pressure which bears down on the parents may provide a clue as to an explanation for this. The mothers of families, in particular, seem to suffer the most in contemporary society, where free time is becoming increasingly scarce. Unfortunately humans have a tendency to take out their frustrations on others, who typically are the weakest and most powerless individuals. Children fulfil both of these latter criteria. However, a problem here is that as Laing frequently suggests in his work, the parents, and the rest of the family, may not even be aware of what they are doing.

Responses to Other Critics, and Praise of Laing

In Mitchell’s substantial sections on Laing in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, she additionally provides some responses to the criticism of Laing, and some praise for his work. These will be subject to a brief review before this chapter is concluded. In terms of Mitchell’s responses to Laing’s critics, she argues against

¹⁷⁰ Scorpio, F, (1969), Dr Ronald Laing Talks With Felix Scorpio, *IT*, No.59, July 4-17, p.7

¹⁷¹ *ibid*

Sedgwick's criticism of *Interpersonal Perception*. Sedgwick is Laing's most cited critic, and his critique will be subject to a review later in this thesis.

Sedgwick suggests that *Interpersonal Perception* simply reflects the assumptions of '...orthodox marital counselling...',¹⁷² and is therefore merely a '...liberal-reformist...' work rather than a radical one. Mitchell argues that this is a true statement to a certain extent, but that '...the aim of the research is to discover a system of rapid testing which can be used therapeutically...' ¹⁷⁴ Mitchell's identification that Sedgwick's criticism of *Interpersonal Perception* runs counter to the stated aims of that text is valuable. However, I feel that both accounts ignore the significant discussions and criticism of the focus on the individual within psychology to the exclusion of their wider social context that is present within this text. These comments are located within the first section of *Interpersonal Perception*, which is comprised of three chapters pertaining to the theory behind the method, but additionally run throughout the text. The theoretical chapters contain some further critique of psychoanalysis, and of Object Relations Theory as scarcely having developed beyond the premises of psychoanalysis.

Object-relations theory is concerned with *internal* dynamic structure, supposed to consist of a central ego and other egos, each with correlated objects. Once more, objects not persons are involved; once more the relationship *between* persons is undeveloped theoretically... The "objects" in object-relations theory are *internal objects* not *other persons*.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.246

¹⁷³ *ibid*

¹⁷⁴ *op. cit.*

¹⁷⁵ Laing, R.D, Phillipson, H, and Lee, A.R, (1966), **Interpersonal Perception**, London, Routledge, p.7

Mitchell's response to Sedgwick's criticism of *Interpersonal Perception*, and her own omission with regard to it, suggest that Laing's critics may have a tendency to select the easiest element of a given text to critique, and then ignore other key aspects. The fact that this text was not authored alone by Laing is also omitted. Laing's co-writers fall under the shadow cast by Laing's fame.

Mitchell notes

that: 'many critics have decried Laing's descent / ascent into mysticism, but it is clearly the completely logical progress of his preoccupations.'¹⁷⁶ Here her tracing of the lines of development within Laing's work serve her well (although they do at times go astray). I have argued a similar point in my previous chapter on Deleuze and Guattari that Laing's mystical comments, with the voyage as an example, do not make a sudden appearance in his work, as is assumed by some of his critics, but instead are the product of the advancement of certain concepts throughout his work.

It is interesting that Mitchell notes in her 1999 introduction that '...neither at the time of publication nor at any time since, did anyone really notice the sections on Wilhelm Reich and R.D. Laing.'¹⁷⁷ Mitchell's sections on Laing are briefly evaluated by Kotowicz in his 1997 book on Laing. Kotowicz argues that despite Mitchell's proximity in her views to orthodox psychoanalysis, her critique of Laing is '...thorough, the least emotionally charged, and the least ideologically determined.'¹⁷⁸ I agree with this comment by Kotowicz to some extent. She does avoid the error of only examining snippets of Laing's work, and avoids criticising Laing in a reactionary manner.

¹⁷⁶ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.278

¹⁷⁷ *ibid*, pp.xv-xvi

¹⁷⁸ Kotowicz, Z, (1997), *R.D. Laing and the Paths of Anti-Psychiatry*, London, Routledge, p.105

Certain aspects of Mitchell's praise for Laing do elucidate key aspects of Laing's contributions. At the very end of her sections on Laing, she provides a quotation from Freud where he states that he is glad that biochemical explanations for forms of neuroses have become obsolete.¹⁷⁹ Mitchell comments that schizophrenia can be added to the list of types of distress identified by Freud that are beyond the reach of '...naïve biochemists...',¹⁸⁰ and that this is 'thanks to Laing...'¹⁸¹ However, this praise for this element of Laing's work suffers from being placed at the very end of her sections, and from receiving no further discussion. In an earlier chapter, Mitchell suggests that:

Laing's work demands attention both because of his popularity and influence... and because he claims a lot for his discoveries... The fact that he has a coherent attitude and a battle to fight make him... stand out. Like Wilhelm Reich he is a dominant psychopolitical ideologist.¹⁸²

This latter view of Laing's work is thought-provoking because his work is not typically viewed in such a manner. However, Mitchell's view of Laing as an ideologist does link to her critique of his 'science of persons'. Since she views this aspect of Laing's work as not constitutive of a proper science, she therefore decides that it is reflective and ideological.¹⁸³ Nevertheless, the way in which Mitchell throws in praise for Laing in the midst of criticism of his work dilutes both of her efforts in these areas. This mixing of praise and criticism could have been avoided on her behalf by structuring her discussion in such a way that these elements were discussed separately. It may be a reflection of her respect for

¹⁷⁹ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, pp.291-292

¹⁸⁰ *ibid*, p.292

¹⁸¹ *op. cit.*

¹⁸² *ibid*, p.277

¹⁸³ *ibid*, p.273

Laing that these identifications of the benefits of his work do appear within her critique.

In her first chapter on Laing and the social and historical context surrounding his ideas, Mitchell asks an important question.

Does [Laing's work] show us a way forward in understanding the oppression of women as it takes place within the family that is supposed to give them both their definition and their rationale?¹⁸⁴

I was expecting a substantive response to this question to be provided within Mitchell's later discussions. However, it never appears. The later sections in which she comes close to a reply are rather inchoate, and additionally may have been better developed in a separate section. Too many differing trains of analysis are run together in Mitchell's chapters on Laing, with a resulting lack of clarity in some respects. Since Mitchell does not truly respond to the above question, I will deploy this as a line of enquiry in my chapter on a feminist reading of Laing. One of the benefits of Mitchell's considerable analysis of Laing's work is that she does evaluate his work in a manner that regards it as fully distinct from that of Cooper. She additionally does not conflate Laing's thought with the wider anti-psychiatric movement. These two elements comprise a considerable advance upon the critiques that have been evaluated thus far in this thesis, where at times it is unclear whether Laing himself is the subject of the critique.

The accusation of

only having read a small quantity of Laing's *oeuvre* cannot be levelled at Mitchell, and she provides some discussion of lesser-evaluated works such as *Interpersonal Perception* and *Reason and Violence*. She takes a scholarly

¹⁸⁴ op. cit., p.231

approach for the most part of her sections on Laing. There is only one occasion where she cites a piece of Laing's work as originating from a text incorrectly.¹⁸⁵ This approach, allied to her tracing of the lines of development throughout the majority of Laing's work aids her discussion. For these reasons, I remain sympathetic to Mitchell's critique of Laing, despite the deficiencies with certain aspects of it. A substantial problem lies with her tendency to critique Laing for an alleged prejudice against women. I feel that this is generated more by her defence of the mothers featured in Laing's work, rather than by any real textual evidence being in existence to support her claim. Mitchell appears to assume that because the mothers are female, and Mitchell is a feminist therefore she must defend the mothers. However, this does not extend to the daughters of the families studied in Laing's work. An analysis of the positions of both would contribute to an evaluation of how Laing's work may contain some insights into the position of women, and how women may be subjugated within their families. With regard to Mitchell's critique of Laing, it is apparent to me that her misunderstanding of some key elements of his work have the effect of throwing her critique out of line. Her lack of comprehension of the aims of phenomenology is a key problem involved in this respect. Some of her criticism does view Laing's thought as more simplistic than it actually is. Her comments on Laing's 'science of persons', and the way in which she assumes that this must constitute a form of conventional science in order to be legitimate is a good example of this. Mitchell's forcing of psychoanalytic material on to Laing's work, and her critique of him as not taking sufficiently into account certain psychoanalytic concepts is a further problem. Additionally, she has a tendency to

¹⁸⁵ On p.272 of **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, a quotation from **The Bird of Paradise** is incorrectly stated as originating from **The Politics of Experience**.

engage in what I have termed a Procrustean method of critique, where she cuts out any aspects of Laing's work that do not fit into her line of criticism.

Nevertheless, Mitchell's criticism of Laing contains a greater level of validity, and is far more admirable in terms of its scholarly approach, than that of Showalter, which will be evaluated in the next chapter.

6) Feminist Critiques of Laing II

The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate the validity of Elaine Showalter's critique of Laing in *The Female Malady* (1985), which attempts to criticise Laing along feminist lines. Showalter's critique of Laing falls considerably short of making cogent criticisms of his work. However, it is worth an examination because it serves to highlight further some of the profound misunderstandings that exist regarding Laing and his work. Showalter's attempted critique of Laing additionally illustrates negatively the principles that are required for an incisive critique of an author's work.

Showalter's Critique of Laing

Showalter's criticism of Laing occurs within one single chapter of *The Female Malady*. The very title of the chapter itself is significant as the problem contained therein resonates throughout the entire piece. It is called 'Women, Madness and the Family: R.D. Laing and the Culture of AntiPsychiatry.' The complications involved in the conflation of Laing with the wider anti-psychiatric movement once more rear their head. My previous discussion earlier in this thesis, in my section on Clare, with regard to the fact that Laing was not a true anti-psychiatrist *per se* does not require restating, other than in the respect that this is a frequently recurring element in the problematic critiques of Laing. The lack of clarity that results from this conflation leads one to the consideration that Laing becomes the 'fall guy' for the entire anti-psychiatric movement, and Cooper in particular. This is highly in evidence throughout Showalter's chapter on Laing. I will deal with this particular aspect first.

Showalter does note that it was Cooper, and not Laing, that gave anti-psychiatry its name.¹ However, this brief comment is not given its full due, as Cooper's and Laing's ideas are run together throughout the chapter. It would have been far better for Showalter to have considered these authors separately in separate sections. In a similar vein to Mitchell, Showalter makes some under-developed comments that 'Laingian theory interpreted female schizophrenia as the product of women's repression and oppression within the family.'² Whilst there is some validity to this interpretation, her first few pages of discussion of Laing simply describe some fairly well-known aspects of his work, such as Laing's questioning of the medical model of psychological distress.³ This is a further issue with Showalter's critique of Laing. Far too much of her chapter simply describes aspects of Laing's work and life as opposed to making the effort to analyse or offer anything new with regard to it. Additionally, Showalter has a similar taste for providing unanswered questions to Mitchell. Showalter questions: '...did radical antipsychiatry finally have any more to offer women than did its predecessors, and did R.D. Laing... fulfill the expectations his studies had created?'⁴

Some further questions are posed by Showalter which expose the poverty of the approach that she takes to Laing's work.

But what of the therapy itself? And what of the personality and ideology of its central figure? What happens if we look at antipsychiatry from a feminist perspective?⁵

¹ Showalter, E, (1985), **The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980**, London, Virago Press, p.221

² *ibid*, p.222

³ *ibid*, p.221

⁴ *op. cit.*, p.222

⁵ *ibid*, p.223

The very fact that Showalter takes this approach is ominous in terms of indicating what form the rest of her discussion will take. It may be a fair consideration that biographical work on Laing could potentially have been far more interesting and unusual in 1985 when *The Female Malady* was published. There are a number of biographies of Laing available now, both of which were published in the 1990s.⁶ Therefore, Showalter's biographical considerations in her chapter on Laing may have had a greater relevance when her text was originally published. In this manner, her text has not aged well. Her desire to moralise over Laing's life leads one to the suspicion that Showalter was not able to take a full scholarly approach in terms of her consideration of Laing, unlike Mitchell. Showalter prefers to make *ad hominem* criticisms, as opposed to criticising Laing's theories themselves.

However, some of Showalter's criticisms of Laing closely echo those made by Mitchell. *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* is cited within Showalter's chapter on Laing, where some of Mitchell's praise for Laing is identified.⁷ However, in the footnote to Showalter's reference to Mitchell, the former suggests that there is an '...extreme sexism...' apparent in '...Laingian therapy in its later phases...'⁸ No evidence, textual or otherwise, is provided in order to support this assertion. Instead, the assumption of sexism on Laing's behalf is an interpretation which is conjured up by Showalter. The following quotation provides an example of this sloppy approach.

In antipsychiatry... the typical patient... was female, and the woman's role remained that of patient rather than doctor. In

⁶ Burston, D, (1996), **The Wing of Madness: The Life and Work of R.D. Laing**, USA, Harvard University Press; Clay, J, (1996), **R.D. Laing: A Divided Self**, London, Hodder and Stoughton. Burston's text is the one that I would recommend, due to his engagement with Laing's theories.

⁷ **The Female Malady**, p.222

⁸ *ibid*, p.284

Laing's early work, the majority of case studies describe women struggling with conflicting messages about femininity from their family and the society, but these potential theories of gender are not developed in the studies themselves.⁹

Showalter provides no evidence of the numbers of male and female 'patients' who resided in alternative therapeutic households such as Kingsley Hall. The above statement is a generalisation made about her rather lurid and biased account of Mary Barnes' time spent at the above place. This will be investigated shortly. Whether Showalter's first sentence in the above quotation properly reflects an intentionally male-dominated power structure at Kingsley Hall, or the fact that the role of doctor tends to be taken on by men in our culture, and the role of patient (particularly that of the psychiatric patient) tends to be given to women, is something that is not considered.

Here I would like to remind the reader that male case studies do feature prominently in Laing's early work, which I have referred to in my chapter on Mitchell. The above quotation from Showalter conveniently ignores this. It is also worth bearing in mind that in Laing's day, psychiatric wards were single-sex, as opposed to mixed-sex, as they are now. Laing describes the excitement of female patients at seeing a new male on the ward, during the beginnings of his career in psychiatry in the 1950s.

Hospital wards at that time were either all women or all men so if it was a man, apart from a workman, a guy doing the windows or plumbing or something like that, to actually be in the ward was very unusual.¹⁰

This provides the reason for all of the case studies in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* being of female patients. They were selected from two specific hospitals,

⁹ op. cit., p.231

¹⁰ **Mad to be Normal**, p.131

both of which housed female patients.¹¹ Rather than demonstrating misogyny on behalf of Laing, his focus on such female case studies is more mundanely a reflection of the way in which psychiatric wards were structured at that stage in history. However, nothing was preventing Laing from conducting his research in a male psychiatric ward.

Nevertheless, these unexamined assumptions lead Showalter to the conclusion that ‘like other radical movements of the 1960s, antipsychiatry in practice was male-dominated, yet unaware of its own sexism.’¹² I am aware of no evidence that anti-psychiatry was intentionally excluding of women in the manner that Showalter suggests. Her criticism may be indicative of a more substantial point than she actually makes. From my experience, counter-cultural movements, in general tend to be male-dominated.¹³ Men are given greater room to rebel within our culture. Women are still expected to live a largely conformist life, or they receive a huge amount of criticism. The way in which female existence is still seen as embedded within the family forms, in my view, one aspect of the pressure to conform which is placed upon women. Showalter fails to bring in further considerations as to why anti-psychiatry was male-dominated, and views this simply as a reflection of sexism on behalf of those that participated in this movement. I do not consider such a simplistic view of this to be fully valid. Rather, all Showalter highlights, without this being stated as such, is that counter-cultural movements tend to be male-dominated, and that this is a product of the cultural prescriptions placed upon the different genders. In this vein, Showalter does not demonstrate an ability to transcend the issues that

¹¹ **Sanity, Madness and the Family**, p.15

¹² **The Female Malady**, p.246

¹³ An exception to this was the ‘Riot Grrl’ movement that I was part of in the early to mid-1990s, which was a feminist punk movement.

she identifies with Laing's work, in terms of the notion that Laing ignores gender relations. I have assessed this claim in my previous chapter on Mitchell.

Showalter does not present a critical discussion of such issues herself. She instead also engages in 'playground feminism'. In this manner, she ignores the wider social and historical context, which may have enabled a greater depth of analysis on her behalf, had she drawn upon such considerations.

Showalter does note that Laing did later clarify his position on anti-psychiatry, arguing that he was not happy to be labelled in such a manner.¹⁴ However, she views this as an attempt on Laing's behalf to simply change his views in line with differing times, rather than as a statement of his actual position.¹⁵ It may be of relevance here that if Showalter had given this matter its due, then it would throw her previous discussions into some considerable difficulties. Her entire chapter is predicated on the assumption that Laing was an anti-psychiatrist, and that there was little substantial difference between Laing and Cooper. These assumptions render her critique unclear, as the subject of her criticism is not Laing alone. Showalter does note that Cooper was '...the most politically radical of the Kingsley Hall group...'¹⁶

In *The Grammar of Living*, Cooper advocates sex with patients, which he calls "bed therapy", as a useful way to establish contact... Cooper seems blind... to the ethical issues involved when he picks up a beautiful twenty-year-old schizophrenic Dutch woman... whom he takes home, feeds, and "makes love with".¹⁷

¹⁴ **The Female Malady**, p.246

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ *ibid*, p.247

¹⁷ *op. cit.*

This somewhat worrying account is however, thrown in at the very end of Showalter's chapter. This leads me to the consideration that she should have provided a more sustained and direct critique of Cooper, rather than tangential criticism of Laing. However, to compare the above '...to the rape of asylum patients by their keepers',¹⁸ shows that Showalter is happy to stereotype women as helpless, pathetic individuals who simply obey those who have a greater level of social power than themselves. The above account may either be more innocent than she claims, or may well be exploitative on Cooper's behalf. The precise relevance of this to a critique of Laing, other than suggesting that his colleagues were not angels either, is not stated.

I now wish to look at Showalter's claims regarding the psychotic voyage, and the way in which she transposes her comments on it on to her account of Mary Barnes' time spent at Kingsley Hall. Showalter makes some profound errors in terms of her use of inaccurate evidence with regard to these elements, both actual and textual. With regard to the chapter of *The Politics of Experience* that features Jesse Watkins' voyage, Showalter makes the following suggestion.

Laing imposed his own terminology of spiritual death and rebirth on Watkins's narrative, and added his own interpretation of the role of the "physician-priest" who accompanies the patient.¹⁹

In my earlier chapter on Deleuze and Guattari, I put forward the argument that one of the contributions made in Laing's case studies, including Watkins' account of the voyage, is Laing's willingness to let the patient or person speak for themselves. Showalter's statement in the above quotation is a complete

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ *ibid*, p.230

misrepresentation of 'A Ten-Day Voyage', since the vast majority of the chapter is directly quoted from Watkins. The notion that the individual undertaking the voyage requires a guide is a suggestion made by Watkins himself,²⁰ instead of being a construction placed by Laing upon the account, as is claimed by Showalter. This example is indicative of a tendency upon her behalf to merely describe aspects of Laing's work in a manner which is not only inaccurate, but which also loses something of the quality of the original.

Showalter's omission in her critique of the fact that Laing does allow his patients to speak for themselves nullifies another of her claims.

...Men speaking for women – even with love – may stifle their language and being... Over and over again, Laing's women, the women of antipsychiatry, appear as latter-day Ophelias and Cassandras whose voices are silenced and whose prophecies go unheeded.²¹

The first point that Showalter makes is adequate. However, I would view any individual speaking for another (if it was an imposed situation) as stifling the other person. The way in which Showalter views this as a specific situation in terms of men speaking for women has some validity, if it was referring to the overall social situation in terms of power relations between the genders, but no evidence is provided to support her relation of this to Laing's work.

Alternatively, Showalter's above criticism follows a lengthy discussion of various pieces of fiction and dramas which were either inspired by Laing, or which contain Laingian themes. It does not follow a critical evaluation of Laing's

²⁰ **The Politics of Experience**, p.134

²¹ **The Female Malady**, p.243

actual work. Many of the critiques of Laing have an aura of expediency about them. Showalter's criticism reaches the nadir of critique for critique's sake.

Showalter provides a quotation from *The Politics of Experience* which she interprets as suggesting that the voyage is viewed by Laing as '...archetypally epic, heroic and masculine...' ²² Her perception of Laing as being obsessed with 'the metaphors of heroic adventure and conquest...' ²³ is a theme that she builds up throughout her chapter. In what is essentially a re-hash of Laing's memories of his early life in *The Facts of Life*, Showalter claims that: 'in Laing's personal vision..., he was clearly destined for heroic action from the start.' ²⁴ In her account of his time spent at university, Showalter suggests that Laing had a '...constant predilection for extreme experiences through which he could test his capacities for heroism.' ²⁵ Showalter's view of the journey as masculine and heroic is an interpretation which she imports from these portrayals of Laing's life. I have never considered the voyage to be specifically gendered in this way. It has always been my view that the journey could be something undergone by any individual, whether male or female. Laing's accounts of it are not exclusively allocated a male protagonist. Arguably, given greater overall rates of female mental distress, the voyage may be a female one, rather than a male one.

The example of the voyage cited by Jaspers that Laing utilises in *The Politics of Experience* does not contain a

²² *ibid*, p.230. The quotation from **The Politics of Experience** that Showalter makes use of appears on pp.104-105 of the latter text in the edition that I am using. It begins 'We do not regard it as pathologically deviant...' and is used through to '...the inner space and time of consciousness.'

²³ **The Female Malady**, p.230

²⁴ *ibid*, p.224

²⁵ *ibid*, p.225

statement of what the gender was of the individual providing the account.²⁶ Showalter appears to be taking the fact that Watkins was male as far more significant than this aspect truly is. A further similarity can be noted here with Mitchell's critique of Laing. Showalter's construction of the journey as male, which is an assumption that is derived from non-existent textual evidence, is then imposed on to her account of Mary Barnes' time which was spent at Kingsley Hall. Barnes was the most famous resident of Kingsley Hall, due to her experiences within the alternative therapeutic community.²⁷ She co-authored a book with Laing's colleague and fellow therapist at Kingsley Hall, Joseph Berke.²⁸ However, Showalter's claims are not supported by Barnes' actual text itself.

At Kingsley Hall... Laing's model patient was a woman. While he may have been hoping for a Sylvia Plath or an Antonin Artaud to guide through the void into hypersanity, only Mary Barnes, a Catholic nurse in her forties, showed up at Kingsley Hall to take the round trip.²⁹

Where any explicit statement regarding what Laing viewed as a 'model patient', (which is in itself a most un-Laingian concept) is to be found within his texts is not stated by Showalter. Laing himself argued that he had never '...used her as an example or a paradigm case or set her up in anything I've written or in lectures I've given.'³⁰

²⁶ **The Politics of Experience**, pp.110-112

²⁷ Laing recounts in **Mad to be Normal** that Barnes '...went out on the roof once covered in shit and danced..., *naked*,...' p.180

²⁸ Barnes, M, and Berke, J, (1971), **Mary Barnes: Two Accounts of a Journey Through Madness**, Harmondsworth, Penguin. The sections by Barnes and Berke are authored separately.

²⁹ **The Female Malady**, p.232

³⁰ **Mad to be Normal**, p.185

The above quotation from Showalter, in addition to the following one, demonstrates two severe problems with Showalter's attempted critique of Laing.

Although Laing made the most of Mary Barnes's "recovery", I suspect that her voyage was disappointingly unlike his expectations... The image of the schizophrenic voyage that Laing had created... was a male adventure of exploration and conquest... Faced with the obligation to play mother on the psychic journey, Laing seems to have lost enthusiasm for it.³¹

The first substantial problem with the above criticism is that Showalter simply presumes that she knows what Laing would have been thinking at the time of the events that she describes. Imaginative assumptions cannot form the basis of a valid critique of any author's work. The reliability of presuming to know what another individual was thinking cannot be guaranteed. The second substantial problem with these comments by Showalter is that she has not identified the facts of Mary Barnes' time spent at Kingsley Hall correctly. It was not Laing himself who had '...to spend three years changing diapers, giving bottles, and generally wiping up after a noisy, jealous, smelly middle-aged woman',³² but Berke, amongst others. Therefore, Showalter's claim that, faced with heavy responsibilities of care, Laing lost his interest in the voyage is unfounded. This is also abundantly clear from Barnes' text itself. Barnes desperately *wanted* Laing to be her therapist, but before Berke took over, Esterson was her therapist, which Barnes was angry about.³³ Indeed, Barnes had a number of carers whilst she was at Kingsley Hall.³⁴ However, none of those individuals were Laing.

³¹ **The Female Malady**, pp.235-236

³² *ibid*, 236

³³ Barnes, M, and Berke, J, (1971), **Mary Barnes: Two Accounts of a Journey Through Madness**, Harmondsworth, Penguin, p.72

³⁴ *ibid*, p.113, 114, 117, 119, 121, 150

The fact that Showalter's

critique is not based upon correct and reliable evidence throws its validity into strong doubt. Laing himself notes that Berke was Barnes' therapist in *Mad to be Normal*.³⁵ Kotowicz additionally raises the point of the inaccuracy of Showalter's critique, and suggests that her reading of Laing's actual work is poor.³⁶ He further argues that Showalter's piece is not really a critique of Laing, but is instead simply a character assassination.³⁷ Her tendency to make *ad hominem* attacks upon Laing within the chapter does support Kotowicz's conclusions. A scholarly critique should have no need to operate upon this level. It may be easier to launch a personal attack upon an individual, as opposed to engaging with actual theories themselves. Showalter's claim that the text co-authored by Barnes and Berke permits a comparison between the male psychiatrist and the female patient's accounts of their experiences³⁸ is not developed in any substantial analytical depth. In *Mad to be Normal*, some sections of Mullan's discourse with Laing are directly devoted to identifying these falsities in Showalter's work. As I have previously mentioned, Laing noted that he was not Barnes' therapist. Laing also suggests that he was far more sympathetic to Barnes' sections of the text that she participated in with Berke, than he was to the parts written by Berke.

I think that what *she* wrote in that book, as I remember it, really pleasantly surprised me. What Joe wrote... didn't impress me at the time... But Mary was seriously baring her heart and soul and her experience to try to convince other

³⁵ **Mad to be Normal**, p.198. Laing states on p.185 that he never took on Barnes as a patient.

³⁶ Kotowicz, Z, (1997), **R.D. Laing and the Paths of Anti-Psychiatry**, London, Routledge, p.102

³⁷ *ibid*, p.105

³⁸ **The Female Malady**, p.232

people that there was something to be said for the way she did it and I quite respected that.³⁹

I fully agree with Laing's comments in this quotation. Barnes' sections of her text with Berke are excellent. Showalter's account of this does not do it justice. Barnes has provided another first-hand account of experiencing psychosis, in a similar manner to Watkins' account, 'A Ten-Day Voyage', in *The Politics of Experience*.⁴⁰ She provides excellent descriptions of her mental state.

A significant omission in Showalter's account of Mary Barnes and her residence at Kingsley Hall, and something which is absent in other biographical accounts, is that Laing suggests in *Mad to be Normal* that Barnes was a self-publicist, and that she was '...an evangelist for a certain type of trip – going down and coming up.'⁴¹ These comments are not made in such a manner as to deny the validity of Barnes' experiences, however. Nevertheless, Barnes' brother was, according to Laing, in arguably a worse state than herself.

I had a great deal of concern for her brother who was the real – you've got to say this with double treble irony – the *real* schizophrenic... He was in real despair and was seriously struggling his way out of it... Mary had a mission to save him... We completely agreed about mental hospitals and the use of heavy medication.⁴²

This may be viewed by feminist critics of Laing as him showing a greater level of concern for a male individual who was suffering from extreme mental distress, as opposed to for the female Barnes. However, I would view this from an alternative angle as providing a further example of the way in which female

³⁹ **Mad to be Normal**, p.201. The discussions are based upon Mullan and Laing directly examining Showalter's text.

⁴⁰ It is worth noting that Barnes and Watkins knew each other during their time at Kingsley Hall. **Mary Barnes: Two Accounts of a Journey Through Madness**, p.9, 154

⁴¹ **Mad to be Normal**, p.200

⁴² op. cit.

mental distress is viewed as far more significant than male distress by feminist critics. Such arguments are insufficiently grounded through the suggestions made that women deserve to be seen as special cases, simply because they are female.

Barnes' text additionally supports Laing's suggestions here, with regard to her brother. Mary wanted both herself and her brother Peter to '...live together in a psychotherapeutic community.'⁴³ Peter spent most of his time in mental hospitals, and Mary describes him as being suicidal.⁴⁴ Laing met both of them when Mary was trying to get help with their mental distress.⁴⁵ Mary Barnes originally wanted Anna Freud (Sigmund's daughter) to be her analyst, and was upset when she was rejected by her.⁴⁶ Mary appears to have been unaware of the limitations of psychoanalysis for dealing with schizophrenia. Some of Barnes' text does support Laing's claim that she was a self-publicist. She describes herself as wanting '...to be on T.V. or in books...'⁴⁷ However, this consideration should not lessen the fact that she was clearly experiencing extreme mental anguish during the time that she was writing about.

Laing's fame has attracted some very poor work regarding his life and ideas. An article claiming to be an interview with Laing in *Vogue* from 1969 operates on a similar level to that of Showalter, but without attempting any critique of his work.⁴⁸ The article is not written from a feminist point of view, but shares with Showalter a tendency to make unsubstantiated claims about Laing. The first false claim made in the *Vogue* article is that it is an interview with

⁴³ **Mary Barnes: Two Accounts of a Journey Through Madness**, p.62

⁴⁴ *ibid*

⁴⁵ *ibid*, pp.64-65

⁴⁶ *op. cit.*, p.63

⁴⁷ *ibid*, p.106

⁴⁸ Inglis, B, (1969), *Society and Psychiatry*, **Vogue**, 15th March, pp.114-117

Laing. However, no actual dialogue with Laing is provided. Instead, Inglis merely states that he had met Laing on a few occasions.⁴⁹ The reading and interpretation of Laing's work contained in the article occurs on a highly simplistic and inaccurate level, with Inglis claiming that Laing has '...given us a glimpse... of the treasure house of the unconscious mind.'⁵⁰ The article further shares with Showalter a tendency to merely describe Laing's biography and basic ideas, and to attribute ideas to him which do not actually originate from Laing himself. The *Vogue* article demonstrates that both critique as character assassination, and hagiography (which is essentially what is contained in the *Vogue* piece), as approaches to an author's work produce irrelevant material. However, I remain unsurprised that an article in a fashion magazine failed to contain a high level of analysis of Laing's work. What is remarkable was the extent of Laing's celebrity, which is reflected in the fact that such publications as *Vogue* saw fit to run articles on him. In contemporary times, individuals become famous for having made no real contributions to any area of study or life.

To conclude this section, Showalter's attempted critique of Laing contains the least valid criticisms of his work out of any of the critiques that have been reviewed so far in this thesis. Even the conservative psychiatric critiques make at least the effort to try and engage with Laing's theories themselves, as opposed to his life, even if these attempts are subject to misreadings and misinterpretations. Showalter's critique of Laing, when she does try to deal with his theories, simply parrots Mitchell's criticisms, without offering any new perspectives on these views. Showalter's chapter on Laing contains far too much pure description of his biography and concepts, with no substantial or subtle

⁴⁹ *ibid*, p.116

⁵⁰ *ibid*, p.117

analysis of either. It further contains a great deal of discussion of secondary sources, which are only tangentially related to Laing's work. Her chapter is more of a critique of anti-psychiatry and Cooper than Laing himself. Showalter assumes that guilt by association is sufficient to indict Laing with the problems that she attempts to identify with Cooper and the wider anti-psychiatric movement. Very little of her chapter on Laing fully relates to Laing and his work itself. The evidence that Showalter makes the effort to utilise is flawed.

However, speaking as a woman, I find the fact that this is supposed to be a feminist critique of Laing to be the worst aspect of all. Showalter is happy to deploy stereotyped gender roles in order to try and justify her assumptions regarding Laing. Her view that all female patients are therefore helpless, pathetic, victims is an example of this. It may be the case that some female patients are placed in such positions. Nevertheless, from my perspective, a feminist analysis should be precisely questioning these sorts of stereotypes, rather than providing them with further reinforcement. The fact that Showalter's critique operates in this manner, and claims to be speaking in women's name, further illustrates my consideration that this is the worst critique of Laing that I have evaluated thus far. The next chapter is intended as a necessary corrective to Showalter's and Mitchell's criticism of Laing as being prejudiced against women.

7) Arguments for a Feminist Reading of Laing

This chapter is comprised of my arguments that Laing's work can be read in such a manner that it can be seen as of benefit to women. It identifies aspects of his work which either stand in sharp contrast to Mitchell and Showalter's claims that Laing is prejudiced against women in some way (claims which I view as lacking in any real textual or other evidence), or which have been poorly developed or missed by Mitchell and Showalter. Empirical evidence regarding levels of psychosis and the life circumstances (including gender) of individuals who are seen as suffering from some form of psychotic distress are additionally reviewed, as a means of identifying whether women should be accorded the special treatment that Laing's feminist critics claim is appropriate.

I have found Mitchell and Showalter's accusations that Laing is extremely sexist to be shocking, as these claims have never occurred to me previously. In my over a decade-long engagement with Laing's work, one of the benefits of his ideas for me has been precisely the absence of statements that women are inferior to men, or any implicit suggestions to that effect. Some of Mitchell's work, in particular, will be revisited in this chapter, since some of her arguments that Laing's work contains insights into the position of women within this culture remain undeveloped and unresolved within her own discussions. I feel here that a brief account of my point of view and approach to Laing's work is worth noting. I regard myself as a feminist, but I am, however, not willing to defend women simply for being women. Neither do I consider myself to be a conventional female individual, as I have spent much of my life trying to undo the repressive socialisation to which

women are subjected. Therefore, some of my comments are being made from a radically different point of view to that typically expected from women.

However, I view this as a benefit rather than as a complete limitation, as a different vantage point can enable an individual to perceive aspects of theories which will be missed by more conventional standpoints. I feel that Mitchell, particularly, would have aided her critique of Laing by being clearer about her assumptions and views, especially in terms of her use of psychoanalytic concepts. My brief comments here are intended to introduce some reflexivity into my following discussion.

The question posed by Mitchell that she remains silent about in her chapters on Laing concerns whether his work shows ‘...us a way forward in understanding the oppression of women as it takes place within the family that is supposed to give them both their definition and their rationale?’¹ My answer to this is to respond affirmatively. My discussion in this section will serve to highlight this. The first point that I wish to raise has been noted briefly in my chapter on Mitchell. Laing’s main overall project that is expressed throughout the majority of his work is the project of making what is seen as madness intelligible and comprehensible. I wish to argue here that this central focus itself is actually of benefit to women, since the latter group tend to receive the diagnosis of some form of mental illness in greater numbers than men. This aspect that I have identified stands in sharp contrast to the claims made by the feminist critics of Laing, who view his work as excluding and discriminating against women. I view Laing’s main project as alternatively opening up a space

¹ **Psychoanalysis and Feminism**, p.231

in which the attribution of madness to women can be understood through their expected conformity to the family.

Empirical Evidence of Levels of Mental Illness

Recent mental health statistics confirm that women continue to be diagnosed in greater numbers than men with some form of classified mental disorder. '20 per cent of women and 14 per cent of men in England have some form of mental illness.'² Women are diagnosed in greater numbers than men for all forms of neurosis, with the exception of panic disorder, which affects both genders equally according to reported levels.³ Within the statistics that I have available to me, a matter that is of further relevance to Laing's work regards the levels of mental illness within children and young people. In the five to sixteen year-old age group, boys have a higher rate of mental illness than girls, with the exception of 'emotional disorders' such as anxiety or depression, according to statistics from 2004.⁴

Among 5-10 year olds, 10 per cent of boys and 5 per cent of girls had a mental disorder. Among 11-16 year olds, the proportions were 13 per cent for boys and 10 per cent for girls.⁵

However, in the sixteen to nineteen year-old age group, the levels of mental illness among young women rise sharply in comparison to the same age group for males. '6 per cent of boys and 16 per cent of girls aged 16-19 are thought to

² Mental Health Foundation, (2003), **Statistics on Mental Health**, [online]. Available at www.mentalhealth.org.uk [Accessed 19/5/06]

³ National Statistics, (2006), **Mental Health: 1 in 6 Adults Have a Neurotic Disorder**, [online]. Available at: www.statistics.gov.uk [Accessed 19/5/06]

⁴ National Statistics, (2005), **Mental Health: 1 in 10 Children Has a Mental Disorder**, [online]. Available at: www.statistics.gov.uk [Accessed 19/5/06]

⁵ *ibid*

have some form of mental health problem.’⁶ Despite the fact that these statistics derive from different sources, and from slightly different years, a change in the levels of mental illness by gender and age group can be noted.

This is of relevance to Laing’s work since his case studies tend to concern individuals whose ‘symptoms’ were alleged to begin in adolescence. Forms of psychosis, including schizophrenia, are recognised as first occurring within this latter age group.⁷ I have previously noted that the majority, but by no means all, of Laing’s case studies are of female individuals. There are, of course, problems with statistics such as those that I have cited above, since many people who are suffering from some form of mental distress may not report this to a doctor, and within the younger age groups, mental distress could be confused with deviant behaviour. However, these statistics are sufficient to provide a general indication of the numbers of those diagnosed with a mental illness, and the proportions involved by gender, and by age group. The suggestion provided by these statistics that up until the age of sixteen, more boys than girls tend to be diagnosed with some form of mental illness may lead to the possible explanation that the socialisation of girls, and the social expectations placed upon them lead young women to display what comes to be regarded as some form of madness. What happens around the age of sixteen that may lead to the large rise in mental illness amongst adolescent females?

⁶ Mental Health Foundation, (2003), **Statistics on Mental Health**, [online]. Available at www.mentalhealth.org.uk [Accessed 19/5/06]

⁷ Zeman, S, (1997), **Understanding Schizophrenia (Mental Health Foundation Booklet)**, [online]. Available at www.mentalhealth.org.uk [Accessed 29/9/08]. In this document it is stated that ‘schizophrenia usually starts in the late teens or early twenties, but can also affect older people for the first time,’ p.2.

At this stage, a further view of mine is worth expounding as it relates to this particular discussion. I am uneasy with the idea that mental illness is an illness in the same manner as diabetes or asthma, for example. I am fully aware that neurological abnormalities, or other biological problems could lead to an individual displaying what are seen as symptoms of some form of madness. However, I am unaware that any definite conclusion as to the biological cause of mental illness is currently in existence. My views here are, of course, influenced by Laing, and his skill in making what comes to be regarded as madness socially intelligible. Therefore, I prefer to view the high prevalence of forms of mental illness among the general population of this country⁸ as indicative of a broader *malaise*, of a general sense that individuals are unhappy with themselves and their lives. According to my views, I am reinterpreting the rise in mental illness in young women around the age of sixteen as indicative of a substantial level of unhappiness and stress amongst this age group.

Nevertheless, a significant problem with the empirical evidence that I have reviewed thus far is that no clear division is made between forms of neurosis and psychosis in the statistics on children. Laing's work is primarily concerned with comprehending forms of psychosis, and schizophrenia in particular. In the statistics on rates of mental illness amongst children, forms of psychosis would fall into the category of 'less common disorders', within which boys still display higher levels than girls.⁹ Far more statistics are available on forms of neurosis than on psychosis itself. This

⁸ Statistics from the Mental Health Foundation suggest that one in four individuals will suffer from some form of mental illness over the course of a year. Mental Health Foundation, (2003), **Statistics on Mental Health**, [online]. Available at www.mentalhealth.org.uk [Accessed 19/5/06]

⁹ National Statistics, (2005), **Mental Health: 1 in 10 Children Has a Mental Disorder**, [online]. Available at: www.statistics.gov.uk [Accessed 19/5/06]

reflects the fact that the numbers of those affected by what is seen as some form of psychosis are small in comparison to those affected by some form of neurosis, and that the rates of individuals who are suffering from some form of psychosis have remained stable over long periods of time.¹⁰ I have been unable to access any statistics from the 1960s regarding levels of schizophrenia. However, research suggests that ‘there was no significant change in the incidence of schizophrenia over the 114-year period 1881-1994’,¹¹ despite overall increases ‘...in both local and national official statistics of psychiatric morbidity...’¹²

Further research has confirmed that little change in the incidence of psychosis has occurred over time, although ‘...substance-induced psychosis has increased...’¹³ Kirkbride *et al*’s research suggests that rather than any decline occurring within levels of schizophrenia, there has instead been a change in the diagnosis allocated to such individuals ‘...away from schizophrenia towards other non-affective psychoses.’¹⁴ For example, the more recent creation of the ‘personality disorders’, which are viewed as highly controversial diagnoses, include both ‘schizoid personality disorder’ and ‘schizotypal personality disorder’.¹⁵ It would have been interesting, if he had still been alive, to hear Laing’s views on such classifications. The organisation Mind are highly critical of the use of ‘personality disorders’ as a form of classification

¹⁰ Bark, S, and Hatloy, I, (2008), **Private Correspondence via email**. I would like to extend my thanks to Inger Hatloy (Mind Information Officer) for helping me to find much of the information on psychosis and schizophrenia which is utilised in the remainder of this section.

¹¹ Nixon, N.L, and Doody, G.A, (2005), Official Psychiatric Morbidity and the Incidence of Schizophrenia 1881-1994, **Psychological Medicine**, Vol.35, pp.1145-1153. Abstract available online at: www.journals.cambridge.org [Accessed 8/10/08]

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Kirkbride, J.B, *et al*, (2008), Is the Incidence of Psychotic Disorder in Decline? Epidemiological Evidence from Two Decades of Research, **International Journal of Epidemiology**, Oxford, Oxford Journals. Abstract available online at: www.ije.oxfordjournals.org [Accessed 8/10/08]

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ Gorman, J, (2005), **Understanding Personality Disorders** (Mind Information Booklet), [online]. Available at: www.mind.org.uk. [Accessed 17/11/05], p.3

of mental illness, since the categories are very broad.¹⁶ 'Many of these diagnostic labels have been used in a way that stigmatises people... It could be that medical professionals gave people these labels simply because they were 'difficult' in some way.'¹⁷ The social control implications of designating certain personalities as pathological in some manner are clear from my point of view.

The above

research suggests that rates of psychosis and schizophrenia have remained fairly constant over long historical periods. The growth in reported levels of forms of mental distress has occurred within the neuroses rather than the psychoses. The following discussion makes use of the most reliable information that is available on psychosis and schizophrenia in this country. However, it is difficult to make any full distinction between neurosis and psychosis, since individuals who have been diagnosed with the latter may additionally display aspects of the former classification. In the most detailed report which is currently available at the time of writing on adults in the U.K. who have been diagnosed with some form of psychosis,¹⁸ the individuals from the sample who also display high levels of neurotic symptoms suffer the greatest in terms of being 'economically inactive',¹⁹ of perceiving themselves as having a severe lack of social support,²⁰ and of reporting having suicidal thoughts.²¹ This calls into question Mitchell's criticism of Laing as making an insufficient distinction between neurosis and psychosis, since this evidence suggests that making such a total distinction is highly problematic.

¹⁶ *ibid*, p.6

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ O'Brien, M, Singleton, N, Sparks, J, Meltzer, H, Brugha, T, (2002), **Adults with a Psychotic Disorder Living in Private Households, 2000**, London, TSO (National Statistics Publication)

¹⁹ *ibid*, p.32

²⁰ *ibid*, p.40

²¹ *op. cit.*, p.51

The prevalence of psychotic forms of distress is typically given as affecting one in two hundred individuals at some stage in their lives.²² Specific information on schizophrenia is difficult to obtain. However, the Office for National Statistics suggests that there is a per year prevalence rate for schizophrenia of 0.5 % of the population, with a further study suggesting a prevalence rate at any stage of life of 0.2 %.²³ In contrast, depression is far more common, with a prevalence rate of 10 % of the population of the U.K. at any time.²⁴ Further analysis of the rates of schizophrenia by gender and age provide some interesting information which is of relevance to Laing's feminist critics.

While prevalence rates are the same for men and women, age and gender together is an important factor: one study shows the incidence for men aged 15-24 is twice that for women, whereas for those between 24-35, it is higher among women. This reflects a common late onset of the illness for women.²⁵

Prevalence rates refer to '...the number of people with a particular diagnosis at a given time,'²⁶ whereas rates of incidence refer to '...the number of new cases... that appear in a given time period.'²⁷ The above evidence, in addition to further examples in the Office for National Statistics report on 'Adults with a Psychotic Disorder Living in Private Households' (2002) (which will shortly be reviewed), allied to the greater levels of mental illness amongst boys rather than girls strongly suggest that psychosis and schizophrenia are not only 'female maladies,' to borrow the title of Showalter's text.

²² National Statistics, (2006), **Mental Health: 1 in 6 Adults Have a Neurotic Disorder**, [online]. Available at: www.statistics.gov.uk [Accessed 19/5/06]

²³ Hatloy, I, (2008), **Mind Information: Statistics 1: How Common is Mental Distress?**, [online]. Available at: www.mind.org.uk [Accessed 19/9/08], p.5

²⁴ *ibid*, p.3

²⁵ *ibid*, p.5

²⁶ *op. cit.*, p.1

²⁷ *ibid*, p.2

The fact that there is no difference between the genders in terms of the prevalence of schizophrenia, and that younger men as a group have a higher incidence rate than women of schizophrenia broadly indicate that Mitchell and Showalter are wrong to argue that a special case should be made for Laing's female case studies, simply because they are female. This is, at least, the case in contemporary British society. Alternatively, more attention should be paid to the detailed male case studies ignored by Mitchell and Showalter, since they are as representative of a 'typical' schizophrenic as Laing's female case studies are. The above report from the Office for National Statistics provides evidence that men who suffer from some form of psychotic distress are more likely than women to encounter difficult life circumstances. Being male increases the likelihood of an individual not being able to work due to illness or disability amongst the sample used in the report.²⁸ 'Twenty-nine per cent of men, compared with 15 % of women, were classified as having a severe lack of social support...'²⁹ The level of perceived social support that an individual receives was gauged through the direct responses of those that took part in the study.³⁰ Men were additionally more likely than women to be consuming dangerous levels of alcohol.³¹

Therefore, men were more likely than women to be existing on a low income due to illness or disability, to be socially isolated, and to self-medicate through alcohol consumption. Overall, however, little difference in the social circumstances of men and women with some form of psychotic distress was

²⁸ O'Brien, M, Singleton, N, Sparks, J, Meltzer, H, Brugha, T, (2002), **Adults with a Psychotic Disorder Living in Private Households, 2000**, London, TSO (National Statistics Publication), p.xi, p.33

²⁹ *ibid*, p.40

³⁰ *ibid*, p.39

³¹ *op. cit.*, p.43

identified in the report. Nevertheless, women were more likely than men to turn down offers of help or the provision of services.³² ‘The main reasons given for not seeking help were that they did not think anyone could help and that they were afraid of possible treatment or tests... The type of help most often mentioned as offered but refused was counselling.’³³ I have previously noted in this thesis the limitations of psychoanalysis as a form of therapy for individuals who are experiencing what is seen as some form of psychosis. Despite this, the largest number of the sample used for the Office for National Statistics report were receiving psychotherapy or psychoanalysis as some form of treatment.³⁴ This was ‘...reported by almost half (49%) of those receiving counselling or other psychological therapy.’³⁵ I have found this rather surprising, given that psychoanalysis is predicated upon the study of neuroses rather than psychoses. No proportions were given for the amount of individuals receiving psychoanalysis alone. The next two most common forms of therapy that people with some form of psychosis were receiving were counselling (42 %), and behavioural or cognitive therapy (14 %).³⁶ Other forms of therapy were much less common.

A further issue that I have touched upon in this thesis concerns the disputed nature of any causal explanations for psychosis and schizophrenia. I view the focus upon genetic and other biological explanations for schizophrenia as potentially a result of greater funding for such scientific enterprises, rather than as a suggestion that ‘the cause’ for schizophrenia will necessarily be found through such research. In contemporary times, mother-blaming has taken on a

³² *ibid*, p.25, table 2.16

³³ *ibid*, p.17

³⁴ *op. cit.*, p.15

³⁵ *ibid*

³⁶ *ibid* p.21, table 2.8

new biological slant. A recent article suggests that ‘children whose mothers suffered severe stress in pregnancy may have an increased risk of developing schizophrenia, according to new research.’³⁷ The study was carried out by a researcher in the U.K, but was based upon the Danish population. It suggests that ‘the exposure of expectant mothers to serious life changes in the first three months of pregnancy could affect the baby.’³⁸ The research is seen as innovative, but not as a reason for major concern ‘...because the absolute risks are small.’³⁹

In Laing’s later work, he proposes the idea that life inside the womb could have an effect on the individual’s later life. Intimations of this idea are present in the middle period of Laing’s work, in *The Politics of Experience*, where he suggests that the schizophrenic voyage involves a form of rebirth.⁴⁰ More lengthy discussions of this topic are to be found within *The Facts of Life*, and in Laing’s last published work, *The Voice of Experience*, which constitutes something of a return to form in the critical first four chapters, after the vague ramblings contained in much of *The Facts of Life*. The views expounded in these latter texts suggest that life in the womb, and the process of birth itself could have an effect on the individual in later life. The detour that Laing’s work takes here into a more biological view is something that I am uneasy about, given that my interest in Laing was not generated by such musings. This is examined later in this thesis.

Nevertheless, in the middle to late period of Laing’s work, a further view of his is proposed which is worth drawing

³⁷ Mental Health Foundation, (2008), **Latest News and Archive: Pregnancy Stress ‘Schizophrenia Risk for Child’**, [online]. Available at www.mentalhealth.org.uk [Accessed 29/9/08]

³⁸ *ibid*

³⁹ *ibid*

⁴⁰ **The Politics of Experience**, p.106

in at this stage. He suggests that both the biological and the social areas of research into psychosis, and other forms of mental distress, require closely linked investigation. In Laing's 1969 interview with Felix Scorpio, Laing suggests that if the funding were made available to him, he would have liked to:

...have a place where one could get down to discovering what the biochemistry of SOCIAL patterns is... If one thinks of the social field of a number of people, a family or a group, who live together, ...the biochemistry is very intimately connected with the fluctuations... and positions and movements within the social field... If someone was got into the position in the social field that was untenable, there would be a corresponding biochemical transformation in that person, and around him as well.⁴¹

Here Laing is suggesting that simplistic causal explanations for schizophrenia cannot provide a full appreciation of the complex interactions between the biological and the social. Recent articles have also called for a more subtle approach to understanding psychosis. Beveridge (2002) provides a clear account of the difficulties involved in the reductive biological approach in psychology and psychiatry.⁴² Laing's contribution to this debate is acknowledged in the article, alongside the wider influence of existentialism upon psychology.

Beveridge also notes that:

Contemporary psychiatry has increasingly adopted [the] bioscientific approach. This is ironic, coming at a time when those in general medicine have been voicing their unease about the limitations of the scientific model.⁴³

⁴¹ Scorpio, F, (1969), Dr Ronald Laing Talks With Felix Scorpio, **IT**, No.59, July 4-17, p.6

⁴² Beveridge, A, (2002), Time to Abandon the Subjective-Objective Divide?, **Psychiatric Bulletin**, No.26, pp.101-103

⁴³ *ibid*, p.102

Towards the end of the article, Beveridge suggests that ‘...the great challenge for the future is to integrate the neurobiological with the social and psychological.’⁴⁴

Laing cites an example from his own experience, which is given in both the above interview with Scorpio, and in *The Facts of Life*, which provides a good illustration of this matter. Laing discusses the introduction of tranquillisers for use in the clinical context. One of the nurses that he worked with asked whether these particular drugs had any effect on height, since a ‘...somewhat wild woman...’⁴⁵ had appeared to diminish in height since she had been on tranquillisers.⁴⁶ Laing provides the following comments.

There’s nothing that affects our chemistry more intimately than other people... In the case of the wild woman, a chemical agent had modified her behaviour, and there was a reportable, measurable change in another person’s perception, so that person experienced her as smaller.⁴⁷

The consideration may be posed that purely biochemical findings that schizophrenics, for example, have a different blood chemistry to other individuals may alternatively be a product of extreme unhappiness. An individual who is experiencing considerable distress may well have a different blood chemistry to an individual who is happy. The isolation of biological research into forms of mental distress from social research produces forms of knowledge which have only a limited validity in their given domain.

Investigations into the alterations involved in the bio-chemistry of individuals who are distressed compared to individuals who are not suffering in some manner could form a

⁴⁴ *ibid*, p.103

⁴⁵ **The Facts of Life**, p.112

⁴⁶ *ibid*

⁴⁷ *op. cit.*

control group for comparison with people who are alleged to be suffering from a mental illness. A further problematic issue concerns the manner in which research is structured in such a reductive manner. Why, given the complexity of human experience, do we seek ‘the cause’ of mental distress? The assumption that one perspective can provide such an answer appears to me to be a key factor that is involved here. However, it is becoming clear that a less simplistic approach is required in order to match the complicated nature of the human individual within her or his social networks. Laing’s idea (as expounded by Mitchell) that there should be a homology between what is being studied and the method used to study it is of considerable relevance here.

Much of the research that

I have reviewed for this section suggests that severe traumatic and stressful life events are now seen as playing a part in the generation of psychotic experiences.

There is now a considerable body of evidence that points to a link between traumatic life events and the development of psychosis. For too long this sort of research has been discouraged by an overemphasis on neurons and genes. Fear of “family blaming” has also contributed to decades of silence on this issue.⁴⁸

A chapter of the Office for National Statistics report on adults with some form of psychosis is devoted to ‘stressful life events, suicidal thoughts and behaviours’.⁴⁹ It supports to some extent the idea that traumatic events in the lives of individuals are linked to forms of psychotic distress.

⁴⁸ Larkin, W, (2007), Mind over Medicine, **Society Guardian** [online], May 11. Available via: www.societyguardian.co.uk [Accessed 16/05/07]

⁴⁹ O’Brien, M, Singleton, N, Sparks, J, Meltzer, H, Brugha, T, (2002), **Adults with a Psychotic Disorder Living in Private Households, 2000**, London, TSO (National Statistics Publication), pp.48-55

The proportion of people reporting experiencing stressful life events was far higher in this sample of people with psychotic illness than in the general household population aged 16 to 74. Almost everyone in the sample (97%) had experienced one of the events in the group concerning relationship problems, illness and bereavement.⁵⁰

When these statistics were further analysed in terms of gender, men were more likely than women to report stressful experiences relating to employment and financial difficulties, and to having had a problem with the police and an appearance in court.⁵¹ A high proportion of the individuals in the sample also reported being victimised in some way. However, women were more likely than men to report the specific experiences of ‘violence in the home’ (as it is termed in the report), and sexual abuse.⁵² The report also cites research which suggests that ‘...the number of stressful life events was a more important predictor of suicidal thoughts and behaviours than the individual events experienced.’⁵³ In the sample used for this report, 57% had experienced six or more stressful life events, and 17% reported ten or more of them.⁵⁴ The indication that severely stressful and traumatic life events are linked to experiencing psychosis is of relevance to Laing’s work, and his case studies in particular, since many of the individuals that he investigates have had such experiences. This will be further reviewed in the next section.

In Rethinking

Psychiatry (1988), Kleinman makes use of an extensive range of epidemiological evidence relating to mental illness. I will look at some of his comments on the family, and the social situation of women before I conclude this section. With

⁵⁰ *ibid*, p.49

⁵¹ *ibid*, p.50, p.52 table 7.2

⁵² *op. cit.*, p.52 table 7.2

⁵³ *ibid*, p.50

⁵⁴ *ibid*

regard to the family, Kleinman notes that: ‘family expressions of hostile, negative, and overinvolved emotional response to schizophrenic members have been found to be valid predictors of relapse and worsening course.’⁵⁵ This is highly relevant to Laing’s work since many of the families of schizophrenics that he investigated can be seen as hostile, negative and unable to separate emotionally from their children. Kleinman additionally suggests that the genetic theory of schizophrenia is ‘controversial’.⁵⁶ With regard to the social situation of women, Kleinman suggests that: ‘worldwide, women in most studies bear higher rates of mental illness than men, and research points to the importance of their relative powerlessness...’⁵⁷ Earlier in his text, Kleinman cites one such study which bears out the point above.

In a classic study, Brown and Harris (1978) convincingly demonstrated that among working-class women in England, relative powerlessness, absence of affective support, and the social pressures of child rearing and no job outside the home significantly increased their vulnerability to serious life event stressors,... those with marginal self-esteem were pushed over the edge...⁵⁸

However, the research that Kleinman cites relates to forms of depression, as opposed to psychosis. Nevertheless, the contribution played by the lack of relative social power on behalf of women is an issue that I wish to raise in positing my arguments for a feminist reading of Laing in the next section.

I wish to conclude this section by summarising my key findings from the empirical data that I have reviewed. The contemporary statistics from the U.K. that I have investigated in terms of those

⁵⁵ Kleinman, A, (1988), **Rethinking Psychiatry: From Cultural Category to Personal Experience**, New York, Free Press, p.2

⁵⁶ *ibid*, p.35

⁵⁷ *op. cit.*, p.57

⁵⁸ *ibid*, p.38

individuals suffering from some form of psychotic distress, and the proportions of those affected by gender, and by life circumstances, serve to debunk certain received ideas and common assumptions, particularly those of Laing's feminist critics. Rates of mental illness are higher for male children who are under the age of sixteen than they are for the same age group for girls. There is no difference between the genders, however, in terms of the prevalence of schizophrenia. In the detailed Office for National Statistics report on psychosis, the evidence presented suggests that men suffer more than women in some respects in terms of living with such a diagnosis. The material that I have reviewed in terms of the possible 'causation' of psychosis and schizophrenia indicates that severe trauma and stress have at least as strong a role to play in the generation of this form of distress as biological factors. This supports my theory, which is influenced by my reading of Laing, that forms of mental distress are the product of unbearable life experiences which lead the individual to 'crack up', and that this is particularly the case if the person concerned is already operating on what Laing would term a low basic level of their sense of security. The evidence from this section is intended to support the arguments in the following one.

Arguments for a Feminist Reading of Laing

In this section, I will mostly be presenting arguments in relation to Laing's case studies. However, other material from Laing's work will be drawn upon, where it is necessary. A great deal of my discussion will be focussed upon *Sanity*, *Madness and the Family*, but not to the exclusion of other relevant examples from Laing's texts. My basic premise for this section, which I have alluded to previously, is that Laing's overall main project of making madness socially

intelligible is of benefit to women, since we tend to be diagnosed with forms of mental distress in greater numbers than men. This is, however, problematised somewhat by the indication in the empirical evidence regarding schizophrenia that it affects men and women equally. Nevertheless, I do feel that Laing's work contains insights into the social position of women, which remain undeveloped within Mitchell, although traces of such arguments can be found within her work on Laing. My intention is not to suggest that there should be a higher incidence of psychosis among women, but to argue against Mitchell and Showalter's interpretations of Laing's work. Neither do I wish to suggest that all women will be crushed by the factors that I examine within this section. It is possible to survive the experience of repressive socialisation, and life within a claustrophobic family environment.

The first matter with regard to the eleven case studies in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* that I wish to deal with is the fact that they are all of female individuals.⁵⁹ Mitchell suggests that this is a chance occurrence,⁶⁰ rather than an indication of Laing's alleged sexism. Here I would like to add that there were strict criteria that patients had to meet in order to take part in the studies written up in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. For example, a minimum and maximum quantity for electro-shocks received by the patient was stated,⁶¹ and the patients had to not have been subject to '...any organic condition... that might have affected those functions regarded as disturbed in schizophrenia...'⁶² However, within these criteria, it is stated that Laing and

⁵⁹ Thanks to Matt Connell for raising this issue in a tutorial.

⁶⁰ *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, p.285

⁶¹ *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, p.15

⁶² *ibid*

Esterson did want to investigate the families of women specifically.⁶³

Nevertheless, I do not wish to fall into the same trap as Laing's feminist critics in terms of taking this as more significant than it possibly is. From my perspective, the focus upon families of female individuals enables the insights that I wish to discuss in this section. I also would like to re-state my earlier consideration in my section on Showalter that psychiatric wards in Laing's time were single-sex, and that this may have played a part in the selection of individuals for study.

The main way in which Laing's work offers a view into the social situation of women is through the way in which socialisation is gendered, and through the examples of this which are largely implicit within *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. In other words, in the latter text, such examples do not receive explicit commentary from Laing and Esterson, but have become apparent to me through my reading of it. However, comments on the socialisation of female individuals are found in other texts by Laing, particularly in *The Politics of Experience*. Nevertheless, I wish to first provide an instance from *The Facts of Life*, where Laing defends women. In the latter text, Laing notes that he spent a great deal of his early time as a psychiatrist in a mental hospital in Glasgow in a specifically female ward.⁶⁴ He provides an account of what is sometimes referred to as the 'Rumpus Room', where, following Laing's observations of the female ward that he was allocated to, he enabled a room to be set aside for 'the twelve most hopeless patients...'⁶⁵ The room was set out like a normal room, as opposed to a ward, and two nurses were assigned to look after the patients there.

⁶³ *ibid*

⁶⁴ **The Facts of Life**, p.113

⁶⁵ *ibid*, p.115

On the first day, the twelve ‘completely withdrawn’ patients had to be shepherded from the ward across to the day room. The second day... I had one of the most moving experiences of my life on that ward. There they all were clustered around the locked door, just waiting to get... over there... So much for being ‘completely withdrawn’.⁶⁶

Laing notes that these twelve patients all left hospital after eighteen months from when the project began, but after a year, they all returned to hospital again.⁶⁷ Following this discussion, Laing provides one of his most explicit criticisms of the male-dominated psychiatric establishment, and the impact of this upon women. ‘The statistics for the number of women to men whose brains have been cut up in America are 3 to 1, all *by* men.’⁶⁸ Laing then proceeds to (somewhat unclearly) suggest that large numbers of the female European population were dragged away from their homes in the middle of the night, ‘...and then trundled off into the inquisitorial European dungeons,’⁶⁹ in the past history of this continent. The lack of clarity is a result of Laing not specifying exactly what historical events he is referring to. However, he draws a parallel between these events and what happens with psychiatry. ‘It’s done so neatly today that most people don’t know it’s happening.’⁷⁰ The point that I wish to illustrate with this example from *The Facts of Life*, and with the following one from *The Politics of Experience*, is that Laing cannot be considered to be prejudiced against women in the manner that his feminist critics claim.

He would not bother to include the above remarks if that was the case, nor would he provide the criticism of the socialisation of girls that is found in Chapter Three of the latter text, entitled ‘The

⁶⁶ *ibid*, pp.115-116

⁶⁷ *op. cit.*, p.116

⁶⁸ *ibid*

⁶⁹ *ibid*

⁷⁰ *op. cit.*

Mystification of Experience'. Laing cites the example of a school class where the girls had to bake a cake and the boys were to judge which was the best. He provides these comments.

1. The school is here inducting children into sex-linked roles of a very specific kind.
2. Personally, I find it obscene that girls should be taught that their status depends on the taste they can produce in boys' mouths.⁷¹

These are the most explicit comments by Laing on the subjugation of women that I am aware of in his work. My following discussion will highlight aspects which do not receive such a full commentary, but which serve as a critical tool for highlighting certain aspects of the socialisation of women within *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. I disagree with Laing's feminist critics' notion that the absence of an explicit comment on the situation of women is therefore evidence of Laing's sexism in the latter text.

A comparison of the differing treatment of the daughters of the families featured in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* as opposed to the sons provides some revealing material. This aspect is highly apparent in two of the families in the text: 'Family Four – The Danzigs', and 'Family Seven – The Golds'. In my earlier chapter on Mitchell, I noted that the Danzig family expected complete compliance from their daughter Sarah, in accordance with her father's wishes.⁷² Her brother John, however, receives different treatment from the family to that of Sarah. He was permitted, unlike his sister, to criticise his

⁷¹ **The Politics of Experience**, p.60

⁷² **Sanity, Madness and the Family**, p.112

father, ‘...but not in public.’⁷³ John was also allowed to misbehave, without receiving the severe criticism that his sister did for the same actions.⁷⁴ It is suggested by Laing and Esterson that John did support his sister in earlier times, but when that fell apart, he engaged in a collusive alliance with their mother.⁷⁵ It is additionally indicated that the mother of the Danzig family may have been responsible for encouraging this split between John and Sarah, and of using John against his father for her own ends.⁷⁶

This family therefore functioned largely through a series of alliances... Sarah was left out... These alliances offered protection against impossible ideals. Sarah, with no ally, was expected to conform with no let-up to the rules that the others all managed to break.⁷⁷

Sarah, unlike John, was permitted no room for manoeuvre by her family. Her parents thought that it was ‘...necessary...’ for her brother to live by the same double standards as the father, but in Sarah’s case, ‘...they insisted that she adopt their point of view without reservation.’⁷⁸ The parents of the Danzig family also saw Sarah’s time spent thinking, and putting efforts into reading the Bible as clear illustrations of her mental illness, in a manner which I find to be, at best, highly unusual.⁷⁹ Again, the different treatment accorded to the different genders of the child is apparent. No incidences of John being accused of thinking are put forward by the parents, despite Sarah claiming that he (like many typical individuals) also thinks.⁸⁰

⁷³ **Sanity, Madness and the Family**, p.118

⁷⁴ *ibid*, pp.118-119

⁷⁵ *ibid*, p.121

⁷⁶ *op. cit.*

⁷⁷ *ibid*, p.122

⁷⁸ *ibid*, p.130

⁷⁹ *op. cit.*, pp.127-130

⁸⁰ *ibid*, p.128

‘Reading the Bible was also a very doubtful activity, especially for a girl.’⁸¹

Laing and Esterson’s paraphrasing of the Danzig parents’ views on their daughter’s religious studies provides one of their most forthright comments on gendered parental expectations. It is a shame that the Danzig family did not permit their youngest daughter, Ruth, to be included in the interviews,⁸² as her participation may have shed further light on whether their prescriptions for total conformity with the father’s views applied to the female children of the family alone. The Danzig family provide an interesting counterpoint to Mitchell’s claims that most of the interviews were with the daughter and mother, since the father was present for the majority of the interviews, as opposed to the mother alone.⁸³

The differing treatment of male and female children is also apparent in the study of ‘Family Seven – The Golds’, in terms of the alterations in the parents’ views of Ruth Gold’s artistic leanings compared to those of her brother.

Her brother realized, as he put it, that his parents were very ‘limited people’... They had accommodated themselves to some extent to his ‘artistic’ pursuits, but they could not see any validity whatever in Ruth’s propensities in that direction.⁸⁴

Once again, total compliance with the parents’ views was expected from the daughter, rather than the son. It is a recurring theme of *Sanity, Madness and the Family* that the families described therein will not let their daughters go, or be their own individuals, even to the extent that the daughters are traumatised by this treatment. The psychiatric system itself is used as a means of enforcing the

⁸¹ *ibid*

⁸² ‘At her parents’ request, Ruth was not included in the investigation.’ *Ibid*, p.110.

⁸³ *ibid*

⁸⁴ *op. cit.*, p.163

parents' domination of their daughters. In many of the case studies, disagreement with the parents (a fairly normal occurrence, especially for teenagers), is taken as a sign of schizophrenia. Ruth Gold expresses this herself at the end of the chapter on her family.

INTERVIEWER: But do you feel you have to agree with what most of the people round you believe?

RUTH: Well if I don't I usually land up in hospital.⁸⁵

In the chapter on 'Family Three – The Churches', it is mentioned that Claire Church's younger brother had had an episode of schizophrenia himself. Laing and Esterson were not, however, permitted to interview him.

We have not been able to form a picture of this family from every angle because no one in the family wished... Michael... to be interviewed. He had had a schizophrenic breakdown when he was sixteen, but is said to be quite well now. Many things point to this not being the case.⁸⁶

The latter comment provided by Laing and Esterson is rather ominous, but they do not expand on this. From my perspective, it is a shame that Michael was not permitted to be interviewed, since his views may have shed further light on both Claire's treatment by her family, and upon his own predicament. In this chapter, it is noted that Claire was seen as insane because she '...lacked normal feelings of affection for her parents and others,'⁸⁷ and because she was said '...to lack warmth...'⁸⁸ Given the differing cultural prescriptions which are placed upon the genders in terms of expected behaviours, here I wish to put forward the

⁸⁵ *ibid*, p.175

⁸⁶ *ibid*, p.76

⁸⁷ *op. cit.*, p.75

⁸⁸ *ibid*

consideration that lacking warmth and affection may be seen as more of an issue for girls and women, since we tend to be expected to behave in such a manner.

The Church family provide a good example of a further recurring theme of *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, which I have referred to previously in this thesis – the way in which displays of autonomy on behalf of the female children are taken as signs of schizophrenia by the families and most of the psychiatrists. The daughters are not allowed to live their own lives. If they do try to, then they are seen as insane. Whilst these aspects may receive little explicit comment from Laing and Esterson, it is to their credit that they come across in the text. *Sanity, Madness and the Family* is a book which is concerned with the phenomenology of families in which one member has been diagnosed as schizophrenic. Given their restricted aims for the study, the lack of such commentary is not a matter for critique. However, the presentation of the material lends itself to the tracing of recurring themes in the text, some of which I have identified here. It can be argued that women are given a more restricted identity in the first place, through their socialisation, than men. If a woman does not conform, then the social disapproval seems to be far greater than that for men. The latter group are permitted to rebel, whereas the female identity in this culture seems to me to consist of little other than blind, docile obedience to others. These issues are highly relevant in today's culture, which from my perspective, constitutes a new misogyny,⁸⁹ with women reduced to their ornamental value and little else. I have always viewed myself as a person first, and as a gender secondly, which has enabled me to ignore most of the Procrustean socialisation of women.

⁸⁹ Irvine Welsh has referred to the current context of women as a '...regressive post-feminism...' Welsh, I. (2009), *Up From the Street*, **Guardian Review**, 14th March, p.20

What is apparent to me within the case studies in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* is the exploitation by their families of relatively powerless female children. From my point of view, to identify and analyse this, as I have been attempting to do, constitutes more of a feminist analysis than Mitchell and Showalter's accusations that Laing blames the mothers, and is therefore prejudiced against women. My assertion here is problematic to some extent, since the mothers featured in this text have probably not had the easiest of lives themselves. However, the daughters featured in these families have arguably even less social power than their mothers. For me, an analysis of their situation is valuable in terms of contributing to a feminist reading of Laing. At this stage, I wish to draw upon some of the empirical evidence that I have reviewed in the previous section.

Kleinman's arguments that hostile, negative families tend to worsen the condition of schizophrenic family members, and his citing of studies which have linked a lack of relative social power to an increased chance of experiencing mental distress are highly relevant to Laing's work, and *Sanity, Madness and the Family* in particular. Kleinman provides evidence which backs up my hypothesis with regard to the relative powerlessness of female children in relation to their parents, and the way in which this seems to aggravate the mental distress that they have experienced. The daughters that are featured in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* are placed in an extreme double-bind situation – to try and be autonomous, but then be seen as insane and treated accordingly, or to conform to their families' demands and therefore suffer existential death. The evidence which links traumatic life events to an increased chance of experiencing what is seen as psychosis is additionally

relevant to this text. I feel that I am fairly safe in arguing that living with a family which does not recognise you as a person, which sees you as ill if you do not do as they wish, and in the more extreme case studies cited in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, tie up their children or give them forced attempted abortions, would be traumatic for an individual. Such trauma-inducing families are a feature of Laing's work, and he appears to have been ahead of the times in terms of recognising this. Most of the research that I am aware of that links traumatic life events with psychosis is fairly recent.

The conformity to the family which is expected of the female children featured in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* can be further analysed by examining Laing's summary of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in *Reason and Violence*. Chapter Four of *The Politics of Experience*, entitled 'Us and Them' is used by Laing to further some of these Sartrean concepts. Laing himself notes that the latter chapter is heavily influenced by Sartre's text.⁹⁰ *Sanity, Madness and the Family* additionally deploys concepts which are derived from Sartre's *Critique...*, so I therefore consider an analysis of some of these concepts to be of value in terms of identifying certain aspects of the families which are featured in this text. These sections of Laing's work represent some of his most significant applications of Sartre's theory to the social field. I have referred earlier in this thesis to the study of groups and group formations which Laing explains in *Reason and Violence*, in my chapter on Deleuze and Guattari. Sartre puts forward the idea that human groups are essentially our own inventions.

⁹⁰ **The Politics of Experience**, p.83

In the last and crucial resort, even the most apparently permanent institutionally preserved human group is ultimately maintained by the concerted invention of its being.⁹¹

The nuclear family itself can be seen as an invented group formation, which is specific to advanced capitalist societies. Sartre further suggests that groups seek to create a sense of cohesion, and permanence, through what he calls ‘the pledge’.⁹² Families can be seen as examples of such pledged groups. In the example of the case studies within *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, the pledge that these families expect their daughters to follow is that of obedience to the family.

Every individual who is born into a pledged group finds himself in a situation where pledges have already been given on his behalf. He is pledged by proxy, as it were, ahead of himself.⁹³

The daughters in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* have been pledged ahead of themselves. They were expected to behave in such a manner as though they had freely accepted their families’ demands, when it appears not to have been the case. Laing and Sartre note that the pledge can be used to try and enforce group conformity and obedience.⁹⁴ It is a means of ensuring the ‘...inert permanence...’⁹⁵ of a particular group, such as the family. The concept of the pledge is directly related to the family within the chapter of *The Politics of Experience* that I have referred to earlier. The dark side of pledged groups is made apparent in this chapter.

⁹¹ **Reason and Violence**, p.14

⁹² *ibid*, p.135

⁹³ *ibid*, p.144

⁹⁴ *op. cit.*, p.149

⁹⁵ *ibid*

In the nexal family the unity of the group is achieved through the experience by each of the group, and the danger to each person is the dissolution or dispersal of 'the family'... A united 'family' exists only as long as each person acts in terms of its existence.⁹⁶

In *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, the lack of recognition of the parents as a positive force in their lives by the daughters threatens the family with such dissolution. The pledge of family loyalty weighs heavily upon the female children. Their unwillingness to bear this burden appears to be the main reason that their family view them as insane. Their brothers are allowed to ignore the pledge, or conform to it if they wish, but the daughters are not permitted that luxury.

Tradition itself is, for me, a key part of the pledge that binds families together. The family should, in the traditional view, reproduce itself in the same form throughout the generations. However, processes of detraditionalisation are at work in contemporary society, and I take hope in these forces. The fact that two incomes are now needed in order for a family to survive may eventually undermine the traditional nuclear family structure. However, the requirements of child care remain set up in such a manner that women tend to still have to stay at home to look after younger children. Paternity leave continues to be of a lesser proportion to that of maternity leave. Given that having and raising a child requires no prior qualifications, I almost feel as though I would be of a lesser status were I to stay at home with children. The family serves as a means of reinforcing the subjugation of women. Gender roles loosened somewhat in the 1990s, but as I have already alluded to, mainstream society and the media's portrayal of increasingly unclothed women, serve as regressive forces. I consider

⁹⁶ **The Politics of Experience**, p.73

many traditional ways of life to be of little use to women who would like to live emancipated lives. The family needs to be transcended in its current patriarchal form.

Laing's explanation of Sartre's thought in *Reason and Violence* proposes that the pledge itself is insufficient to maintain the unity of a group. A threat (real or invented) is needed in order to keep the group together.

In the pledged group,... nothing material binds the members, the danger is not real, it is only possible. The origin of the pledge is anxiety... The danger to the permanence of the group is from dispersion and seriality... Fear must be reinvented.⁹⁷

In *Sanity, Madness and the Family* and *The Politics of Experience*, the threat examined by Laing which is used to maintain group unity is the threat of creating a scandal concerning the family. I will examine Laing's comments on this idea in *The Politics of Experience* first, in his chapter examining the creation of 'Us and Them'.

Gossip and scandal are always and everywhere elsewhere. Each person is the other to the others. The members of a scandal network may be unified by ideas to which no one will admit in his [or her] own person.⁹⁸

Here Laing suggests that what are seen as scandalous behaviours are not the product of a rational process with a definite origin, but are driven instead by irrational anxieties. 'There is conformity to a *presence* that is everywhere *elsewhere*.'⁹⁹ Laing's discussions of the functions of scandal in terms of

⁹⁷ **Reason and Violence**, p.136. Seriality refers to the lack of a true group unity.

⁹⁸ **The Politics of Experience**, p.68

⁹⁹ *ibid*, p.71

maintaining group cohesion are somewhat ironic, given that he was himself the subject of more than one scandal during his life.

Laing illustrates the ‘scandal network’ in this chapter by utilising an ‘...inverted Romeo and Juliet situation’,¹⁰⁰ which he has, presumably, concocted himself. However, there are instances in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, which I consider to be better exemplars of this issue. Laing and Esterson themselves note that ‘...the spectres of scandal and gossip...’¹⁰¹ are features of all of the families examined within that text. I have already referred to many of these families within this thesis. I wish to begin by first examining ‘Family Two: The Blairs’. The reader may recall that Lucie Blair’s father was a highly unpleasant individual who told his daughter that she would be raped or murdered if she so much as ventured outside of the house alone.¹⁰² Within this case study, both parents appear to be excessively concerned about what other people outside the family think of them.

The *others* outside the family, the ‘Them’ who were the concern of Mr Blair, were all alike for him. None could be trusted.¹⁰³

The concept of ‘the They’ is a feature of Heidegger’s thought in *Being and Time* (1927). I wish to restrict myself to some brief comments on this theoretical link, since a full examination of the relation between Laing and Heidegger’s thought would require another thesis in itself. However, I wish to note that Laing was aware of Heidegger’s work, and that frequent references to the ‘they’ are made in Laing’s chapter in *The Politics of Experience* that I am here discussing.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p.69

¹⁰¹ *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, p.133

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p.55

¹⁰³ *op. cit.*, pp.66-67

Governing one's behaviour according to

what 'they' think is a form of lived inauthenticity, according to Heidegger.

In so far as I refuse or fail to consider certain options for the reason that 'they', 'one', or 'we' do not do such things, my condition is one of 'inauthenticity' rather than 'authenticity', and I have ceded my decision to 'others' or rather to the anonymous 'they'.¹⁰⁴

A key feature of the scandalisation of their daughters' behaviour by these families is the fear of what 'they' will think and gossip about. This is used as an attempt to regulate the daughters' actions, but serves to mystify them further. It is a most curious feature of human relations that they should be conducted in such a manner. Why bother oneself about what no specific, actual individual thinks? The anxiety of social disapproval appears to be great enough in these families to not require a definite origin. As Laing suggests in his theoretical considerations on this matter that I have cited above from *The Politics of Experience*, the disparaging 'they' are everywhere and nowhere at once. To an individual such as myself, to live one's life in such a manner is insane. Such thoughts could be considered as psychotic, since they do not correspond to lived reality. Social norms have been internalised by such parents to the extent that reality fails to temper these considerations.

Mr Blair's ridiculous views on what would happen to a woman were she to venture out alone, and his distrust of others, were shared by his spouse, albeit in a slightly different way.

[Mrs Blair's] view of the world was no less fantastical, but her fantastical 'others' were women. She lived in a world of scandal and gossip. Everyone else knew everyone else's

¹⁰⁴ Inwood, M, (1997), **Heidegger**, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p.26

business, or wanted to. 'They' were, once more, all alike. It was best to keep oneself to oneself and never tell anyone 'your business'.¹⁰⁵

Laing and Esterson make it apparent that with Lucie languishing within this prison of a family, cut off from others, she was left unable to make any sense of social relations.¹⁰⁶ Laing and Esterson additionally note that her parents lived in '...what in clinical terms would be regarded as a typically paranoid world...'¹⁰⁷ The attempt to maintain family group cohesion destroys the daughter's possibilities of sanity. The parents treat an invented reality as though it was real.

In the chapter on 'Family Three: The Churches', the mother fails to see her daughter as an individual who is separate and distinct from herself. Here Laing and Esterson argue that: 'Spontaneity... is the very heart of subversion to institutional mores, to pre-set role-taking and assigning.'¹⁰⁸ The parents of the Church family were threatened by such spontaneous actions. Once again their family appears to provide little other than a prison-like environment for their daughter. They also live in a world formed of their own constructions, rather than any approximation to reality. Laing and Esterson additionally make it clear in this case study, as with the Blair parents, that both parents were involved in this shared fantasy, as opposed to simply the mother. The total family structure reinforces the invented world of the family.

Almost totally lacking in spontaneity, Mr and Mrs Church were particularly fearful of gossip and scandal. Another aspect of this was their fear of what they called 'a crowd'... One aspect of a crowd is that it is a collection of people not

¹⁰⁵ **Sanity, Madness and the Family**, p.67

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*, p.72

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*, p.99

bound together by... organizational or institutional safeguards.¹⁰⁹

With these families, fairly commonplace elements of life are elevated to highly anxiety-producing dangers.¹¹⁰ The fear of gossip and scandal serves to produce and amplify these anxieties. This lack of spontaneity is something which is noted by Laing in his summary of Sartre's late theory as a feature of the pledged group.

With the pledge, reciprocity is centrifugal. It is a bond sustained in the absence of the others, not only lived in their presence. Each in his [or her] solitude has guarantees and imperatives, rights and obligations. No more is there a spontaneous living invention of relatedness, but a reciprocal inertia.¹¹¹

The family as an inert, unchanging form of social grouping does characterise the series of families that feature in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. The idealised version of the family appears to be as important to these individuals as their actual family members in their unique reality. However, the rights accorded to each member of the pledged group are not distributed equally.

Given that, as I have previously discussed, the male children of these families appear to be permitted to leave the family prison, these case studies illustrate that it is gossip and scandal about the female children that these families are so terrified of. It remains doubtful if this is intended to try and help the daughters. It may be more the case that the fear of scorn being poured upon the whole family is the origin of the anxiety. However, Laing and Esterson problematise my idea here, by suggesting

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*, p.102

¹¹⁰ Laing himself notes this in **The Politics of Experience**, p.74. He argues that some families have '...a phantasy of the external world as extraordinarily dangerous...'

¹¹¹ **Reason and Violence**, p.143

that in this case study, the family have failed to see their daughter as a person who is subject to real potential dangers.

...The 'Claire' who was the object of Mrs Church's concern was much more an object of her fantasy than a real person in her own right in a real world. Actual real dangers in the real world hardly seemed to concern Mrs Church at all... Claire as a little girl was allowed to work in the top storey of a house, at the height of air-raids in one of the heaviest bombed areas...¹¹²

That this family are more concerned about their imagined version of their daughter than her actual self is indeed disturbing. The family has become so engrossed in their fantasy world that they lack in any proper caring responsibilities for their daughter. That the daughter is then expected to share in this lunacy or be seen as insane becomes the nail in the coffin.

The parents

featured in 'Family Four: The Danzigs' '...regarded Sarah's madness as a calamity visited on the family.'¹¹³ The mother utters a similarly bizarre statement to that contained in worrying about what 'they' will think: the idea that such things only happen to other people.¹¹⁴ Frequently when terrible things happen, individuals say that such things do not happen to people like them. This begs the question of precisely why people see themselves as so different to others? Sarah Danzig's parents were full of '...shame and fear of scandal... They regarded her as a 'breaker of the family front'.¹¹⁵ They perceived Sarah as a breaker of the pledge that attempted to keep the family together. However, in this case study the gossip and scandal referred to real events, as opposed to the abstract anxiety of

¹¹² **Sanity, Madness and the Family**, p.105

¹¹³ *ibid*, p.116

¹¹⁴ *ibid*

¹¹⁵ *ibid*, p.117

what ‘they’ will think. Sarah went to work at the same place where her father was the boss, and it leaked out that she had had a ‘breakdown’.¹¹⁶ However, Sarah remained in a position of mystification because the unpleasant gossip occurred behind her back. ‘Sarah felt their hostility without being able to get the feeling confirmed by anyone.’¹¹⁷

Some of the ‘scandals’ featured in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* are to do with the daughters becoming pregnant. Such pregnancies outside of marriage were, during that historical period, more of an occasion for controversy than they arguably are now. This was the case with one of the families that I have already examined: ‘Family Two: The Blairs’. With regard to Lucie Blair:

...a pregnancy had been terminated and she had been sterilized. She had never married, but had had a baby girl during the war, who was adopted.¹¹⁸

I have already referred to ‘Family Five: The Edens’ response to Ruby’s pregnancy – to give her a forced attempted abortion, which resulted in a miscarriage.¹¹⁹

The whole family was choked with its sense of shame and scandal. While emphasizing this to Ruby again and again, they told her that she was only imagining things when she thought that people were talking about her.¹²⁰

It is to Laing and Esterson’s credit that the perceptive reader can see how the patient’s ‘delusions’ mirror those actually held by their bizarre and suffocating family environment. Whilst her relations were attempting to abort Ruby’s

¹¹⁶ *ibid*

¹¹⁷ *op. cit.*

¹¹⁸ *ibid*, p.51

¹¹⁹ *ibid*, p.131 and 134

¹²⁰ *ibid*, p.135

pregnancy, they told her ‘...pityingly and vindictively at once, what a fool she was, what a slut she was...’¹²¹ Ruby ‘...complained of... voices outside her head calling her ‘slut’, ‘dirty’, ‘prostitute’... [She] had given birth to a rat after she was admitted to hospital...’¹²² The ‘rat’ that Ruby was referring to may have been the miscarriage. The voices that she heard corresponded to her family’s opinions of her. In this case study, the relations’ sense of scandal and gossip have become internalised by Ruby. In order to believe their denials that they held these views, she has then attributed these accusatory voices to some other, non-existent presence. The role of mystification in leaving Ruby with no means of orienting herself through such confusing messages has rendered her as having to project out certain aspects of her relations’ disgust, and to internalising others.

The final family that I wish to examine in this section is ‘Family Eight: The Heads’. This particular case study contains some of Laing and Esterson’s most explicit commentary on the chasm between ‘average’ social beliefs and the strict codes held by the families featured in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. The patient featured in this case study, Jean, is described by Laing and Esterson in the following way. ‘...[Her] prevailing manner was that of a puzzled child doing her best to meet the demands of adults. There was a puppet doll-like quality about her...’¹²³ Women are conventionally assumed to be more other-directed than men. I would view this as the product of socialisation, as opposed to any innate tendency in this direction on behalf of women. Other than the obvious biological differences between the genders, I view the social differences between the two as largely the product of the consequences of socialisation. In my next section, I will analyse such a focus

¹²¹ op. cit., p.134

¹²² ibid, p.131

¹²³ ibid, p.176

upon the other on behalf of women, by drawing upon other aspects of Laing's theory. However, worrying about what 'they' will think and say is not exclusively the preserve of women.

Both Jean's biological family (the Jones) and her husband's (the Heads) are noted as '...fervent Non-conformist Christians of fundamentalist leanings.'¹²⁴ It is in their discussion of the tensions between the attempt to live one's life according to such a doctrine, and the 'typical' views of 'everyday' society that Laing and Esterson demonstrate considerable skill.

...Every family in this series presents its own peculiar difficulties... In this case, much of the difficulty arises from the fact that none of them... even think, much less express, any unchristian thoughts.¹²⁵

Jean's elder brother managed to escape the family, and he helped Jean as much as he could until he left home.¹²⁶ He '...described vividly his own technique of developing his own life...'¹²⁷ Jean's brother (Ian) was adopted '...to give him a good Christian home.'¹²⁸ He appears to not have been treated in any substantially better way as a child than Jean was.

...He bit his nails 'down to the bone', for which his arms and hands were put in bags and strapped to his body by attached cords tied behind his back.

[...] Jean's parents and husband show a notable inability to see the other person's point of view, and are completely unaware of this inability.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ op. cit., p.178

¹²⁵ *ibid*, p.178

¹²⁶ *ibid*, p.181

¹²⁷ *ibid*. Laing and Esterson do not, unfortunately, flesh this out any further.

¹²⁸ *ibid*, p.192

¹²⁹ *ibid*, p.195

The main difference between Jean and her adopted brother may be that he was allowed to eventually leave the family, both physically and socially, whereas Jean's separation from her parents '...was at the price of becoming equally attached to her husband.'¹³⁰ She never managed to achieve a full sense of her own autonomy.

This case study is the only one in which both genders of child receive an equal treatment from the family. With reference to Jean, Laing and Esterson summarise well the double-bind situation that characterises these families.

...They implicitly set her an ideal, deny that they have set it, then put the onus on her for taking too much out of herself in trying to live up to it, and thus breaking down.¹³¹

The idea of the family as a pledged group has been one that I have examined in this section. The pledge that binds Jean's family and husband is that of their religious beliefs. The pledge can take a more abstract form, when it requires adherence to social and moral codes which are not commonly shared among the wider population. Social conformity is taken to a paranoid extreme in these families that live in terror of what 'they' will think and say.

Freud notes in his essay *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929) that there are: '...two main types of pathogenic methods of upbringing – over-strictness and spoiling...'¹³² This comment becomes rather lost in Freud's discussions of the impact of this upon the ego and super-ego. However, the initial point is of relevance to my

¹³⁰ op. cit., p.182

¹³¹ ibid, p.186

¹³² Freud, S, (1985), **Civilization, Society and Religion: Group Psychology, Civilization and its Discontents and Other Works**, (trans. J. Strachey), Harmondsworth, Penguin, p.323

discussions here. The series of families which are featured in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* all exhibit tendencies towards over-strictness with regard to their female children. From my reading of the text, these case studies are examples of the psychological abuse and neglect of these young women by their families. It is a credit to Laing and Esterson that the reader is enabled to perceive this, given that these families behave and communicate in a way which is best described as highly confusing. This clearing away of the levels of mystification that shroud these women's lives constitutes a defence of relatively helpless and abused female children. Laing's phenomenological approach, with its unbiased view of the wider social network that comprises the family is a key element that enables this to occur.

From my standpoint, with regard to the women featured in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, it would arguably aid their recovery from the mental distress that they are experiencing to be permitted some time away from their family environment, if not to attempt to separate from their families altogether. In Laing's development of Sartre's theory in the chapter 'Us and Them' from *The Politics of Experience* which I have been using in this section, he posits the following argument.

Some families live in perpetual anxiety of what, to them, is an external persecuting world. The members of the family live in a family ghetto, as it were.¹³³

Examples from *Sanity, Madness and the Family* have been utilised in this section in order to provide illustrations of this excessive anxiety about the world outside of the family. This irrational fear may then be used as a way of controlling the rest of the family group. However, Laing notes that leaving the group is made as

¹³³ **The Politics of Experience**, p.74

difficult as possible for the person who may want to leave the ‘family ghetto’. One feature of a ghetto is that no one wishes to remain there, but it is virtually impossible to leave.

The individual is also expected not to want to leave. ‘...The simplest and perennial threat to all groups comes from the simple defection of its members.’¹³⁴ This problem is additionally discussed in *Reason and Violence*.

Being-in-the-group, in its interiority, is manifested by a double failure to which each has given his [or her] consent: powerlessness to leave, and powerlessness to be integrated: powerlessness to dissolve the group in oneself or to be dissolved in it.¹³⁵

However, the females that have been traumatised by their families which feature in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* have not been given a choice or a voice over the abstract rules which govern the behaviour of their family group. There is something of an absence with regard to this matter in *Reason and Violence*. These women have been pledged ahead of themselves, which I have referred to earlier. Their consent to being treated in such a manner is assumed, rather than explicitly given.

Nevertheless, it is noted that staying in the group can actually harm the individual.¹³⁶ Sartre suggests that forms of reciprocity are shaped by the structure of the groups that such relations are embedded within.

There are no longer any unmediated reciprocities, but reciprocities that have been formed and deformed ‘by the group’. Group work has been done on them.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ *ibid*, p.78

¹³⁵ **Reason and Violence**, p.158

¹³⁶ *ibid*, p.151

¹³⁷ *ibid*

Gender relations do not feature as a matter for critique in *Reason and Violence*.¹³⁸ I would like to add to the analysis offered in that text, and developed by Laing, that the different genders are treated differently, both in terms of their place in the family group, and in terms of the level of reciprocity that is expected from them. The fact that many of the women featured in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* are seen as mad because they lack the ‘correct’ level of reciprocity towards their family is illuminating. Men are allowed to leave the family, and lead their own lives, but women are expected to lead a life of perpetual obedience to their family, however insane that family may be. Throughout this section, I hope to have demonstrated that Laing’s work can be read in such a way that it can be seen as illuminating with regard to the gendering of socialisation, in contrast to Mitchell and Showalter’s claims that Laing’s work discriminates against women.

Laing’s Reinterpretation of Past Clinical Descriptions

In this section, I will be examining two instances where Laing defends women. The first occurs in *The Politics of Experience*, where Laing re-evaluates a clinical examination of a young woman by the early psychiatrist Kraepelin.¹³⁹ The second is taken from Laing’s last published work, *The Voice of Experience*. In this text, Laing provides a resounding critique of Binswanger’s existential analysis of ‘Ellen West’ (1958).¹⁴⁰ I am including these examples in order to further reinforce the fact that there is no textual evidence to suggest that Laing

¹³⁸ However, racism, colonialism and class are criticised, *ibid*, p.125.

¹³⁹ *The Politics of Experience*, pp.88-90

¹⁴⁰ *The Voice of Experience*, pp.53-62

was in some way a misogynist, and to demonstrate additional examples of his defence of relatively powerless, exploited women.

Laing's reinterpretation of Kraepelin's account of a 'clinical examination'¹⁴¹ of a '...servant girl, aged twenty-four...' uses Kraepelin's own words. However, Laing places Kraepelin's actions (the things that he does to the woman) in italics. Kraepelin's actions include stopping the girl from moving, taking hold of her, attempting to force a piece of bread from her hand, and (most horrifyingly) pricking her in the forehead with a needle.¹⁴² Given that this all occurs in front of an audience, the account becomes even more chilling. It constitutes little other than an exercise in dehumanisation and degradation. The point that Laing is making by italicising Kraepelin's actions is that if they are taken '...out of the context as experienced and defined by him, how extraordinary *they* are!'¹⁴³ Laing uses this account in order to demonstrate the disjunction between who is seen as sane and who is seen as insane, and to show that these lines are drawn in a somewhat arbitrary manner.

A feature of the interplay between psychiatrist and patient is that if the patient's part is taken out of context, as is done in the clinical description, it might seem very odd. The psychiatrist's part, however, is taken as the very touchstone for our common-sense view of normality.¹⁴⁴

This point made by Laing links to my discussions in my previous section, since a disjunction occurs where the families in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* are seen as sane, whereas the daughters are seen as insane because the family claim that they are. Conventional psychiatry appears to reinforce women's subjugation, by

¹⁴¹ **The Politics of Experience**, p.88

¹⁴² *ibid*, p.89

¹⁴³ *ibid*

¹⁴⁴ *op. cit.*, pp.89-90

claiming that a woman is insane if she does not submit to her lot in life. The relevance of looking at the wider social context in order to comprehend a person's behaviour is demonstrated both within Laing's theory and in his case studies.

Kraepelin also features in Binswanger's study of 'Ellen West', since he was one of the many psychiatrists that she saw.¹⁴⁵ The name Ellen West is a pseudonym.¹⁴⁶

Existential analysis... seems to offer a way to understand a human situation in human terms.

...Binswanger's existential analysis of Ellen West (1958) is generally taken to be a standard work in its field, an exemplary model of its kind.¹⁴⁷

Throughout his section on this study, Laing proceeds to demonstrate the poverty of Binswanger's attempted existential study. This critique additionally constitutes one of Laing's most resolute defences of an utterly powerless (within her social context) woman. Binswanger did not know this individual before she was admitted to the hospital where he worked, during the first part of the 1900s.¹⁴⁸ He interviewed her only occasionally during her stay in hospital.¹⁴⁹ 'He states that he regards his *lack* of first-hand personal or clinical knowledge of Ellen West as an advantage for the purposes of existential analysis.'¹⁵⁰ Binswanger's account is not of Ellen West herself, but of '...the existential

¹⁴⁵ **The Voice of Experience**, p.58

¹⁴⁶ *ibid*, p.54

¹⁴⁷ *ibid*, p.53

¹⁴⁸ *op. cit.*, p.54

¹⁴⁹ *ibid*

¹⁵⁰ *ibid*

Gestalt that is Ellen West...'¹⁵¹ His study is not based on evidence which was taken from the individual herself directly,

...but from various written documents: poems, diary entries, letters, and a report by her husband on her recollection of her life, elicited by him under hypnosis at Binswanger's instigation.¹⁵²

At this stage, before Laing moves on to assess these accounts of West's life, methodological problems can already be perceived, particularly in the light of this study's claim to be an existential analysis. Binswanger's methods divert considerably away from the principles of a Laingian approach. They could indeed be seen as the polar opposite of a social phenomenological methodology. Binswanger spent very little time with Ellen West. Laing, on the contrary, spent as much time as possible with the individuals that featured in his case studies. Binswanger's study of Ellen West is based on second- and third-hand material. Laing attempted as far as possible to use the patient's own accounts of their life. Issues of reliability and validity are of concern here, since material from others regarding another person may well be biased. After various sessions with psychiatrists and admissions to hospital, Ellen West committed suicide.¹⁵³ Laing argues that Binswanger '...is dissecting a dead butterfly of his fancy, not depicting the pathetic life of a defeated person.'¹⁵⁴

This problem of Binswanger's reliance on accounts of West's life which are taken from individuals other than herself lead Laing to frequently criticise Binswanger's study for failing to consider what the events in West's life actually meant to her as a person. West was a woman whose life was

¹⁵¹ *ibid*

¹⁵² *op. cit.*

¹⁵³ *ibid*

¹⁵⁴ *ibid*, p.55

entirely controlled by others – by her family, by others, and by the psychiatrists that were supposed to help her. West had an ‘infatuation’ at the age of sixteen.¹⁵⁵ Laing questions the fact that Binswanger presents this in this manner without enquiring what this ‘infatuation’ actually meant to West.¹⁵⁶ Later, when she was twenty,

...she had become engaged to a romantic foreigner, but broke off the engagement, at her father’s instigation... We are left forever to guess what it meant to her to have to give up the man she loved. At any rate, this emotional catastrophe may possibly have some remote connection with her losing her appetite, going on hunger strike, or whatever.¹⁵⁷

This issue of eating or not came to be a prominent one in her life. I am aware that eating disorders can be a measure that individuals utilise in order to achieve some degree of control over their lives, since other aspects are beyond their control.

West had some form of psychological crisis when she was twenty-three, ‘...about the time “she has an unpleasant love affair with a riding teacher”.’¹⁵⁸

Laing again demonstrates that this value judgement is not one made by West herself. He suggests that this love affair may have been described as unpleasant because the material came from West when she was under hypnosis which was conducted by her husband.¹⁵⁹ Therefore, this may be a construction placed upon West’s experience by her husband, rather than it being an authentic description as such. It is possible for a person under hypnosis to have false memories implanted or to be made suggestible to other ways of construing events. Laing

¹⁵⁵ op. cit.

¹⁵⁶ ibid

¹⁵⁷ ibid

¹⁵⁸ ibid, p.56

¹⁵⁹ ibid

sees the absences and inaccuracies in Binswanger's account as at least, if not more, significant than what is directly told to the reader.

However, whatever it may have meant to Ellen, like those other relations of hers which may have been as important and significant to her as they were trivial and meaningless to those in whose control she was, and in whose control she remained until she died,...we hear no more about it.¹⁶⁰

Laing's re-evaluation of Binswanger's study of Ellen West presents the reader with some of his most forthright comments on the domination of a woman by the (mostly male) others around her.

In a parallel to the case study of Jean Head in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, Ellen West went from being under the control of her family to being under the control of her husband. Binswanger notes that her husband had a good 'rapport' with West, but in terms of a 'hypnotic rapport', rather than a good relationship in the customary meaning of the term.¹⁶¹

Binswanger himself notes, rather ominously, that: 'the use of the term at this point may be taken to indicate the extent of the husband's influence over Ellen.'¹⁶² West underwent two periods of psychoanalysis.¹⁶³ During the second session of analysis '...her husband leaves her, at the request of the analyst but against his own wishes.'¹⁶⁴ Laing argues that: 'what wishes she had in the matter are not part of the discourse.'¹⁶⁵ He also suggests that: 'the list of recorded enforced separations is quite impressive.'¹⁶⁶ None of these separations were directly the result of West's own will. The list of different attempts at therapy,

¹⁶⁰ *ibid*

¹⁶¹ *op. cit.*, p.59

¹⁶² *ibid*

¹⁶³ *ibid*, p.59

¹⁶⁴ *ibid*, p.58

¹⁶⁵ *op. cit.*

¹⁶⁶ *ibid*

different diagnoses and differing psychiatrists is also notable. It is not stated with whom the first two periods of psychoanalysis were with.

...Kraepelin diagnosed melancholia, and shortly thereafter another doctor advises that her analysis should be terminated, and she was admitted to Kreuzlingen, where Binswanger comes into the picture for the first time.¹⁶⁷

West's first analyst thought that she was suffering from hysteria,¹⁶⁸ her second thought that she '...was a severe obsessional neurotic with manic-depressive oscillations.'¹⁶⁹ However, Binswanger diagnosed her as having schizophrenia, as did the man who invented the 'disease' itself, Bleuler.¹⁷⁰

Only Binswanger and Bleuler with their master vision could see the truth her Gestalt revealed: schizophrenia.

For Bleuler, the final authority on the diagnosis he had himself invented, the diagnosis was indubitable.¹⁷¹

Binswanger and Bleuler decided to discharge West from hospital, in accordance with her wishes, since she was '...virtually a hopeless case anyway...'¹⁷² West said that she intended to kill herself. She did so, after eating normally for the first time in many years, by taking poison.¹⁷³ Some of Laing's most sarcastic venom that is expressed in any of his texts is directed at Binswanger's account of the tragedy of this woman's life. However, it is worth recalling that it is not an

¹⁶⁷ *ibid*

¹⁶⁸ *ibid*, p.59

¹⁶⁹ *ibid*, pp.59-60

¹⁷⁰ *op. cit.*, p.59 and 60

¹⁷¹ *ibid*, p.60

¹⁷² *ibid*

¹⁷³ *ibid*

account of a person, but of her ‘existential Gestalt’.¹⁷⁴ ‘Binswanger assures us on no less than seventeen occasions... that her suicide was “authentic”.’¹⁷⁵ What Binswanger would have been referring to by an inauthentic suicide is not made clear. Nevertheless, this remains a highly distasteful comment, which may have been intended to shore up Binswanger’s attempt at an existential analysis rather than being an illuminating comment on this individual’s death.

It should be clear

to the reader that Binswanger’s study of Ellen West does not constitute an existential analysis. At no stage does Binswanger enter into West’s world itself, nor does he view her as a totality. West, as a person, is not examined in personal terms. Laing’s anger at the treatment of this woman is matched by his disgust at this study’s claims to be an existentialist one.

...In this attempt at an existential analysis, we see psychiatric diagnostics carried to... the extreme of absurdity...It is a tragi-comical paradox that Binswanger’s account is... a perfect example of just what he is striving,...not self-reflectively and self-ironically enough, to eschew, and leave behind.¹⁷⁶

Laing perceives Binswanger’s attempted existential analysis as scarcely an improvement on psychoanalysis, in terms of the lack of engagement with the actual individual herself.

[Binswanger’s] ‘existential’ look turns out to be a further sophistication of the very institutionalized depersonalized-depersonalizing objectivizing psychiatric diagnostic look, from which he is trying to disencumber himself.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ *ibid*

¹⁷⁵ *op. cit.*

¹⁷⁶ *ibid*, p.54

¹⁷⁷ *ibid*, pp.61-62

I am unaware of any other instances where Laing attacks the methodology of supposedly existentialist approaches, other than his brief critique of Jaspers' account of the voyage which is given in *The Politics of Experience*.

This re-

evaluation of the case study of Ellen West is illuminating in terms of the ways in which the problems that she faced do appear to be ones that are, by and large, encountered by women. Her difficulties with eating, or not eating, are explained by Laing in terms of her experience of the world and the degree of others' control that she was subject to. *The Voice of Experience* was published some years after Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*.¹⁷⁸ I am not aware of any evidence to suggest that Laing was influenced by, or conscious of, the feminist critiques of his work, other than his criticism of Showalter's comments in *Mad to be Normal*. However, this may have been the case. Nevertheless, Mitchell's and Showalter's claims that Laing is prejudiced against women are thrown into further doubt by Laing's defence of women within these reinterpreted case studies. Showalter's chapter on Laing occurs after the publication of *The Voice of Experience*. The latter text remains largely ignored within the study and critique of Laing, but moves closer to a 'classic' Laingian text, particularly in the first part of the book.

Additional Comments

Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (2005) constitutes, in my view, one of the best pieces of feminism that has been produced in recent years. It is a realist critique of the way in which pornographic

¹⁷⁸ **The Voice of Experience** was published in 1982, whereas **Psychoanalysis and Feminism** was originally published in 1974.

‘culture’ has infected mainstream culture, and how this has impacted upon women and our perception of ourselves. I wish to examine this text, and relate it to some of Laing’s theory in order to demonstrate how the latter may be used to advance a feminist analysis. Throughout *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, Levy teases out well the contradictions involved in the sale of a mass-market ‘raunch culture’ to women who are supposed to view this as some form of empowerment. ‘Female chauvinist pigs’ are defined as ‘...women who make sex objects of other women and of ourselves.’¹⁷⁹ The aspect of this text that I wish to examine is a chapter that focuses on teenage girls, and the impact of commercialised ‘raunch culture’ upon them. However, I wish first to turn to the strands of Laingian theory that I will be drawing upon in order to make this analysis.

The focus upon

one’s appearance that is expected of women in this culture, for no substantial reason, involves a focus upon the outer self to the exclusion of the inner self. Laing’s theory does include an examination of the ways in which our culture draws such lines between the inner world and the outer world.

Our culture, while allowing certain marginal licence, comes down very sharply on people who do not draw the inner / outer, real / unreal, ... private / public lines where it is thought to be healthy, right, and normal to do so.¹⁸⁰

Laing is referring to the experience of people who are seen as schizophrenic, people whose perception of the world can differ radically from the ‘norm’. However, is our culturally-specific sense of the differentiation between the inner

¹⁷⁹ Levy, A, (2005), **Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture**, New York, Free Press, p.4. I find the term ‘female chauvinist pig’ to be a confusing one, since if the definition of a male chauvinist pig was applied in the same manner, a ‘female chauvinist pig’ would be a woman who saw women as better than men.

¹⁸⁰ **Self and Others**, p.34

and outer spheres of experience necessarily healthy in itself? I wish to argue that our culture's encouragement of women to focus on their outer appearance serves to deny women more substantial, and possibly lasting forms of satisfaction in life. In *The Politics of Experience*, Laing's analysis of the drawing of such boundaries takes a more culturally critical turn. He notes that 'this identity-anchored, space-and-time-bound experience...' ¹⁸¹ is specific to a particular historical and social organisation. Laing then proceeds to suggest that:

Our time has been distinguished, more than by anything else, by a drive to control the external world, and by an almost total forgetfulness of the internal world. ¹⁸²

In Levy's chapter where she interviews American teenage girls about how they perceive themselves, the focus on outer appearance that is expected of women is a recurring theme. One girl (Anne) '...seemed to have only one truly engrossing passion: her looks.' ¹⁸³ This is in sharp contrast to a teenage boy that Levy had interviewed, whose plans for his later life, and wider interests, formed his topics of conversation. ¹⁸⁴ Levy is highly critical of the other-directedness that is involved in women's focus upon their appearance. She suggests that it is directed more towards what men want to see, rather than what women would like. In what I find to be a shocking moment in the text, ¹⁸⁵ Anne says the following. 'I definitely feel like because I've put so

¹⁸¹ **The Politics of Experience**, p.113

¹⁸² *ibid*, p.115

¹⁸³ **Female Chauvinist Pigs**, p.152

¹⁸⁴ *ibid*

¹⁸⁵ The text is full of unpleasant anecdotes. A crowd of people baying at young women to expose their breasts on a beach, for the American television programme 'Girls Gone Wild' (which consists of female members of the public flashing for the cameras), is a further example. *Ibid*, pp.15-17

much consciousness into my appearance in the past, now I get scared of having a relationship that's based on what's inside of me...' ¹⁸⁶ Levy comments that:

If her looks were a kind of hobby – if dressing and grooming...were things she did for *pleasure* – then the process would be its own reward. But she spoke of her pursuit as a kind of Sisyphean duty...

[Such] girls seem more focused on what is expected of them than on what they want... ¹⁸⁷

In schizophrenia, the individual loses contact with the outside world, and takes refuge in the attempted shelter of their own inner world. I here would like to postulate on another form of harmful experience, where the individual loses all contact with their own inner world. To be starved of self-knowledge through focusing upon one's appearance can only be seen in a negative light. Is Anne suffering from some sort of reverse schizophrenia, where the self becomes little other than its outer display? Laing's female case studies demonstrate this expectation placed upon women to be more focused on what is expected of them, rather than on what they themselves would like from life. If conformity to these social expectations is lacking, then the woman is seen as insane. At this stage, I would like to put forward the argument that Western societies, in this manner, do not encourage women towards psychological 'health', but more towards a life of alienation. This may constitute an explanation for the overall higher levels of mental illness amongst women as opposed to men. My solution to this issue is to avoid living out a gender stereotype, and to live one's life as one sees fit. However, the courage that this takes may not be achievable for an individual with a low threshold of

¹⁸⁶ *ibid*, p.155

¹⁸⁷ *ibid*

psychological security. These comments are intended to demonstrate that Laing's theory can lend itself to a feminist analysis. The absence of any misogynist leanings in his work enables such an enquiry to be made. The open-ended nature of phenomenology additionally promotes such an analysis because the construction of the theory does not have to involve omitting elements that do not fit into a dogmatic schema such as that found in psychoanalysis.

A further benefit

of Laing's theoretical framework is that it maintains a relevance to lived experience which may be lost in other perspectives. Laing's work is of benefit to those who may be having difficulties in their familial environment. The relevance of theory to lived experience is something that, if lost, could consign academia to perpetual irrelevance. Human experience, itself, transcends even language and culture at its most extreme. It is the most traumatic and pleasant experiences for which we tend to be lost for words. I have experienced indescribable pain when I have been ill in the past. There are no words to match the experience that I underwent. Experiences which are not culturally validated tend to be seen as insane or mystical, as Laing argues in *The Politics of Experience*. Any theory which regards human experience as purely bound by language dismisses that experience as a quality in itself, and leaves humanity in a prison of language, bound forever. I wish to make it clear at this juncture that I am not saying that culture and language do not shape experience to a large degree. I merely wish to suggest that experience can transcend language and culture.

It could be considered that some small spaces of new freedom are available for women in contemporary society. Processes of detraditionalisation mean that

women may be able to leave their families and seek paid employment. However, these spaces are subject to the retrograde view of women that appears to largely dominate our culture. The idea of the family as an invented group, which derives from *Reason and Violence*, could be used as an argument that we invest too much emotionally in what is actually an arbitrary, contingent social formation. With regard to *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, in addition to Laing's other detailed female case studies, Laing resurrects the tragedy of women's lives in a manner which many others may find echoes of their own lives in. One can only wonder whether these individuals ever managed to find happiness, or whether their despair devoured them for the remainder of their existences. In this chapter, I hope to have demonstrated the relevance of Laing's theory as one which can be developed in order to produce a feminist analysis. I wish to emphasise again the point made at the beginning of this chapter: my arguments here are not intended to be of a causal nature. Not all women will be crushed by processes of socialisation. My main intention in this chapter has been to demonstrate the lack of textual evidence to suggest that Laing was biased against women, and the lack of empirical evidence to support the idea of schizophrenia being a 'female malady.' The next chapter will examine left-wing critiques of Laing, and those by Jacoby and Sedgwick, in particular.

8) Left-Wing Critiques of Laing

This chapter examines the left-wing critiques of Laing. The first section analyses Jacoby's (1977) critique of Laing which is provided in his text *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing*. This section will additionally utilise the wider Frankfurt School critique of existentialism in order to draw in the wider theoretical influences that impact upon Jacoby's criticism of Laing. Jacoby was supervised by Marcuse for his thesis, which was eventually published as *Social Amnesia*.¹ The next section will appraise Sedgwick's critiques of Laing. This occurs across two separate texts: Sedgwick's chapter in the text edited by Boyers entitled *R.D. Laing and Anti-Psychiatry* (1974),² and Sedgwick's chapters on Laing in his text *Psycho Politics* (1982).

Jacoby's Critique of Laing

An initial problem with Jacoby's critique of Laing is contained within the very title of his text. The categorisation of Laing's work as occurring within the orbit of 'conformist psychology' is highly problematic. The effort to provide an alternative theoretical psychology which is opposed to the prevailing orthodoxies of the day can be seen as one of Laing's main projects. Jacoby does acknowledge this issue. He states that it is '...unjust to include Laing and Cooper'³ within this grouping, since 'the intent of their psychology is political and critical...'⁴

However, residues of this point at issue do remain throughout Jacoby's critique.

¹ This information was provided by my supervisors, Matt Connell and Conrad Lodziak.

² A further version of this text was published in 1972 as edited by both Boyers and Orrill.

³ Jacoby, R, (1977), **Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing**, Hassocks, Harvester Press, p.131

⁴ *ibid*

Furthermore, the issue of Laing and Cooper's work being examined together is additionally noted as problematic by Jacoby. He suggests that:

...it should be emphasized that while no distinction is drawn here between Laing and Cooper, this does not mean that they are identical... The justification for limiting this discussion to Laing and Cooper is found in their theoretical closeness...⁵

The difficulty contained within appraising Laing and Cooper in such a manner is one which I have raised as a recurring problem in the critiques of Laing on more than one occasion in this thesis. The above comments by Jacoby appear to serve as a damage limitation exercise which is intended to compensate for the deficiencies created by his structuration of the material he selects to study.

Jacoby's main criticisms of Laing are closely interrelated. Despite this, I am separating out each one in order to closely examine each element. The first aspect of Jacoby's critique that I wish to examine is his perception of Laing's work as lacking in criticism of society, and as lacking in a coherent view of society itself. Early on in Jacoby's chapter, he argues that in Laing and Cooper, 'the critique of society is degraded to externals against the inner drift of their own work.'⁶ Jacoby later presents a quotation from Laing which refers to his concept that schizophrenia is a strategy created by schizophrenics in order to live in an untenable situation.⁷ Jacoby critiques this on the basis that '...the content of this unlivable reality is whittled down to that of interpersonal relations, especially of the family...'⁸ However, are not familial relations themselves infected by the kind of culture that they are produced and reproduced within? In this respect, Jacoby contradicts other criticisms that he

⁵ *ibid*, p.132

⁶ *op. cit.*, p.131

⁷ *ibid*, p.133

⁸ *ibid*

makes by not applying his criticisms of Laing and Cooper to his own remarks, particularly Jacoby's identification of reification within their work. This latter aspect will be appraised shortly.

It would have been arguably one of the most significant achievements historically within theory if Laing had managed to produce a text which worked from the individual, through mediating groups such as the family, through to wider society itself. However, his texts may have then been criticised for a loss of focus. The fact that Laing's sphere of analysis remains limited to the inter-personal realm is a necessary component required for such an examination to occur. Wider social criticism was not Laing's main project, despite some of his comments in this direction. Therefore critiques on this basis fall short in terms of matching Laing's aims, and proceeding appropriately from that origin. The further recurring issue of criticising Laing for a lack of inclusion of aspects that the critic would like to have perceived again is a problem here.

Jacoby claims that because social criticism is not foregrounded in Laing's work, it is therefore '...a front for establishment psychology, [and] political passivity...' ⁹ I am aware of no textual evidence from Laing's work to support the first assertion. The latter one is derived from the alleged absence of social critique within Laing's work. Particularly in *The Politics of Experience*, some minor criticism of capitalism and Western culture is provided. However, I wish to examine this later in this section, as it provides a good counterpoint to other related criticisms made by Jacoby. He claims that

⁹ *ibid*, p.131

While there are sufficient statements designating the family as a mediating agency between society and the individual, in the main it is accepted as the cause of social oppression and not also its victim.¹⁰

This criticism is repeated in slightly different forms on two other occasions within Jacoby's chapter.¹¹ No quotations from either Laing or Cooper are provided by Jacoby to support his above statement. The absence of an explicit comment upon this matter is taken as indicative of an acceptance of the family as the cause of social oppression. I am aware of no evidence in Laing's work to validate Jacoby's claim. However, Laing was aware that the family was impacted upon by wider social relations. I have provided a quotation from Laing's interview with Scorpio in 1969 where Laing states that he views the nuclear family as a peculiar form of social grouping that has occurred specifically in a certain historical form of society in my chapter on Mitchell.¹² This flags up the importance of examining interviews with an author as well as their texts, since interviews may provide clarifications of their project which may not be so clearly articulated within their published works.

However, some validity in Jacoby's critique can here be perceived.

...The family does not exist in a no-man's land. It is snarled in a historical dynamic; it has changed in the past, and it is changing now. It is as much victim as victimizer.¹³

It may have been beneficial for more comprehensive discussions of how the specific historical form of the family impacts upon its members to have been

¹⁰ *ibid*, p.133

¹¹ These occur on p.137 and p.139.

¹² Scorpio, F, (1969), Dr Ronald Laing Talks With Felix Scorpio, **IT**, No.59, July 4-17, p.7

¹³ **Social Amnesia**, p.139

included in Laing's work. However, the crucial issue is whether this may have produced a loss of focus in his work. A class analysis could create the difficulty of pre-defining the research in such a manner that it may result in simply confirming only what it set out to find. Nevertheless, Laing was aware of the problem of the impact of wider society upon the individual and the family as a mediation between the two. Some of his most explicit comments upon this matter are provided in Laing's paper entitled *The Obvious*, which was presented at the *Dialectics of Liberation* conference in 1967.¹⁴ Marcuse also presented a paper at this event. In *The Obvious*, Laing argues that: '...the intelligibility of social events requires that they be always seen in a context that extends both spatially and in time. The dilemma is that this is often as impossible as it is necessary.'¹⁵

Therefore Laing, during the period of his work which Jacoby is critiquing, demonstrates that he was himself well aware of this issue with his work.

As we begin from micro-situations and work up to macro-situations we find that the apparent irrationality of behaviour on a small scale takes on a certain form of intelligibility when one sees it in context... These larger contexts do not exist out there on some periphery of social space: they pervade the interstices of all that is comprised by them.¹⁶

The example that Laing provides is that of seeing the behaviour of a person diagnosed as psychotic as intelligible within their wider family context. It could accordingly be posited that placing individuals within a broader context was one of Laing's aims. Jacoby's criticisms suggest that this aspect of Laing's work

¹⁴ I have referred to Laing's paper earlier in this thesis, in my chapter on Deleuze and Guattari, who raise similar criticisms to those made by Jacoby.

¹⁵ Laing, R.D, **The Obvious**, (paper presented in 1967), in Cooper, D, (ed), (1968), **The Dialectics of Liberation**, Harmondsworth, Penguin, p.15

¹⁶ *ibid*

should have been expanded. One can comprehend Jacoby's frustrations here, despite the limitations that I have noted above. However, Jacoby's comments can be seen as productive criticisms highlighting avenues for extending Laing's work. Laing notes that there is:

...a theoretical and practical problem of finding the mediations between the different levels of contexts... The intermediate systems that lie on this range have to be studied not only in themselves, but as conditioning and conditioned media between the individual parts and the whole.¹⁷

It is surprising that Jacoby's critique of Laing demonstrates no awareness of *The Obvious*, particularly since Marcuse was one of his tutors. Jacoby restricts his criticism to Laing's main published texts. In *The Obvious*, Laing argues that '...the context of the individual at first appears as his immediate network, and the contexts of that network come into view as larger social frameworks that have not by any means been adequately identified.'¹⁸ Laing notes that there is a gap between theory and empirical research in this respect, since '...we can theoretically reach farther than our empirical research can go...'¹⁹

Jacoby is criticising Laing from the societal end of the scale. Some of Jacoby's criticisms relating to the position of the family within society contradict themselves within the overall flow of his argument. In some instances, Jacoby is claiming that the family is influenced by wider social relations, and that Laing takes this insufficiently into account.²⁰ At other occasions within his critique of Laing, Jacoby claims that the

¹⁷ *ibid*, p.16

¹⁸ *op. cit.*, p.20

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ **Social Amnesia**, p.136 and p.137

family cannot form a basis for social criticism.²¹ Jacoby's view of the family and its role as a social mediator is rendered rather imprecise by his differing accounts of it. The family can be a means of oppressing and controlling its members, and this may reflect the wider repression at large in society. Jacoby appears to be somewhat naïve with regard to families and the destructive influence that they can take upon their members' lives.

Jacoby may be labouring the somewhat obvious point that powerful wider social forces directly structure the lives of individuals, and indirectly through the mediating agency of the family. However, this hardly constitutes a relevant criticism of Laing, who makes this very point himself. Alternatively, Jacoby, who almost drifts into a social determinism, might be interpreting Laing's focus on the family as an indication that Laing has reduced social determinism to family determinism. Nevertheless, this would be a bizarre criticism since Laing is radically opposed to any kind of determinism. This, it is clear, is a major source of Laing's opposition to positivism in psychology, and also to the prescriptive use of psychoanalytic concepts in shaping the (mis)diagnosis of individual patients. It is instructive here to note that Laing cites John MacMurray's *The Self as Agent* (1953) as an important influence in the development of his thought.²² Laing is acutely aware that however powerful the social forces impinging on the family and the individual, the latter retains the capability of exercising agency, however insignificant that may be.

This reminder of Laing's unwillingness to embrace determinism in any shape or form, in conjunction with the numerous ways in which he highlights the

²¹ *ibid*, p.138

²² **The Divided Self**, p.23

sickness of conformity to self-alienating social norms, does enable a corrective to the simplistic positivist tendency in sociology evident in the 1950s and 1960s to ‘read-off’ the values, beliefs, and attitudes of individuals from their socio-economic status.²³ It is useful to bear this in mind when considering Jacoby’s criticism of Laing for ‘...the omission of a class analysis of mental illness’²⁴ within his work. It can be additionally argued that this was not a feature of Laing’s main project. However, particularly in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, and in Laing’s other substantial case studies, one would have appreciated even some brief detailing of the occupational and class backgrounds of the featured families and individuals. I feel that this may have enabled a more comprehensive perception for the reader of the wider family context, and, for example, whether financial pressures were aspects of their lives or not.

Nevertheless, information regarding these families was included in a confidential manner in the above text,²⁵ so there would have been an issue with presenting the class backgrounds of the families in respect of this. Laing’s most direct statement on such a matter occurs in *The Divided Self*.

The socio-economic factors of the larger community of which the patient’s family is an integral part are not *directly* relevant to the subject matter that is our concern. This is not to say that such factors do not profoundly influence the nature of the family and hence of the patient.²⁶

One can appreciate that structuring a psychobiography in such a manner as to include a class analysis and to fully do this justice could slant the material away

²³ I am grateful to Lodziak for noting this line of argument.

²⁴ *ibid*, p.139

²⁵ **Sanity, Madness and the Family**, p.25

²⁶ **The Divided Self**, p.180

from a study of interpersonal relations on that level itself. However, it has been noted in research on psychiatric diagnoses that ‘psychiatric disorders and suicidal attempts were more likely to occur in people facing socio-economic disadvantage...’²⁷ Nevertheless, one is here arguing with the benefit of the empirical research that has been conducted between Laing’s time of writing and contemporary times. As Laing states in the quotation from *The Obvious* that I have utilised earlier, there is a gap between what can be theorised and what can be supported by empirical evidence. Such a consideration could be useful for tempering some of Jacoby’s criticisms.

Jacoby’s criticism that ‘...society is shuffled out...’²⁸ in Laing’s work relates closely to one of his other main strands of criticism of Laing’s theory – that reification is present within it. This criticism is additionally levelled at Sartre and Heidegger’s versions of existentialism by Marcuse and Adorno respectively.²⁹ I will be drawing upon these wider theoretical influences on Jacoby’s critique of Laing as I proceed. I will additionally utilise some of Laing’s comments in *The Politics of Experience* in order to provide responses to Jacoby’s claims. Jacoby notes that Laing’s thought is influenced by both social psychology and the sociology of groups, alongside continental existentialism.³⁰ ‘Both, however, ultimately work to eat away the social context of these human relations; they reduce social relations to immediate human ones.’³¹ Jacoby suggests that ‘...the concept of society disappears to

²⁷ National Statistics, (2006), **Mental Health: 1 in 6 Adults Have a Neurotic Disorder**, [online]. Available at: www.statistics.gov.uk [Accessed 19/5/06]

²⁸ **Social Amnesia**, p.136

²⁹ Marcuse, H, (1948), **Sartre’s Existentialism**, in Marcuse, H, (1983), **From Luther to Popper**, London, Verso; Adorno, T.W, (1973), **The Jargon of Authenticity**, (trans. K.Tarnowski and F.Will), London, Routledge, (2003 Edition)

³⁰ **Social Amnesia**, p.135

³¹ *ibid*

make way for endless empirical observations on group dynamics.’³² However, this latter criticism appears to be targeted more at the study of group dynamics itself, as opposed to Laing’s work directly. Nevertheless, Jacoby proceeds to apply this criticism to Laing’s work. I would like to restate my earlier comment that to maintain focus in a piece that moved from individuals and groups through to the wider society would be extremely difficult. Jacoby’s irritation here is understandable, if unfounded as a valid criticism. The fact that Laing’s work has served to contextualise the individual within wider human networks could lend itself to a wider analysis of such networks. Jacoby critiques Laing for not taking this aspect further.

Later in his chapter, Jacoby compares the critique of Feuerbach’s work by Marx and Engels to the critique of Laing. ‘The human community shrinks to the immediacy of the I / You encounter, and this is abstracted from the historical and social reality.’³³ Jacoby additionally suggests that Laing’s work is lacking in ‘...the conception of man as activity, as praxis.’³⁴ Jacoby’s first criticism can be countered by reference to my previous comments that this aspect of his critique addresses aspects that lie outside of the realm of Laing’s main project. Jacoby’s second criticism has even less validity attached to it. He appears to have simply transposed Marx, Engels and Marcuse’s criticisms of Feuerbach onto Laing (and Cooper’s) work. The concept of praxis is as foregrounded in Cooper’s work as it is in Laing’s, particularly in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. Cooper argues that ‘the free action (or praxis) of a

³² *ibid*, p.136

³³ *op. cit.*, p.146

³⁴ *ibid*, p.147

person can destroy the freedom of another or at least paralyze it by mystification.’³⁵

Praxis is an idea that receives considerable commentary in the methodological introduction to *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. Certain wider cultural criticisms are provided by Laing in *The Politics of Experience*. Jacoby does not support his above criticisms by reference to actual quotations from Laing. He instead utilises the theoretical tradition that he is operating in in order to attempt to bolster his claims. Jacoby appears to be guilty of a further academic crime that is committed in the poor critiques of Laing – that of selective reading and identification of aspects of an author’s work. Those that do not fit are ignored (the Procrustean critique). The concept of praxis is used in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* as a means of rendering group behaviour intelligible. ‘...What happens in a group will be *intelligible* if one can retrace the steps from what is going on (process) to who is doing what (praxis).’³⁶ The objection could here be raised that Laing’s use of the term praxis differs to Jacoby’s deployment of it. However, Jacoby does state that it is human praxis as action, and the impact of this in shaping the wider environment that he is referring to.³⁷ In *The Politics of Experience*, Laing suggests that:

The inertia of human groups... which appear as the very negation of praxis, is in fact the product of praxis and nothing else.³⁸

Therefore, Jacoby’s criticism that Laing ignores praxis is somewhat rather baffling. As I have argued in my previous chapters, a Laingian

³⁵ Cooper, D, (1967), **Psychiatry and Anti-Psychiatry**, London, Tavistock, in Brown, P, (ed), (1973), **Radical Psychology**, London, Tavistock, p.134

³⁶ **Sanity, Madness and the Family**, p.22

³⁷ **Social Amnesia**, p.147

³⁸ **The Politics of Experience**, p.80

analysis of groups can lend itself to wider social criticism, and to enabling a defence of individuals who are more or less powerless within their social context. It could be argued that certain aspects of Laing's work have been ignored by Jacoby, in order for the chapter to fit into the overall theme of the text – *Social Amnesia*. It appears that Jacoby is over-stating the lack of social engagement in Laing's work in order to portray Laing as more societally blind than his work truly is. I will provide some examples of Laing's social criticism shortly, after examining Marcuse and Adorno's critique of existentialism. I wish to examine whether Jacoby is transposing their criticism of existentialism onto Laing's theory, without adapting it suitably. Marcuse's essay on *Sartre's Existentialism* (1948) has as its main locus of critique of existentialism the notion that it is a reified philosophy.

In so far as Existentialism is a philosophical doctrine, it remains an idealistic doctrine: it hypostatizes specific historical conditions of human existence into ontological and metaphysical characteristics. Existentialism thus becomes part of the very ideology which it attacks, and its radicalism is illusory.³⁹

Marcuse's criticism above runs very close to that made by Jacoby with regard to Laing's work, which I have cited previously. The idea of hypostatization refers to treating something conceptual as though it were something real. Any theory could encounter this danger.

Jacoby notes that:

³⁹ Marcuse, H, (1948), *Sartre's Existentialism*, in Marcuse, H, (1983), *From Luther to Popper*, London, Verso, p.161

...in general the Sartrean existentialism as filtered through Laing and Cooper does not contain its original weaknesses – some of which Marcuse has indicated.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, Jacoby appears to replicate Marcuse's critique in his chapter on Laing, without utilising sufficient textual evidence to support his claims. Jacoby additionally claims that Laing's radicalism is illusory by suggesting that Laing confuses mere therapy with social change.

What Laing and Cooper tend to forget is that if family and extrafamily therapy is progress over clinical therapy and analysis, this is progress in therapy, not in social theory or praxis.⁴¹

Towards the end of his chapter, Jacoby argues that: 'the writings of Laing and Cooper more and more suggest the confusion of psychic first aid with liberation.'⁴² Precisely which aspects of Laing's work Jacoby is here referring to are not stated. I am aware of no instances in Laing's work where he asserts that progress in therapy and social liberation are one and the same. Indeed, Laing's work contains few prescriptions as to how the practice of psychotherapy should be conducted. Instead, Laing provides a methodology for the approach to the study of humans and our groupings. The argument that therapy has revolutionary potential is entirely Cooper's and not Laing's.⁴³

Jacoby's view of Laing as confusing therapy with liberation is produced through his grouping together of Laing and Cooper without taking sufficiently into account the distinctions between these authors.

⁴⁰ **Social Amnesia**, pp.145-146

⁴¹ *ibid*, pp.141-142

⁴² *ibid*, p.150

⁴³ Cooper, D, (1970), **The Death of the Family**, London, Penguin, in Brown, P, (ed), (1973), **Radical Psychology**, London, Tavistock, p.170

[Laing and Cooper] tend to equate individual psychoses and madness with social liberation... Hence, the noticeable glorification of schizophrenia, especially in *Politics of Experience*, as a “natural healing process,” and “existential rebirth.”⁴⁴

I have already spent some time dispelling the hoary myth that *The Politics of Experience* contains little other than the above idea in this thesis. It is a shame, given the academic nature of Jacoby’s chapter, that he could not have engaged with some of the more concrete theories proffered in that text. He instead resorts to criticising a myth, as opposed to an actual theory. However, the above strand of critique enables Jacoby’s claims that therapy is seen as tantamount to emancipation within Laing’s work.

The affinity between Jacoby’s critique of Laing and Marcuse’s critique of Sartre is also evident in the following quotation from Marcuse.

...Against this proclamation of the absolute freedom of man, the objection arises immediately that man is in reality determined by his specific socio-historical situation, which in turn determines the scope and content of his liberty and the range of his ‘choice’.⁴⁵

This argument has a similarity with Jacoby’s claims that Laing’s work lacks in a coherent conception of society, which I have reviewed earlier in this chapter.

Adorno’s critique of existentialism in *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1973) additionally displays similar criticisms of existentialism. Adorno’s critique is referred to by Jacoby in his chapter on Laing. *The Jargon of Authenticity*, by and large, criticises Heidegger’s work. However, Marcuse notes that Sartre’s *Being*

⁴⁴ **Social Amnesia**, p.132

⁴⁵ Marcuse, H, (1948), **Sartre’s Existentialism**, in Marcuse, H, (1983), **From Luther to Popper**, London, Verso, p.172

and Nothingness ‘...is in large parts a restatement of... Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*.’⁴⁶ Again, Adorno’s critique of existentialism focuses on reification as a problem with this philosophy. Whilst problematising the concepts of authenticity and inauthenticity, Adorno argues the following.

The subject, the concept of which was once created in contrast to reification, thus becomes reified... Such a philosophy need no longer be concerned with how far society and psychology allow a man to be himself or become himself, or whether in the concept of such selfness the old evil is concentrated one more time.⁴⁷

The Frankfurt School’s critique of existentialism has as its context the affiliation of Heidegger with the Nazi party during the Second World War.⁴⁸ This would seem to give Adorno’s critique an extra edge. I wish to make no comment upon whether this affiliation of Heidegger’s was a matter of expediency, or altogether more darker. My intention with this comment is to permit the reader to be aware of this historical context to the Frankfurt School critique of existentialism. Adorno’s other main line of critique of existentialism is that it is based upon the use of impenetrable language or jargon – hence the title of his text. Adorno argues that ‘by means of the magic formula of existence, one disregards society, and the psychology of real individuals which is dependent on that society.’⁴⁹ Jacoby’s critique of Laing shows a further similarity with this work of Adorno. Therefore, it does appear that Jacoby has simply transposed the Frankfurt School’s critique of existentialism on to Laing’s work, with little change or adaptation.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, p.162

⁴⁷ Adorno, T.W, (1973), **The Jargon of Authenticity**, (trans. K.Tarnowski and F.Will), London, Routledge, (2003 Edition), p.94

⁴⁸ For a text that deals with this matter, see: Wolin, R, (ed), (1993), **The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader**, (2nd ed), Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press

⁴⁹ **The Jargon of Authenticity**, p.55

Jacoby's criticism of Laing as presenting a reified theory are somewhat ironic given that Laing devotes a considerable amount of *The Politics of Experience* to the critique of reification itself. A substantial amount of social criticism is additionally present within this text. Jacoby's chapter demonstrates no awareness of these elements. Laing's critique of reification is largely directed at psychoanalysis.

Few now find central the issues of conscious and unconscious as conceived by the early psychoanalysts – as two reified systems, both split from the totality of the person,... and both exclusively *intrapersonal*.

It is the relation *between persons* that is central in theory, and in practice.⁵⁰

Jacoby claims that 'the drift of [Laing's] analysis is not distinct from that of the neo- and post-Freudians; it ignores the psychic depths and the past for the present and accessible interhuman dynamics.'⁵¹ Jacoby does appear, within this chapter, to be operating from a psychoanalytic perspective, that he clearly believes is faithful to Freud. His very criticism in the above quotation is suggestive of this, since Jacoby claims that Laing ignores the past and deeper psychic realms, which are both features of Freud's theory.

That Jacoby is himself operating from within a psychoanalytic perspective is further supported by the ease with which he uses Freudian language to (mis)represent Laing.

The ego, frightened over its own fragility, seeks endless confirmations it can neither give nor receive... Multiple

⁵⁰ **The Politics of Experience**, p.42

⁵¹ **Social Amnesia**, p.142

reflections are the opium for the multiple wounds the ego has suffered.⁵²

In this instance, Jacoby's criticism of Laing is rather incoherent. He appears to be claiming that the confirmation of one person by another, who perceives that individual as more or less who they are, is nothing but a placebo for mitigating against the psychological destruction of the self that can be occasioned within Western society. This illustrates a tendency by Jacoby to either misinterpret or misunderstand Laing's work. It additionally demonstrates an ignorance by Jacoby of the fact that he is criticising elements that Laing himself criticises. This is the case with reification, as I have already examined. 'Why do almost all theories about depersonalization, reification, splitting, denial, tend themselves to exhibit the symptoms they attempt to describe?'⁵³ Again, Jacoby appears to be oblivious to the fact that reification is critiqued by Laing. Given the prominence of Laing's critique in *The Divided Self*, *Self and Others* and *The Politics of Experience*, it is extremely difficult to confer any credibility on Jacoby's 'criticism'.

This is additionally the case with regard to Jacoby's criticism that Laing omits the idea that interpersonal relations take the form of alienated ones within contemporary society.⁵⁴ In order to make this criticism, Jacoby has to ignore the central strand of Laing's argument in *The Politics of Experience*, which consists precisely of the idea that alienation pervades all of human life to some degree, within present society. 'Our alienation goes to the roots. The realization of this is the essential springboard for any serious reflection on any

⁵² *ibid*, p.144

⁵³ **The Politics of Experience**, p.44

⁵⁴ **Social Amnesia**, p.144

aspect of present inter-human life.’⁵⁵ *The Politics of Experience* contains some of Laing’s most strident social criticism, and for this reason is arguably my favourite of Laing’s texts. The agencies that mediate between the individual and larger social groupings, such as the family and the education system, come in for some hefty critique from Laing as reproducing alienated social relations. ‘In a world where the normal condition is one of alienation, most personal action must be destructive both of one’s own experience and of that of the other.’⁵⁶ Chapter Three – ‘The Mystification of Experience’ – contains some blistering criticism of socialisation processes as constituting little other than forms of alienation. Jacoby may have perceived the fact that Laing’s analysis remains at the level of critiquing such mediating agencies as reinforcing his criticism that wider social relations are ignored within Laing’s work. However, I view *The Politics of Experience* as presenting a shift of emphasis within Laing’s work to a wider social engagement. However, this strand within Laing’s work does go into decline after the publication of *The Politics of the Family*, which in itself is essentially about alienated social relationships.

The mimicking of Marcuse and
Adorno’s critiques of existentialism continues with Jacoby’s claims that Laing’s work represents a bourgeois perspective, and serves to justify capitalist society.

...Laing and Cooper... make the elementary bourgeois error: they mistake the phenomenon specific to one historical era as universal and invariant. In brief, they take the human relations that prevail in late bourgeois society as human relations as such.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *The Politics of Experience*, p.12

⁵⁶ *ibid*, p.29

⁵⁷ *Social Amnesia*, pp.143-144

The reader should be able to perceive here that this is indeed a similar criticism to that of reification being present within Laing's work. The accusation that Laing's work is bourgeois in such a manner is one that I find almost as outrageous as Laing's feminist critics' claims that he was a misogynist. It is precisely the lack of such an elitist outlook that one finds to be of merit within Laing's *oeuvre*. Jacoby appears to be taking the absence of explicit statements against the present social organisation as evidence of support for it. The notion of existentialism as a bourgeois philosophy is criticised by Adorno in *The Jargon of Authenticity*.⁵⁸ In Marcuse's essay on *Sartre's Existentialism* similar claims are made regarding Sartre's philosophy, albeit with a greater level of validity than is found in Jacoby's critique of Laing. However, this essay does not take into account Sartre's late work, in which he himself criticises his earlier ideas. Marcuse is highly critical of Sartre's notion of freedom within *Being and Nothingness*, which he sees as legitimising domination.

...These philosophical concepts have declined to the level of a mere ideology, an ideology which offers itself as a most handy justification for the persecutors... Behind the nihilistic language of Existentialism lurks the ideology of free competition, free initiative, and equal opportunity.⁵⁹

Further residues of Marcuse's critique of Sartre are present within Jacoby's chapter on Laing. Jacoby suggests that Laing's theory of self-identity, a combination of how an individual sees themselves and how others see them, is little other than '...the theory of the spectacle; the passivity of the consumer is elevated into a theory of human identity.'⁶⁰ No explanation of how Laing's theory of self-identity precisely relates to 'the

⁵⁸ *The Jargon of Authenticity*, p.13, p.15, p.16, pp.38-39, p.100

⁵⁹ Marcuse, *Sartre's Existentialism*, p.174

⁶⁰ *Social Amnesia*, p.148

passivity of the consumer' is elaborated. As Jacoby's critique proceeds, it becomes less clearly related to the actual material that it is alleging to criticise. Marcuse's critique of Sartre takes much more care not to withdraw excessively from the orbit of what is being criticised. At this point, it is worth noting that in Wiggershaus' (1994) lengthy text on the Frankfurt School it is suggested that Marcuse and Sartre eventually moved closer towards a similar position.

With his essay on tolerance, however, Marcuse took sides with Sartre, who in 1961 had written an introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* expressing unreserved solidarity with it...⁶¹

Wiggershaus notes that the conclusions reached by both authors were very similar in terms of their comprehension of violence on behalf of the oppressed as of a legitimate nature.⁶² I am including this consideration because I do not want to create the impression in the reader that the work of the Frankfurt School and existentialism itself present diametrically opposed theories. I prefer to view them as paradigms which have large tensions between them, but from which a fruitful intellectual dialogue has been produced. Indeed, one could argue that Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* was influenced by such a dialogue.

Arguably

Jacoby's most valid criticism regards the notion that mysticism can become a form of privatism and social withdrawal. However, this occurs more at the level of a general observation than a full criticism of the mystical elements of Laing's work. The latter element does form a strand that runs through the majority of

⁶¹ Wiggershaus, R, (1994), **The Frankfurt School**, (trans. M.Robertson), Cambridge, Polity, p.611

⁶² *ibid*

Laing's work, but which receives its full expression in the closing chapters of *The Politics of Experience*.

If "our time has been distinguished... by an almost total forgetfulness of the internal world," to follow Laing, it is not to be called to life by forgetting the outer world that forgot the inner one. [...]

Mystical politics produces mysticism without politics. The very recent interviews with Laing suggest this progression.⁶³

This last remark on behalf of Jacoby is not referenced. The vast majority of the interviews with Laing that I have been able to obtain occur after the publication of *Social Amnesia*. Therefore, I cannot verify Jacoby's comment. From one perspective, I agree with Jacoby's notion that forms of meditation and spirituality can involve a withdrawal from wider social engagement. They could become a privatistic pursuit. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily have to be the case. Spirituality could form the basis of a belief system which is opposed to Western materialism. Laing's mysticism, from my reading of the latter chapters of *The Politics of Experience*, is not intended as a prescription for social retreat, but as a corrective to an ego-centric culture, where shallow greed takes precedence over lasting relationships. Self-knowledge and political engagement are not mutually exclusive.

The problem with Jacoby's above criticism is that it occurs at a juncture in his argument that follows a profound misinterpretation of Laing's mystical turn. This is not to say that some level of misunderstanding is present within Jacoby's previous criticism. Jacoby argues that: 'the assumption that mystification is a response to alienation, "inner" space to the lack of "outer"

⁶³ *Social Amnesia*, p.149

space, was advanced long ago and has gained nothing in the interim.’⁶⁴ Jacoby is here confusing spirituality and mysticism with mystification proper. Again, one can perceive a level of validity in his argument, since a preoccupation with mystical theories could lead an individual to conceive of the world in unusual ways. However, Jacoby considers that his assumption here is self-validating. He does not unpick further his linking of mysticism and mystification. He again uses Marcuse and Adorno’s work to attempt to shore up his critique, but again does not tie this concretely to Laing (or Cooper’s) work. Jacoby demonstrates no awareness that a substantial theme in Laing’s work involves the critique of mystification, both within theory and as socially produced. At no stage in Laing’s work is mystification proposed as a solution to alienation. Where Jacoby’s line of critique is derived from here (other than from the Frankfurt School) is itself mystifying. Sedgwick produces a similar line of criticism of Laing’s ‘mystical’ comments, which is evaluated in the next section.

Further misinterpretations on behalf of Jacoby regarding Laing’s work involve the limits of psychotherapy and the extent to which it can produce real change to an individual’s life. Jacoby claims that Laing suggests that therapy is tantamount to emancipation, which I have briefly referred to earlier.

...There can be talk of therapy, but therapy as therapy – not as radical therapy or social change... In this way therapy becomes self-conscious, adequate to its own notion; it does not mystify itself as radical cure or liberation while it responds to the emergency of the individual victim.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ *ibid*, p.148

⁶⁵ *ibid*, p.134

Later in his chapter, Jacoby suggests that ‘inasmuch as the limitations of family therapy are not acknowledged, the therapy begins to confuse itself with social change.’⁶⁶ I am aware of no instances where Laing asserts that therapy can be equated with social change. The first criticism is targeted at both Laing and Cooper. It must be emphasised that the idea that therapy could have such potential is entirely Cooper’s, as I have stated earlier in this chapter. However, the second quotation features in a discussion of *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. This latter text is certainly not a work devoted to prescriptions for the practice of family therapy. It is instead a study, with limited aims, of certain families where one female child has been diagnosed as schizophrenic. However, Jacoby continues his rather irritating tendency of mixing in poor criticism with good quality critical observations on the matter that he is discussing. I would have been surprised if Laing had argued against Jacoby’s notion that therapy is a limited pursuit.

...The therapy, conceiving itself as dealing with the real context, inches out to include more and more people in this context and finally is damned to impotence, confronted by more people than any therapy could hope to “treat”.⁶⁷

In an insane society, all of the population may require psychotherapy. With regard to the limits of therapy, some of Smail’s discussions in *Taking Care: An Alternative to Therapy* (1987) are worth briefly noting. Smail, for whom Laing is inspirational,⁶⁸ conceives of therapy as having a very limited scope. He views one of its best possible outcomes as demystifying the individual about the wider influences that shape their existence.

⁶⁶ op. cit., p.137

⁶⁷ ibid

⁶⁸ Lodziak, C, (2009) **Personal Communication**

...Though their stated profession and unstated interest may be to offer cure, most therapists of good will also play an inadvertently subversive role within the society which damages us so profoundly... This almost inevitably means that patients begin to criticize aspects of a social 'reality' which before they had always taken for granted...⁶⁹

It may have been interesting to see if Jacoby would have additionally levelled accusations at Smail that his conception of society is inadequate, in the same manner that he has done with Laing. In a chapter entitled 'Change: The Limits of Therapy', Smail problematises arguments regarding the efficacy of therapy. '...The actual suffering caused by the injustices and inequalities of our society cannot easily be concealed under a blanket of therapy.'⁷⁰ Jacoby is correct in arguing that the only adequate response to a sick society is social change itself. Jacoby views therapy as yet another form of mystification, in some ways. Smail suggests that:

The *actual* possible achievements of therapy may thus be summarized very briefly as establishing what is the case ('demystification'), and providing courage and encouragement.⁷¹

I view Smail's contribution in terms of arguing for a political purpose for therapy as an agent of social demystification, albeit with limited aims, as a significant one, and one that is compatible with Laing's work.

Prior to my conclusion of this section, I wish to examine another of Jacoby's mystifying criticisms of Laing – that the approach in his work constitutes a positivist one in some instances. Jacoby suggests that Laing and Cooper's work '...finally dribbles into blind

⁶⁹ Smail, D, (1987), **Taking Care: An Alternative to Therapy**, London, Constable (1998 edition), p.4

⁷⁰ *ibid*, p.90

⁷¹ *ibid*, p.4

therapy and positivism, pop existentialism and mysticism.⁷² This criticism is additionally repeated towards the end of Jacoby's chapter.⁷³ I have already dealt with Jacoby's accusations of Laing's work consisting of 'blind therapy' and 'mysticism' previously in this section. No substantial analysis of whether 'pop existentialism' is a factor in Laing's work is offered within Jacoby's piece. One wonders whether because Laing's work was popular in its day, and it operates from an existential perspective, if Jacoby has conflated the two elements. Jacoby does, however, attempt to flesh out further his claims that Laing's work contains positivist elements. Jacoby identifies the other intellectual tradition that Laing's work operates within as '...a neo-positivist social psychology and sociology focused on the group and group dynamics...'⁷⁴ Jacoby's error here is to assume that this constitutes one homogenous perspective, whereas Laing's phenomenological approach differs radically from standard methodologies.

Jacoby argues that Laing's work on the family consists of:

...endless empirical observations on group dynamics. These empirical observations skirt the antagonistic relationship that is outside the laboratory – the individual and society – in favor of the safe, sound, and verifiable one of individual and individual.⁷⁵

It is stated in the preface to *Sanity, Madness and the Family* that the majority of the interviews for that text were conducted in psychiatric hospitals.⁷⁶ I have already referred to Laing's dissatisfaction with how the interviews were carried out for the above text in my chapter on Mitchell. He was also unhappy with the

⁷² **Social Amnesia**, p.131

⁷³ *ibid*, p.149

⁷⁴ *ibid*, p.135

⁷⁵ *op. cit.*, p.136

⁷⁶ **Sanity, Madness and the Family**, p.9. This is also stated in the introduction on p.15.

fact that ‘...the majority of these interviews were conducted in our own consulting rooms, and not in the family homes...’⁷⁷ However, even a hospital consulting room is not the same environment as a laboratory, despite it still constituting an ‘unnatural’ environment. Jacoby’s comment suggests that Laing was a conventional scientist, which was not the case. Jacoby’s above criticism provides a further example of his parroting of Frankfurt School critiques, without adapting the material appropriately, since Adorno and Horkheimer are referenced by Jacoby as criticising group studies in the same vein.⁷⁸ Jacoby additionally appears to be confusing an element of positivism – empiricism – with positivism itself. He continues to ignore aspects of Laing’s work that do not fit into his argument, such as Laing’s substantial criticism of positivism as an approach to the study of humans and groups. Later in his chapter, Jacoby criticises Laing’s use of mapping within his work, which he sees as forming a ‘...move from existentialism to positivism...’⁷⁹ Mitchell additionally criticises this aspect of Laing’s work. I will briefly summarise my earlier comments from that chapter. Whilst I can perceive the value of having a system of noting the differing viewpoints of individuals in a group, I do find this strand of Laing’s work to be somewhat alienating. This element receives a more comprehensive commentary in Chapter Nine of this thesis.

I wish to conclude this section by noting that Jacoby does praise some aspects of Laing’s work, before rounding up the main problems with his critique of Laing. Jacoby notes that Laing and Cooper’s work:

...seeks to indict, not absolve, a maddening society. Their work seethes with discontent. In this as well as in their serious

⁷⁷ *ibid*, p.25

⁷⁸ **Social Amnesia**, p.135

⁷⁹ *ibid*, p.145

philosophical interests they radically diverge from the conformist psychologies.⁸⁰

However, this comment occurs in the first paragraph of Jacoby's chapter. The content of the above quotation becomes lost as the piece proceeds. Jacoby additionally claims, in the introduction to the chapter, that: 'the intention of the following is neither to sum up nor write off Laing and Cooper, but, hopefully, to be suggestive.'⁸¹ Nevertheless, given the strong way in which many of Jacoby's criticisms are asserted, this qualification becomes further diluted as the chapter proceeds. Towards the end of the chapter, Jacoby emphasises '...the strength of the writing of Laing and Cooper.'⁸² This again appears to have been included in an effort to counterbalance an over-emphasis upon certain problematic issues within Laing's work.

In conclusion, it is a shame that one of the benefits of Jacoby's critique – its deployment of Frankfurt School theory – is additionally its downfall, since the latter's critiques of existentialism are insufficiently modified by Jacoby to be relevant to Laing's work. However, it must be emphasised that Marcuse's criticism of Sartre neglects Sartre's late work. This may provide the basis for some of Jacoby's misinterpretations. Jacoby's critique is extremely repetitive in terms of the aspects that it identifies. The criticisms that Jacoby makes appear to be produced more by his squeezing of Laing's material into the orbit of a theory that is suffering from 'social amnesia', as opposed to being genuine deficiencies with the texts themselves. It is additionally disappointing that Jacoby's critique replicates the majority of the errors with the other critiques of Laing that have been reviewed thus far. Certain limited aspects of Jacoby's

⁸⁰ *ibid*, p.131

⁸¹ *ibid*

⁸² *op. cit.*, p.149

critique do have some validity. However, these tend to occur at the level of general observations on a topic, as opposed to being concretely tied to Laing's work itself.

Sedgwick's Critique of Laing

Peter Sedgwick is described as Laing's 'chief critic'⁸³ by Mullan in his text of conversations with Laing. Sedgwick's critique occurs within two different texts – a chapter within the unfortunately titled *R.D. Laing and Anti-Psychiatry* (1974), edited by Boyers, and within Sedgwick's book *Psycho Politics* (1982). The first of the two chapters within the latter text that are devoted to Laing, entitled 'R.D. Laing: The Radical Trip', is, for the most part, identical to Sedgwick's paper *R.D. Laing: Self, Symptom, and Society*, which occurs in the text edited by Boyers. This replication is not noted by Sedgwick in the customary fashion in *Psycho Politics*. However, some differences are present between the two versions, in the form of editing, corrections, and additions. Sedgwick's critique has been utilised and quoted by other critics of Laing, such as Reznek and Mitchell. Both of these instances have been referred to in the relevant chapters of this thesis. Sedgwick proposes to offer a '...scientific and logical evaluation of Laingian concepts of psychosis and its treatment.'⁸⁴ I shall argue that Sedgwick's critique of Laing is highly problematic. Furthermore, I shall attempt to show that tensions and contradictions within the structure of Sedgwick's argument itself serve to undermine the clarity of his critique of Laing. These issues will be highlighted as this section proceeds.

⁸³ **Mad to be Normal**, p.10

⁸⁴ Sedgwick, P, (1982), **Psycho Politics**, London, Pluto, p.8

First, it will be useful to provide a little background in order to attempt to make better sense of Sedgwick's stance towards Laing. Sedgwick claims to be operating from a left-wing perspective, despite very little of his critique displaying any evidence of this. The main left-wing criticism of Laing – that he does not engage to a sufficient degree with wider social forces – is put forward by Sedgwick, in a similar vein to Deleuze and Guattari and Jacoby. Jacoby's critique is directly referred to by Sedgwick within *Psycho Politics*.⁸⁵ He notes that he is 'particularly indebted'⁸⁶ to Jacoby's critique of Laing, within a footnote. Indeed, certain of Sedgwick's criticisms of Laing are virtually identical to those produced by Jacoby. Sedgwick claims that Laing's '...radicalism was less an implication than an obscure insinuation.'⁸⁷ He further suggests that Laing's knowledge of any social groups comprising a larger unit than the family is limited.⁸⁸ I have already evaluated such criticisms previously in this thesis. Sedgwick appears to be keen to align himself with the main orthodoxies of the left-wing critiques of Laing. Sedgwick additionally criticises Laing for not maintaining the 'correct' left-wing line. 'Laing's retreat from socialism is tragic for his left-wing admirers.'⁸⁹ The precise content of this 'retreat' appears to be the product of Sedgwick's framing of Laing's career as constituting a 'radical trip' and a 'return to psychiatry' within the respective titles of his chapters on Laing in *Psycho Politics*. The evidence provided to support this by Sedgwick is flimsy at best, and ignores Laing's critiques of psychiatry within his later texts.

⁸⁵ *ibid*, p.111

⁸⁶ *ibid*, p.267

⁸⁷ *ibid*, p.103

⁸⁸ *op. cit.*, p.104

⁸⁹ *ibid*, p.103

Sedgwick is keen to portray Laing as being a Marxist at the height of his fame, but claims that Laing later reneged upon this. I have not seen any other claims of this nature within the literature on Laing that I have reviewed. These claims that Laing was a Marxist feature in the altered text in *Psycho Politics*, but are not present within the earlier version. Sedgwick provides a second-hand account from an individual claiming that Laing ‘...declared himself as a marxist’,⁹⁰ during a private lecture. Sedgwick also suggests that Laing put his name to ‘...the May Day Manifesto,... a militant and developed anti-capitalist statement...’⁹¹ in 1967. In his second chapter on Laing in *Psycho Politics*, Sedgwick states that Laing eventually denied ‘...ever having been a marxist in the political sense.’⁹² The footnote to this specific comment is illuminating. Sedgwick alleges that he confronted Laing on this issue. ‘When I reminded him that he had signed the New Left *May Day Manifesto*, he said: “Which one was that?”’⁹³ A fair amount of discussion of Sedgwick’s criticism of Laing is provided in *Mad to be Normal*. He was clearly a source of some irritation to Laing, who states that he ‘...never met Peter Sedgwick except glancingly in the early ‘70s after he had contributed to *Laing and Anti-Psychiatry*.’⁹⁴ The fact that Sedgwick uses second-hand sources, and upholds them as ‘the truth’ clearly does not add to the production of an incisive critique. Gossip and textual evidence are treated as one and the same. The fact that Laing suggests that he did not really know Sedgwick leads one to believe that the above confrontation may never have actually occurred.

⁹⁰ *ibid*, p.95. Marxism is not given a capital letter in this section from Sedgwick, nor on p.103.

⁹¹ *op. cit.*

⁹² *ibid*, p.103

⁹³ *ibid*, p.266

⁹⁴ **Mad to be Normal**, p.356

Mullan perceives Sedgwick's

criticism as indicative that the basis of it was that Laing was not following what Sedgwick considered to be '...a "correct Marxist" line...' ⁹⁵ Laing responds in the following quotation.

I thought that Peter Sedgwick in particular, his absolute impertinence, to accuse me of not following a correct Marxist line where as far as I'm concerned Marx is an important intellectual... that I respect. But I never would have regarded myself as committed to following a correct Marxist line... What the fucking hell is a correct Marxist line? ⁹⁶

Laing notes that he did read Marx whilst he was at university, ⁹⁷ and that he had friends who were members of the Glasgow Communist Party during that stage of his life. ⁹⁸ In these discussions, Laing demonstrates that he was well aware of this perspective. In his response to this aspect of Sedgwick's critique, Laing states that:

...I never could see how you could extrapolate Marxist apocalyptic revolutionary writings of the 19th century to the present-day world... I had a contempt for these ideological amateurs who'd get a few juicy phrases and think they turn around the world. [sic] ⁹⁹

Laing's discussions on this topic are of a more sophisticated nature than Sedgwick's criticism in this vein. Laing had genuine, well-considered issues with 'champagne socialists', and the application of Marx to that era. Therefore, like any intelligent individual, he was not going to conform to any orthodoxy of the Left. One considers thinking for oneself to be more of a left-wing value than blind acceptance and docility.

⁹⁵ *ibid*, p.91

⁹⁶ *ibid*

⁹⁷ *op. cit.*, p.88

⁹⁸ *ibid*, p.89

⁹⁹ *ibid*, pp.91-92

This consideration of Laing as a breaker of the left-wing front is additionally present within Sedgwick's criticism of Laing's travels in 1971 to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) and India, to '...further his long-standing interest in yoga and certain Buddhist meditations.'¹⁰⁰ No explicit criticism of this episode of Laing's life is present within the main text of *Psycho Politics*, but is instead put forward within a footnote. Sedgwick notes that Laing mentioned in an interview that genocide was occurring within Sri Lanka during the time that Laing was there.¹⁰¹

We can observe Laing's extraordinary state of dissociation from the left which enabled him to sit meditating in a monastery which was part of Sri Lanka's landowning Establishment while peasants, students and trade unionists were being slaughtered and rounded up by the government's forces of repression.¹⁰²

One finds it unusual for such a criticism to be presented within a footnote. The wider context of the left's views on this specific situation at this time is not stated, which leaves the reader somewhat devoid of a means of orientation with regard to this matter. It is disturbing that history has repeated itself in Sri Lanka in contemporary times, with the Tamil Tigers having been largely eradicated by means of military violence. Nevertheless, the issue of how to relate these situations to the theoretical content of Laing's work is problematic. Sedgwick makes no distinction in his critique of Laing between such *ad hominem* attacks, and between criticism of Laing's work. It is difficult for me to assess the validity of Sedgwick's claims, since I am unaware of whether there was substantial left-wing opposition to the events in Sri Lanka at that time. It would be of benefit if

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*, p.228

¹⁰¹ *Psycho Politics*, p.267

¹⁰² *ibid*

Sedgwick were to state his precise problem here. Is he arguing that Laing should not have gone at all, due to the situation in Sri Lanka? Alternatively, is he claiming that Laing would not have made this trip if he was truly left-wing? It would be consistent with Sedgwick's utterings to suggest that he was adopting a 'lifter than thou' form of moralising that produced a type of political correctness.

Laing responds to this element of Sedgwick's criticism in *Mad to be Normal*. Mullan argues that Sedgwick is being extremely cynical with regard to this episode in Laing's life.¹⁰³ Laing's main retort is that Sedgwick's criticism is based on an insufficient knowledge of the political context of the situation in Sri Lanka at that time.¹⁰⁴

This had to do with very complex issues about people struggling for opportunities and advantage between Asian merchants and families and politicians and lawyers. It had *nothing* to do with this simplistic thought that Sedgwick referred to.¹⁰⁵

Laing's discussion of this matter enables a greater comprehension of the situation than Sedgwick's footnote. According to Laing, Sri Lanka was (and presumably still is) split between the powerful Sinhalese and the Tamil minority. The crux of Laing's response to this element of Sedgwick's criticism is that Sedgwick had reduced the situation to a simplistic scenario. Laing recounts a story told to him by a monk where Tamils were rounded up, tied up, and then killed by a steam roller. This occurred '...while they sold coca cola and the kids and everyone turned out to cheer them being squashed into the ground... Every so often the Sinhalese do this to their next-door neighbours.'¹⁰⁶ This shows that Laing was

¹⁰³ *Mad to be Normal*, p.228

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p.244

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p.245

¹⁰⁶ *op. cit.*

well aware of the problems in Sri Lanka at the time, and so were the monks with whom he studied. If Sedgwick's criticism in this vein had occurred within a mature discussion both of the context within Sri Lanka at the time, and of the Left's views on this, it may have acquired a greater level of validity. However, since it is relegated to a footnote which is part of only a brief description of this episode in Laing's life, I consider this to be little other than a passing shot.

Sedgwick's critique displays an additional similarity with that of Jacoby in terms of the critique of the mystical elements within Laing's work. Nevertheless, this aspect of Sedgwick's critique is present within the earlier text *Self, Symptom and Society*, and was therefore produced prior to Sedgwick's incorporation of Jacoby's critique. Sedgwick does attempt to trace the lines of development of certain concepts within Laing's thought. However, some of these attempts are erroneous, particularly within *Self, Symptom and Society*, and Mitchell provides a more coherent account of the developments within Laing's work. Sedgwick argues that *The Politics of Experience* represents a radical alteration within Laing's thought. 'Why did the switch in Laing's theory take place, and why in the two directions of social radicalism and personal mysticism? It was not a necessary consequence of any of his previous doctrines.'¹⁰⁷ I consider this to be less of a substantial break in Laing's thought than Sedgwick claims it to be. I have argued previously in this thesis that elements within Laing's earliest texts do hint at the content of *The Politics of Experience*, particularly within my chapter on Deleuze and Guattari. Sedgwick's vague criticism of Laing's mysticism is closely related to his critique of the voyage. It also relates to Sedgwick's criticism of Laing's travels to Sri

¹⁰⁷ Sedgwick, P, *Self, Symptom and Society*, in Boyers, R, (ed), (1974), *R.D. Laing and Anti-Psychiatry*, New York, Octagon Books, p.39

Lanka and India. One wonders if Laing had made such a journey for purposes other than engaging in the practice of meditation, whether such criticism would have arisen.

An example of Sedgwick's poor attempt at tracing the developments in Laing's work is provided in the following quotation.

Up to his psychedelic phase, Laing accepted the typical medical and psychoanalytic descriptions of [schizophrenic] states of being... But if the schizophrenic experience was to become completely validated,... ego-loss and de-realization had to become positive virtues...¹⁰⁸

The first sentence of the above quotation can only be applied to *The Divided Self*. Even then, it omits Laing's scathing criticism of psychoanalysis itself and the positivist, medical view of the individual which is present within that text. The remainder of the quotation is based upon a complete misreading and misunderstanding of Laing's comments in *The Politics of Experience*. Laing does not state that ego-loss is a 'positive virtue', but that it may form a part of the experience of the voyage. Laing actually describes the voyage as something that may leave the individual '...lost and terrified...'¹⁰⁹

In the next paragraph,

Sedgwick then proclaims:

I do not believe that Laing's mysticism can run very deep. He himself, after all, must utilise 'the egoic mode' very frequently, in seeing patients... and so on.¹¹⁰

Laing's mysticism and the voyage become conflated within Sedgwick's argument. The voyage is not promoted by Laing as a continuous mode of being,

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*, p.44

¹⁰⁹ **The Politics of Experience**, p.103

¹¹⁰ **Self, Symptom and Society**, p.45

nor as some sort of lifestyle choice. Sedgwick is criticising his (mis)interpretation of Laing's comments. With these unclear gripes about the mystical elements in Laing's work (which I have no problems with), any similarity with the other left-wing critiques of Laing's work finishes completely. Sedgwick's critique, instead, has far more in common with the conservative psychiatric critiques of Laing than it does with those produced by Jacoby and Deleuze and Guattari. Indeed, Sedgwick has produced a template for the critique of Laing which is replicated and praised by Reznick and Clare. The more 'scientific' criticisms of Laing which are produced by Sedgwick will be discussed shortly. Since the vast majority of these elements of his critique have been replicated by others, and have already been evaluated in this thesis, they will receive only a brief treatment.

In *Self, Symptom and Society*, Sedgwick claims that Laing's texts prior to *The Politics of Experience* refrain '...from any celebration of a super-sanity achieved by the psychotic in his voyage into inner space.'¹¹¹ The usage of 'his' for all individuals suffering from mental distress within this former text of Sedgwick's appears to be highly inappropriate, particularly when he is referring to female individuals such as Julie, from the last chapter of *The Divided Self*.¹¹² This problem is corrected within *Psycho Politics*. Sedgwick appears to be one of the first of Laing's critics to have produced the line of critique that Laing celebrates and glorifies schizophrenia. In the incoherent, rambling, first chapter of *Psycho Politics*,¹¹³ Sedgwick suggests that he was '...very, very sceptical as to the value of Laing's inferences on the supposedly

¹¹¹ *Self, Symptom and Society*, p.20

¹¹² However, I am aware that this was written at a time when this was standard practice.

¹¹³ I will further expound upon the problems with this chapter later in this section.

normal and life-enhancing qualities of the schizophrenic frenzy...'¹¹⁴ As I have argued previously,¹¹⁵ this involves criticising a misinterpretation, as opposed to Laing's actual statements on this matter, which are much more cautious than they are portrayed to be.

Sedgwick has further aided the production of a standardised critique of Laing with his comments regarding Laing's allegedly 'romantic conception'¹¹⁶ of psychosis. This misreading and misinterpretation of Laing's work has additionally been parroted by Clare, who is featured in the list of acknowledgements in *Psycho Politics*. The acceptance and promotion of Sedgwick's critique of Laing as valid and unproblematic is something that one considers to have been highly damaging to the study of Laing. A simple comparison of Sedgwick's claims with the actual textual evidence contained in Laing's work demonstrates, through the effort to not read aspects into a text that are not present, that the vast majority of Sedgwick's criticisms are unfounded or invalid. Laing noted that he '...thought of writing to him and saying you're putting some sort of ideological map in front of you, in terms of which you see me, but it doesn't correspond... Meditation isn't a betrayal of the cause.'¹¹⁷ Laing additionally highlights Sedgwick's profound misreading of his work with regard to the voyage, in *Mad to be Normal*.

...What I thought was important that led me to write the thing was being lost by this misunderstanding criticism which was impervious in its tone really. It was belligerent and polemical.

¹¹⁴ **Psycho Politics**, p.6

¹¹⁵ Please see my section on Reznik's critique of Laing, and the discussion of the voyage in my chapter on Deleuze and Guattari.

¹¹⁶ *ibid*, p.124. This claim is also repeated on p.110.

¹¹⁷ **Mad to be Normal**, p.357

It wasn't the tone that you could answer in a quiet tone of voice.¹¹⁸

Laing argues that this element of his work was taken to be more substantial than it really is, since it comprises only one chapter and a small section of *The Politics of Experience*.¹¹⁹

This issue with critiques of the voyage is additionally noted by Kotowicz in his text on Laing.

The intensity of the reaction to this part of Laing's work was quite out of proportion to what Laing seemed to be stating. Views that he never held were attributed to him, views that he did hold were exaggerated, taken out of context and given a new meaning. He was, and is, said to be romanticizing madness.¹²⁰

In sharp contrast to Sedgwick's claims to be producing a 'logical' critique of Laing, his criticism is more suggestive of someone who has become 'carried away' by their own (mis)reading of the texts, and then proceeds to criticise Laing on that basis, as opposed to using any real textual evidence. The fact that Sedgwick's criticisms are replicated unthinkingly by others is an error. It is even more of an error to replicate the same methodological problem of not criticising Laing's actual work. Kotowicz further argues (as I have done) that Laing is not promoting psychosis in *The Politics of Experience*, and is, in fact, rather more hesitant about this notion than his critics seem to be aware of.¹²¹

Laing himself

points out that the idea of the voyage has precedents in his earlier work. He refers to the chapter entitled 'The Coldness of Death', which comprises the fifth

¹¹⁸ *ibid*

¹¹⁹ *ibid*

¹²⁰ Kotowicz, Z, (1997), **R.D. Laing and the Paths of Anti-Psychiatry**, London, Routledge, p.65

¹²¹ *ibid*

chapter of *Self and Others*.¹²² I have referred to this chapter in my earlier section on Deleuze and Guattari, since Laing makes use of a woman's experience in order to illustrate the irrelevance of clinical psychiatric and psychoanalytic jargon and concepts for making sense of this individual's voyage. This particular woman's experience involved feeling 'the coldness of death' without ever actually thinking that she had died.¹²³ She experienced her body as dying, and her perceptions were related to various experiences of illness within her family members.¹²⁴ In this account, Laing states that he has '...alluded elsewhere to the possibility that what we call psychosis may be sometimes a natural process of healing (a view for which I claim no priority).'¹²⁵ In *Mad to be Normal*, Laing notes that this particular example of the voyage in his work has been totally ignored.¹²⁶

...People treated it as some sort of salon fashionable idea and never related it to Jesse Watkins... This had been a hell of an experience for him that he had come through... And no one seemed to be interested that this referred to *actual people* and that I wasn't glorifying madness or anything.¹²⁷

It is of interest that, with regard to the voyage, Laing is keen to highlight the fact that his brief engagements with this notion are derived from the actual experiences of individuals. In the light of this, Sedgwick's claim that '...the "nature" of the Laingian psychosis is, in part, that of an elaborately staged artefact',¹²⁸ is rather offensive. Equally displeasing is the fact that Sedgwick fails to base this

¹²² *Mad to be Normal*, p.357

¹²³ *Self and Others*, p.74

¹²⁴ *ibid*, pp.72-76

¹²⁵ *ibid*, p.74

¹²⁶ *Mad to be Normal*, p.357

¹²⁷ *ibid*

¹²⁸ *Psycho Politics*, pp.123-124

allegation on anything from Laing's actual texts, but instead on Clancy Sigal's *Zone of the Interior* (a fictional account of Sigal's brief association with Laing), and on Mary Barnes' published text.¹²⁹ Sedgwick shows no awareness that Laing was not her therapist. Sedgwick also appears to be labouring under the illusion that the voyage was suddenly discovered by Laing magically, out of nowhere.¹³⁰ '...What can explain Laing's sudden discovery of the authentic illuminations that are conferred on fortunate schizophrenics by their delusions?'¹³¹ This particular discussion in *Self, Symptom and Society* is edited out of the version that appears in *Psycho Politics*. This may be because Sedgwick realised that he was wrong to make this assertion. Nevertheless, much of his discussion of the voyage is framed around this assumption. Laing clearly became sick of the scandal surrounding such misinterpretations of the voyage in general.

I sometimes wished I'd never written those few pages because they were picked up with such excessive dust around them, it was obscuring the whole sober, non-acid, non-trippy, ordinariness of, and misery of, a lot of that sort of thing. The idea that I was glorifying it, or recommending it was ridiculous.¹³²

However, Sedgwick does make one criticism of the voyage which has a somewhat greater level of validity than his others, which is not blindly repeated by other critics. Sedgwick suggests that the form of schizophrenia that Laing describes is not the typical one that individuals usually experience.

¹²⁹ Sigal's text does not contribute to the theoretical debates regarding Laing's work. It was only published recently (2005), despite being written in 1975, because Laing threatened legal action over the contents of the novel, which are allegedly highly disparaging towards Laing. Sigal, C, (2005), A Trip to the Far Side of Madness, **The Guardian Weekend**, December 3rd, p.109.

Barnes, M, and Berke, J, (1971), **Mary Barnes: Two Accounts of a Journey Through Madness**, Harmondsworth, Penguin

¹³⁰ **Self, Symptom and Society**, p.40

¹³¹ *ibid*

¹³² **Mad to be Normal**, p.358

The course of schizophrenia as described by Laing for those patients who have been treated by his methods resembles only one type of schizophrenic career: the case of the acute psychotic episode,...which clears up after its first appearance without any further sequel in the patient's life.¹³³

There is some evidence to support Sedgwick's argument here. In one of the Mental Health Foundation's booklets on schizophrenia, it is noted that: 'About a third of people who experience an episode of this sort never have another, while others may have continuing problems and repeated episodes.'¹³⁴ Therefore, a proportion of around a third of individuals who experience what is seen as schizophrenia only have one episode. However, Sedgwick's use of empirical evidence, only a few pages before the above comments, rather contradicts his own argument. He cites a number of studies which showed favourable results when medication was not given to psychotic patients.¹³⁵ Sedgwick then claims that:

...the model of a condition that will terminate itself if left to run its natural limits, and will only be worsened if the physician meddles with it, is an ancient but reputable concept in medicine...¹³⁶

It could be argued here that Sedgwick is referring to different aspects of schizophrenia, so he is therefore not directly contradicting himself. However, it is the lack of consistency of argument which is troubling, alongside the fact that Sedgwick appears to be wholly unaware of these tensions. I will expose further of these examples of tensions and contradictions later in this section. There are a number of problems with the quotation from Sedgwick that I

¹³³ **Psycho Politics**, p.122

¹³⁴ Zeman, S, (1997), **Understanding Schizophrenia** (Mental Health Foundation Booklet), [online]. Available at www.mentalhealth.org.uk [Accessed 29/9/08], p.1

¹³⁵ **Psycho Politics**, p.118

¹³⁶ *ibid*

have used, which raises the idea that schizophrenia does not typically take the form of only one episode. Firstly, he refers to patients that have been treated by Laing's methods. At no stage in Laing's work does he prescribe methods of treatment, so these methods are assumed or inferred by Sedgwick. Secondly, Sedgwick does not direct the reader to any specific instances within Laing's texts where Laing states that schizophrenia occurs only within one episode. Since I am unaware of any such examples, this is a further inference or assumption. The comments that this criticism is couched in serve to further undermine what is an interesting point, even if it is one that is unfounded within its relation to Laing's actual work. Sedgwick presents Laing as someone who is intentionally lying about this matter, and as someone who does not have a sufficient knowledge of schizophrenia to be making such comments.

For anyone with a knowledge of severe mental illness and the fate of its victims, the only possible conclusion can be that Laing is talking about a 'schizophrenia' quite different from the range of the disorders encountered under that label by other practitioners... For the counsellor or befriender of the schizophrenic with a recurring state of illness, Laing's work appears as either misleading or irrelevant.¹³⁷

The very notion that

schizophrenia is real is an assumption that underpins much of Sedgwick's criticism of Laing. This strand influences Sedgwick's 'scientific' criticism of Laing, which is replicated by other critics, and which will be briefly discussed shortly. The idea that schizophrenia is real is one that Sedgwick attempts to reinforce by emotional appeals to the reader, as opposed to through well-considered argument. The above quotation is an example of such an appeal. In the poor first chapter of *Psycho Politics*, Sedgwick makes use of a story about

¹³⁷ *ibid.*, p.122

‘...two parents of schizophrenic children...’¹³⁸ and himself giving a talk to a group of trainee social workers, who appeared to have absorbed the critique of psychiatry, and were, as a result, very critical of Sedgwick and the parents’ claims that schizophrenia is a real illness. According to Sedgwick, the situation became very hostile. Rather than working through the nature of the hostility, Sedgwick simply dismisses it by using a quotation from one of the parents. ‘...Only a few years ago, I read Laing and accepted his story completely – before we had any knowledge at home of what these things were really like.’¹³⁹ Precisely what ‘story’ of Laing’s the parent was referring to is not stated. It is impossible to ascertain what the differences between Laing’s work, or the assumptions made about it, and the experiences of the parent were. This is only one of numerous instances of poor scholarship within Sedgwick’s work on Laing.

The reason for Sedgwick’s over-emotional approach to Laing’s work, which does severely cloud his judgement, is hinted at in *Psycho Politics*. He notes that a close relative of his was admitted into hospital in a psychotic state, and that she died not long after in the ward.¹⁴⁰ Laing notes in *Mad to be Normal* that ‘someone said that he [i.e. Sedgwick] had a sister who had been diagnosed as schizophrenic.’¹⁴¹ This is included in a discussion where Laing notes the lack of real textual engagement with his actual (as opposed to assumed) ideas which is present within Sedgwick’s attempted critique. I am aware that I am running the risk of being very harsh, and I am conscious that such an event would influence an individual’s view of mental illness, nevertheless, this does not excuse the

¹³⁸ *ibid*, pp.6-7

¹³⁹ *ibid*, p.7

¹⁴⁰ *op. cit.*, p.3

¹⁴¹ **Mad to be Normal**, p.358

poverty of Sedgwick's critique. It is a blind polemic, as opposed to a considered intellectual engagement with Laing's work.

The idea that schizophrenia is real links with Sedgwick's 'scientific' criticisms of Laing, which are parroted by others, particularly the conservative psychiatric critics. Since these criticisms have been dealt with previously,¹⁴² they will receive only a brief treatment. However, it is worth noting that Sedgwick is the origin of much of this line of critique. The same comments are found within both *Self, Symptom and Society*, and *Psycho Politics*, although there are minor rearrangements and edits of the material. Sedgwick criticises the fact that the study of 'normal' families (what would have been Volume Two of *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, the 'control' group) was never produced.¹⁴³ From this, he argues that:

...the descriptions of the girls' families in the 1964 study contain remarkably little that might be specifically schizogenic... The theoretical framework outlined in the introduction is again non-specific to schizophrenia...¹⁴⁴

I would like to remind the reader that neither of these criticisms fully address the actual stated aims of *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. The main aim of the study is to investigate whether what is seen as schizophrenia is more socially intelligible than has previously been supposed. This provides an explanation for the tangential nature of Sedgwick's second criticism in the above quotation. The theoretical framework of *Sanity, Madness and the Family* is centred around the social intelligibility of behaviour and experience, not schizophrenia itself. I

¹⁴² Please see my earlier sections on Reznek and Clare's critiques of Laing.

¹⁴³ *Self, Symptom and Society*, p.26

¹⁴⁴ *ibid*, p.27

disagree considerably with Sedgwick's first comment, and have argued against this type of claim in my chapter which provides a feminist reading of Laing.

Sedgwick's criticism here is focussed around his desire to look for the cause of schizophrenia.¹⁴⁵ He notes that *Sanity, Madness and the Family* has other aims than this, but does not permit this awareness to temper his critique.¹⁴⁶ This form of critique has little other substance than that Laing did not create the sort of study that Sedgwick would have liked to view. Sedgwick states that he studied in the area of the 'psychological sciences'¹⁴⁷ in *Psycho Politics*, so he is somewhat influenced by a 'scientific' perspective. However, with regard to Sedgwick's claims to be a more authentic left-wing representative than Laing, one can perceive little other than a conservative psychiatric stance within these criticisms.

At this juncture, I want to provide some comments that I have not previously raised. I find the very idea of the scientific nature of mental 'illness' to be itself a highly unscientific concept.¹⁴⁸ Science can take the form of producing a hypothesis, regarding which the attempt should then be made to disprove that hypothesis as rigorously as possible. Where has the effort been made to disprove the hypothesis of the existence of mental illness? Attempts to find a biological basis for schizophrenia have been, thus far, inconclusive. As I have stated in an earlier chapter,¹⁴⁹ current research is moving more towards traumatic life experiences as influences in the psychotic

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p.28

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Psycho Politics*, p.3

¹⁴⁸ Despite being critical of science in some respects, I do consider there to be value in the conventional scientific method, provided that it is applied coherently to the object of study, and that it is not being used inappropriately. Clearly this involves a different methodology to Laing's 'science of persons'. Ben Goldacre's weekly 'Bad Science' column in *The Guardian* points out the unscientific nature of allegedly scientific studies.

¹⁴⁹ Please see my section on empirical evidence in Chapter Seven.

experience. Other than Laing, and Szasz (from a right-wing approach), little effort has been made to disprove what remain hypothetical constructs. From this perspective, *Sanity, Madness and the Family* is much more scientific than its critics claim. It contributes to a 'science of persons' as opposed to an alienated science which treats humans as mere objects. Laing provides a similar comment to my above discussion in *The Politics of Experience*.

Many people are prepared to have faith in the sense of scientifically indefensible belief in an untested hypothesis. Few have trust enough to test it.¹⁵⁰

Sedgwick's 'scientific' criticisms sit very badly with his attempts at criticising the positivist approach to psychology, which he notes in his poorly-crafted first chapter of *Psycho Politics*. This is one example of the unresolved tensions within Sedgwick's chapters on Laing, which greatly undermine the coherence of his arguments. With regard to the variation in diagnoses that an individual may receive, Sedgwick notes that such classifications can be seen as '...hypothetical constructs of our own devising...'¹⁵¹ Such considerations are not brought to bear upon Sedgwick's claims that schizophrenia is real, and that Laing can be criticised on this basis. In his second specific chapter on Laing, Sedgwick suggests the following.

...The battle against clinical positivism remains as urgent as ever... Laing's capacity to entertain and dramatise alternative models of psychic deviancy remains a valuable resource, the weapon of the sceptic against categories which tend to congeal in the hands of the classifiers with vast social, chemical and even surgical powers over those classified.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ *The Politics of Experience*, p.118

¹⁵¹ *Psycho Politics*, p.23

¹⁵² *ibid.*, p.110

Despite the validity of Sedgwick's praise for Laing in the above quotation, his criticisms which I have previously discussed are of a positivist nature, and do rely upon accepting the classification of schizophrenia as being a correct entity. At the end of *Self, Symptom and Society*, Sedgwick suggests that 'any critique of Laing cannot possibly answer him by brandishing the latest piece of blotting paper on which the chemical juices of a hospitalised schizophrenic have been analysed.'¹⁵³ Nevertheless, Sedgwick does attempt to criticise Laing on such a pseudo-scientific basis, so he ends up negating his own criticism.

Sedgwick simply

cannot form a consistent line of argument with regard to whether mental distress is a real illness, or whether it is simply a social construction. He oscillates between the two in an alarmingly casual fashion. This forms the basis for my dissatisfaction with the quality of his work – it is poorly organised and structured in terms of failing to address the tensions present within the argument. Sedgwick claims that the schizophrenic is really '...a disabled victim...',¹⁵⁴ but fails to clarify what he is referring to exactly by this. Earlier in his discussion, he asserts that 'mental illness is a social construction...'¹⁵⁵ However, much of his criticism of Laing is predicated upon the assumption that mental illness, and schizophrenia in particular, is really in existence. Therefore, much of his criticism is cancelled out by the tangles, tensions and contradictions within Sedgwick's own argument. The first chapter of *Psycho Politics* contains a spectacularly feeble effort at discussing the nature of illness, in which every possible means of conceiving of illness is thrown in, with no coherent thread of argument contained therein.¹⁵⁶ In

¹⁵³ *Self, Symptom and Society*, p.50. This section is edited out of *Psycho Politics*.

¹⁵⁴ *Self, Symptom and Society*, p.46; *Psycho Politics*, p.100

¹⁵⁵ *Psycho Politics*, p.25

¹⁵⁶ *ibid*, pp.27-38

this section, he goes so far as to assert that all illnesses are social constructions, and claims that schizophrenia itself is virtually a useless label.¹⁵⁷

The other main problem with Sedgwick's criticism of Laing is that it is clustered around the assumption that anti-psychiatry is an adequate label for Laing's work, and that it is an unproblematic one. The first chapter of *Psycho Politics*, within which a fair amount of discussion of Laing is contained, is entitled 'Anti-Psychiatry, Illness and the Mentally Ill'. This is a matter which has already been dealt with in this thesis, since it is a recurring problem in the critiques of Laing.¹⁵⁸ Sedgwick labels Laing as an anti-psychiatrist despite the fact that he notes that Laing himself denied being of that order.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, Sedgwick's first text on Laing (*Self, Symptom and Society*) occurs within the collection of essays on Laing called *R.D. Laing and Anti-Psychiatry*. This text is discussed by Laing and Mullan in *Mad to be Normal*, in one of the sections where Sedgwick's 'contribution' is debated. Laing was not happy about the publication of that text. He criticises the literary agent and publisher, who, according to Laing, were admirers and friends of Cooper,¹⁶⁰ because he was done '...a publishing disservice by encouraging [his] alleged association with anti-psychiatry.'¹⁶¹ Laing suggests that many journalists were blinded by this label, and failed to correctly report his actual statements in interviews '...because they were determined to have this mythological storyline of anti-psychiatry and an anti-psychiatric movement that never existed in the way

¹⁵⁷ *ibid*, p.38

¹⁵⁸ Please see my previous sections on Clare's critique of Laing, and on Deleuze and Guattari.

¹⁵⁹ *ibid*, p.118

¹⁶⁰ *Mad to be Normal*, p.356

¹⁶¹ *ibid*

that they said.’¹⁶² According to Laing, Cooper encouraged it to intentionally confuse people.¹⁶³

Sedgwick’s writings on Laing certainly do refer to Laing and his colleagues as more or less one coherent movement. However, he does state that Laing and Cooper’s work were not identical.¹⁶⁴ Nevertheless, he conflates the two when he proclaims the existence of a Laingian ‘movement’ or ‘school’. Both are referred to as part of the ‘Laing School’¹⁶⁵ within Sedgwick’s rambling discussions in the first chapter of *Psycho Politics*. A few pages later Sedgwick proceeds to contradict himself again by suggesting that it would be wrong to think of one anti-psychiatric school of thought,¹⁶⁶ despite the fact that he is happy to lump very different theorists such as Goffman and Szasz together earlier in the chapter. Sedgwick refers to the ‘anti-psychiatry movement’¹⁶⁷ in his first chapter on Laing.

The movement for a critical psychiatry had... its leaders,... who became prophets and sages... It was R.D Laing who dominated the scene longest, as arch-seer and prophet-in-chief.¹⁶⁸

I am aware that Laing’s work was very popular. Nevertheless, Sedgwick’s above comments seem rather excessive. In his second chapter, Sedgwick refers to ‘the Laingians’¹⁶⁹ in a section discussing Kingsley Hall and Cooper’s alternative therapeutic community. He clearly was more than happy to contribute to the mythology of anti-psychiatry.

¹⁶² op. cit.

¹⁶³ ibid

¹⁶⁴ *Self, Symptom and Society*, p.2; *Psycho Politics*, p.68

¹⁶⁵ *Psycho Politics*, p.18

¹⁶⁶ ibid, p.22

¹⁶⁷ ibid, p.66

¹⁶⁸ op. cit., p.67

¹⁶⁹ ibid, p.119

Sedgwick makes some rather sweeping criticisms of what he perceives to be the anti-psychiatric movement (i.e. any theorist that broadly falls under this orbit). For example, ‘...the anti-psychiatric critics themselves are wrong when they imagine physical illness to be essentially different in its logic from psychiatry.’¹⁷⁰ No reference to any specific author is made with regard to this claim. It certainly could not be applied to Laing, because he argues, in many of his texts, that the principles of physical medicine are transferred over to psychiatry in an inappropriate manner. Psychiatry is a division of medicine, after all. Sedgwick even goes so far as to claim that critical psychologists have helped to reinforce the under-funding of mental health provision. He claims that their work:

...chimes in with the cautious, restrictive tones of the cheese-paring politician who is out to deny the priority of resource allocation for the public psychiatric services... Public psychiatry, as the result of the onslaughts of Szasz, Goffman, and Laing... has become thoroughly unpopular with the general reading public.¹⁷¹

On the one hand, Sedgwick’s plea for greater help for those in mental distress is laudable. Laing may have agreed with this. On the other hand, however, he provides no evidence to support his argument, and, again fails to draw from any of these specific authors’ work in relation to this claim.

Even worse than

Sedgwick creating the false impression of a Laingian school (it is worth recalling that Laing, Cooper and Esterson had all fallen out with each other by the

¹⁷⁰ op. cit., p.38

¹⁷¹ *ibid*, p.41

1970s¹⁷²), Sedgwick goes so far as to allege that Laing's work served as a means of indoctrinating readers, and that it became a form of orthodoxy. This is highly ironic given that Sedgwick criticises Laing for not following the 'correct' left-wing line.

...Virtually the entire left and an enormous proportion of the... reading public was convinced that R.D. Laing and his band of colleagues had produced... essentially accurate renderings of what psychotic experience truly signified. [...]

The thrust of Laingian theorising accords so well with loose romanticism and libertarianism implicit in a number of contemporary creeds and moods that it can easily generate support and acquire plausibility.¹⁷³

One finds this to be very insulting towards Laing's readers, and additionally an underestimation of the quality of Laing's work itself. This jibe appears to have little other foundation than that individuals were unwilling to listen to Sedgwick's criticism of Laing at the time. (He notes this before the above quotation. The story of Sedgwick and the parents of schizophrenics gaining a hostile reception from an audience of trainee social workers appears after this quotation.) Sedgwick claims that his criticism of Laing was produced in order to combat '...the potential tenacity of Laing's influence upon future generations of the credulous...'¹⁷⁴ Additionally, one finds this to be offensive. In this respect, Sedgwick's aim of his critique fails completely, since it is of such a poor quality. Any reasonable intellectual with a knowledge of Laing's actual work, which has

¹⁷² **Mad to be Normal**, pp.280 – 281. Laing states that his break with Esterson was a total one, but he kept in touch with Cooper. Laing states that Esterson did not write any of *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, but he was presented as a joint author because of the extent of his research for the text. Ibid.

¹⁷³ **Psycho Politics**, p.6

¹⁷⁴ *ibid*, p.8

been read accurately, will be capable of noting the severe errors in Sedgwick's criticism.

In conclusion, this evaluation of Sedgwick's critique has somewhat taken this thesis in a full circle, since Sedgwick provides the template for much of the erroneous criticism of Laing. It is ironic that an allegedly left-wing author has produced the standardised line of critique which is replicated by the conservative psychiatric critics. What is most alarming is not just that Sedgwick's criticism is unthinkingly reproduced by others, but that the same sloppy approach to Laing's work is also reproduced. There is little real textual engagement in Sedgwick's work. It is more a critique of what he perceives to have been the *zeitgeist*. Gossip is taken as seriously as actual textual evidence. Sedgwick seeks to create a scandal around Laing's work, as opposed to engaging with it on its own terms. Sedgwick's critique is dangerously misleading, in a similar vein to Showalter's attempt at criticising Laing. It is certainly not what Sedgwick claims it to be – a scientific and logical evaluation of Laing's work. In the next chapter, I will be providing some of my own criticism of certain aspects of Laing's work, and drawing upon an excellent critique taken from an interview with Laing.

9) Further Sources of Critique

This chapter will provide some of my own criticism of Laing with regard to certain aspects of his work. In particular, I will be examining Laing's use of mapping and its notational representation within his work. I will additionally be evaluating Laing's comments on the nature of birth within his later texts. These aspects of his work receive only a brief treatment from Laing's other critics, which will be drawn upon at the relevant junctures. They fall outside of the main standard criticism of Laing's work. Both mapping and Laing's comments on birth are elements of his work that one finds to be the least engaging. To an extent, they do not contribute to what I read Laing for. The more critical aspects of Laing's texts are the most engaging from my perspective. However, I wish to avoid producing criticism that replicates the same errors as those that I have already identified previously in this thesis. Therefore, I will be looking at the lines of development of these ideas within the chronological order of the texts that they feature in, and then seek to check my comments against the way that these concepts are embedded within those texts. There is a need to refer criticism back to the texts themselves, because I wish to avoid the problem of abstracting these elements from the texts.

Mapping

In order for the reader to be clear with regard to precisely which element of Laing's work is being referred to by mapping, and Laing's use of notational sets, I am providing the below quotation as an example. It is taken from the appendix

of *Self and Others*, entitled 'A Notation for Dyadic Perspectives'. It is used as a means of noting the different perspectives of individuals in relation to each other.

The following is a short 'exercise' in this area, using a simple notation.

the own person, p
 the way the own person sees himself, $p \rightarrow p$
 the way the own person sees the other, $p \rightarrow o$

Similarly,
 the other person, o
 the way the other person sees himself, $o \rightarrow o$
 the way the other person sees the own person, $o \rightarrow p$
 the way the own person, p , views the other's, o 's, view of himself,
 $p \rightarrow (o \rightarrow o)$
 the way the own person, p , sees the other's, o 's view of him,
 $p \rightarrow (o \rightarrow p)$ ¹

This is an aspect of Laing's work that I have found to be very alienating. It is very different to his other contributions. However, is this a valid basis for critiquing this element of Laing's work? Other critics are happy to criticise Laing because they dislike an aspect of his work, but one does not consider this to be the correct methodological approach to producing criticism. An examination of the ways in which mapping is utilised within Laing's work renders it more intelligible than it first may seem. I wish to examine this shortly.

I have referred to my issue with this aspect of Laing's work briefly in my chapter on Mitchell's critique. She correctly notes that mapping features within *Interpersonal Perception* and *The Politics of the Family*, but fails to state that the origin of this

¹ **Self and Others**, pp.174 – 175. The above quotation reproduces the exact format of this within the text.

strand of Laing's work is within *Self and Others* itself.² Mitchell criticises this aspect of Laing's work because she sees it as flawed in terms of Laing's aim of contributing to a science of persons, which addresses individuals and groups within personal terms.

The mathematical formulations... must seem to most people to be further removed from an ordinary 'language of persons' than the 'defensive' and depersonalizing way of expressing things that Laing originally objected to in Freud.³

Kotowicz agrees with this line of critique. He sees Laing's use of mapping as '...going in the opposite direction from the phenomenological descriptions that we find in *The Divided Self*...' ⁴ At first, I did agree with these comments. However, after applying my principle of referring my criticism back to the texts themselves, my perspective on Laing's use of mapping, and notational sets as a form of representation of this, has changed. It is more intelligible than it first appears, and has more of a clear relation to Laing's aim of creating a science of persons than is apparent from the above criticisms.

In the 'Preface to the Second Edition' of *Self and Others*, Laing states that:

Some of the puzzles posed by the concept of unconscious phantasy may be resolved by bringing into play the theory of mapping... As a function, phantasy can be regarded as an operation of mapping, from any domain of experience to any range of experience.⁵

² Mitchell, J, (1974), **Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical Reassessment of Freudian Psychoanalysis**, Harmondsworth, Penguin, (2000 edition), pp.246-248

³ *ibid*, p.248

⁴ Kotowicz, Z, (1997), **R.D. Laing and the Paths of Anti-Psychiatry**, London, Routledge, pp.40-41

⁵ **Self and Others**, p.7

The problematic nature of unconscious phantasy forms a substantial amount of discussion within the first chapter of this text. Laing uses mapping, within this chapter, as a means of examining different ‘modes of experience,’⁶ such as imagination, memory and perception. Through investigating the way in which Laing deploys mapping, it becomes clearer that it is used by him as a means of noting and analysing these differing modes of experience, along with (in Laing’s term) ‘operations’ that are performed upon experience, such as projection. In the chapter on ‘Collusion’, Laing inserts notations into a quotation from Buber.⁷ The alternative to using such notations is to state that, for example, Sam thinks that Graham thinks that she thinks that he thinks that she does not like him. To state this in notational sets is, however, a rather clearer way of stating this. This is where some of the value lies in this method of Laing’s – it saves using an endless tortuous, confusing, sentence. The use of such notations, within the main text of *Self and Others*, is largely kept to a fairly simple form. Laing states in the appendix that different modes of experience are a feature of interpersonal life, and that this form of notation could be an aid to creating valid inferences.⁸ ‘There could be no greater mistake than to suppose that these issues are mere ‘theoretical’ complexities, of little practical relevance.’⁹

The way in which the use of mapping is embedded within this text does suggest that Laing saw this method as contributing, rather than detracting, from a science of persons.¹⁰ This is additionally the case with regard to its use within *Interpersonal Perception*.

⁶ *ibid*, pp.30-31

⁷ *ibid*, p.109

⁸ *op. cit.*, p.174

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ I am unaware of any specific commentary by Laing on this particular aspect of his work within interviews.

Laing states that the 'Interpersonal Perception Method' (which is a more sophisticated version of the notations discussed above):

...takes the fulcrum of understanding away from the professionally developed and controlled transference-countertransference relationship and places it inside the dyadic experience and interaction of everyday life, where [these] processes commingle [sic] in ways that are only beginning to be studied, much less understood.¹¹

This provides a further example of Laing's emphasis on the 'real life' relevance of the use of mapping and notational sets. Sedgwick provides some criticism of this text, which I have not discussed in my previous chapter. (Mitchell's retort, however, has been previously noted.) Sedgwick suggests that the assumptions of *Interpersonal Perception*, and the method itself, are largely conservative ones.¹² 'The postulates of the study could hardly be in greater contrast with the rest of Laing's work.'¹³ Since Sedgwick does not place this text within the wider lines of development of this aspect within Laing's work, he treats it as further removed from other texts than it actually is. Confusingly, Sedgwick claims, only a few lines later, that: '*Interpersonal Perception* does not, however, represent a break or interlude in the development of Laing's thought.'¹⁴

The latter of Sedgwick's assertions above is valid. However, the theoretical and methodological sections of *Interpersonal Perception* do not sharply contrast with the rest of Laing's *oeuvre*. Much of the theoretical review is concerned with the critique of psychoanalysis and other perspectives, since they insufficiently deal with the

¹¹ **Interpersonal Perception**, pp.38-39

¹² Sedgwick, P, **Self, Symptom and Society**, in Boyers, R, (ed), (1974), **R.D. Laing and Anti-Psychiatry**, New York, Octagon Books, p.30

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*

interpersonal realm.¹⁵ Laing is critical of approaches that assume that each person in a nexus only has one perspective on each other, where many levels of perspectives could actually be in existence, and each influences the other. ‘The failure to see the behaviour of one person as a function of the behaviour of the other has led to some extraordinary perceptual and conceptual aberrations that are still with us.’¹⁶ A key feature of the Interpersonal Perception Method is to not abstract the individual from their wider social relations. Laing notes that the method aims to overcome difficulties that originate from approaches that split the ‘inner’ world of experience, and the ‘outer’ world.¹⁷ He additionally argues that these problems are substantial, since ‘there is no simple isomorphism running from the relation of self to self, through person to person, to person and society.’¹⁸ Therefore, *Interpersonal Perception* can be seen as a text which has more coherence as a feature of Laing’s work than can be perceived by an examination of the empirical method (matching various levels of perspectives between individuals), and Laing’s use of notations alone.

Laing’s use of mapping

is further developed within *The Politics of the Family*. A substantial amount of Part Two of this text makes use of mapping, and contains some of Laing’s most explicit comments on this element of his work, particularly in the chapter devoted to this. He notes that both projection and introjection are ‘mapping operations’¹⁹ that can be performed upon experience. Examples of projection are discussed earlier in the text, with either sets, or single letters, being used. Many

¹⁵ **Interpersonal Perception**, p.3 and pp.6-8

¹⁶ *ibid*, p.8

¹⁷ *ibid*, p.37

¹⁸ *op. cit.*, p.137

¹⁹ Laing, R.D, (1969), **The Politics of the Family and Other Essays**, New York, Vintage, p.117

of these examples are to do with projection upon family members, or more specifically, the projection of one generation of a family upon younger family members.

Each generation projects onto the next, elements derived from a product of at least three factors: what was (1) *projected* onto it by prior generations, (2) *induced* in it by prior generations, and (3) its response to this projection and induction...

As we say, Johnny is the ‘image’ of his grandfather.²⁰

In Part Two of *The Politics of the Family*, Laing resumes his discussion of the ‘Forms of Interpersonal Action’, which constitute Part Two of *Self and Others*, and are drawn upon in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* and *The Politics of Experience*. In *Self and Others*, in the chapter on collusion, Laing notes that he uses the term ‘projection’ in a different way to the psychoanalytic use of the term.

The one person does not use the other merely as a hook to hang projections on. He strives find in the other, or to induce the other to become, the very *embodiment* of projection. The other person’s collusion is required to ‘complement’ the identity self feels impelled to sustain.²¹

The concrete relation of Laing’s

use of notational sets, and mapping, to lived experience does render it more coherent. It highlights well the inter-generational lunacy of perceiving dead grandparents in newly-born babies. Laing provides one of his most explicit statements on the value of this aspect of his work in the chapter on mapping in *The Politics of the Family*.

²⁰ *ibid*, p.77

²¹ **Self and Others**, p.111

It is not a question of the ‘scientific’ truth, or value, of such mappings. We are however in the true realm of science when we study what these mappings are... But they are very inadequately studied ‘scientifically’... when it comes to ‘ourselves’ rather than ‘primitive’ societies.²²

In the above quotation, it is clear that Laing perceived this aspect of his work as contributing to a science of persons. There is a further contribution made by this aspect of Laing’s work, since it raises the problem of not simply considering what effects projecting aspects of others onto others has on the person creating the projections, but he also considers the effects on the person being projected upon. By induction, Laing is referring to the operation of inducing a person to embody the other’s projection.²³ ‘We have actually no word for the transformation of the *other’s* experience under such induction.’²⁴ This noting of an absence in this area is reminiscent of Laing’s comment in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* that ‘we have clinical terms for disturbed, but not for *disturbing* persons.’²⁵

Prior to researching this section, I was strongly considering critiquing Laing’s use of mapping and its notation within his work. However, after considering the place that this element of his work takes within his texts, and the relation of mapping to discussions of projection, and other operations performed upon experience, it is clear to me that this aspect of Laing’s work has a greater degree of coherence than I had previously assumed. It contributes to Laing’s aim of rendering experience intelligible. Since experience is itself complex and multi-layered, such notations are of use in terms of setting out these facets of human relations. It would have been tempting for me to produce a facile critique based

²² **The Politics of the Family and Other Essays**, pp.118-119

²³ *ibid*, p.119

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ **Sanity, Madness and the Family**, p.149

on my dislike of this element, and the fact that, on the surface, it seems not to fit with Laing's overall main projects. Nevertheless, I now find this aspect of Laing's work to be less alienating than I had previously considered, and can perceive the relevance of mapping to a science of persons. It is also worth noting that Laing's interpersonal theory that I have drawn upon in this section is an aspect of his work that is missed by his critics and other commentators.

Laing's Discussions of Birth

Laing's comments on the relationship of birth and pre-birth to experience may, however, provide a more coherent line of critique. This aspect of his work occurs within his later texts, *The Facts of Life* and *The Voice of Experience*, in particular. Nevertheless, the origin of this strand of Laing's work derives from *The Politics of Experience*. These comments in the latter text are not directly concerned with the nature of the experience of being in the womb, and being born, but instead discuss the voyage as a form of rebirth. 'The process of entering into *the other* world from this world, and returning to *this* world from the other world, is as natural as death and giving birth or being born.'²⁶ Later on in the text, Laing describes the voyage as a movement '...from being outside (post-birth) back into the womb of all things (pre-birth)...'²⁷ He states that the return may involve the transition '...from a cosmic foetalization to an existential rebirth.'²⁸ The idea of such a rebirth within later stages of life is only briefly taken up within Laing's later texts that I have referred to above.

²⁶ **The Politics of Experience**, p.103

²⁷ *ibid*, p.106

²⁸ *op. cit.*

Chapter Six of *The Facts of Life*, simply entitled 'Birth', mentions such rebirthing of adults. Laing refers to an American psychotherapist who was in a session with an '...incurable psychotic...'²⁹, who went into movements that she perceived as akin to trying to be born. '...She enacted with him his birth, playing the part of the midwife.'³⁰ According to Laing, this individual went through many other such 'birthings', and had, at the time of writing, recovered somewhat from his mental distress. Laing states that this psychotherapist (Elizabeth Fehr) came over to London in 1973, and spent a fortnight doing such 'birthing' sessions '...with people in the households and network in our scene in London.'³¹ Laing claims that these sessions brought about '...remarkable changes...'³² in the people involved. However, he provides no further analysis of this matter, and abruptly ends the very short chapter soon after the above comments.

This material from *The Facts of Life* provides the only clear relation between Laing's earlier comments in *The Politics of Experience* regarding 'existential rebirth', and the focus on birth and existence in the womb in his later texts. There is no other hint at the substantially different turn that Laing's work takes in its speculative discussions of birth in any of his other texts. The main issue is that Laing could be interpreted as claiming that biological processes condition later personality and life problems – a problematic birth creates an unhappy individual. This provides arguably the facet of Laing's work which may be the most dislocated from his other main contributions, and in which the relation between this element of his work and his previous

²⁹ **The Facts of Life**, p.68

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ *ibid*, p.69

³² *op. cit.*

achievements could be seen as a paradoxical one. I wish to provide some concrete examples of the difficulties posed by this strand of Laing's work after drawing upon other critiques of this element. Nevertheless, it is worth stating at this juncture that, despite the potential problems with Laing's comments on birth, it is not a main feature of the criticism of Laing.

Sedgwick provides some criticism
of this aspect of Laing's work.

A serious discontinuity between this latest approach and the whole of Laing's previous intellectual career is striking; it affords no connection with any general social theory... Laing will be remembered for more important reasons than his late interest in ante-natal and post-natal complications of this idiosyncratic sort.³³

In this instance, Sedgwick manages to provide some relatively valid criticism of this turn in Laing's later work. Since the vast majority of the 'classic' texts by Laing are focussed upon the critique of biological reductionism, it is shocking for Laing to have then become what could be read as a proponent of such an approach in the relevant sections of *The Facts of Life* and *The Voice of Experience*. Within both of these texts, most of the material contained therein is devoted to experience within the womb and the experience of birth, with more critical chapters only featuring as less substantial elements of the texts. Here I would like to make it clear that I am not fully 'writing off' both of these texts, since they do contain some important material that fits with the more typical concerns of Laing's work. For example, *The Voice of Experience* contains Laing's re-evaluation of Binswanger's study of 'Ellen West', which I have examined in my section on Laing's reinterpretation of past clinical descriptions.

³³ **Psycho Politics**, pp.109-110

The Facts of Life is Laing's weakest text, since it is a rambling, unfocused, jumble of discussions, some of which are presented as though they were poetry.³⁴

It contains both autobiographical notes, discussions of birth, and some critical material on psychiatry and science.

This diversion within Laing's last published theoretical texts is subject to a reasonable critique in an interview with Laing in *The Times*, conducted by Laurie Taylor (then a professor of sociology) in 1983. Taylor's criticism benefits from his desire to avoid the standard approach to critiquing Laing. Taylor was glad that he had decided:

...to ask no questions about [Laing's] acid trips, or his mystical interludes, or his brief affair with the love generation.

In any case he'd written quite enough since those days to deserve some clear space in which to stand. I wanted much more to talk about his lifelong concern with "experience"...

Taylor additionally notes that he took this approach because he did not '...want to go backwards in the argument...' with regard as to whether Laing had, at some stage, been romanticising madness. He states that he was aware that this was not the case. Taylor's criticism is directed towards *The Voice of Experience*, and its concern with experience in the womb, and that of birth. He questions: 'Wasn't this making altogether too much of this intra-uterine period?' I agree to some extent with Taylor's raising of this issue. It is fair to consider that

³⁴ A reason for this is provided in Laing's book of conversations with his children, where he describes himself as sitting '...on the floor, surrounded with sheaves of paper, reading what [he had] written, scoring out, tearing up, cutting and piecing together, arranging and rearranging', and states that this 'turned out to be *The Facts of Life*.' Laing, R.D. (1977), **Conversations with Adam and Natasha**, New York, Pantheon, p.52

³⁵ Taylor, L. (1983), Revisiting the explorer of experience: The Times Profile: R.D. Laing, **The Times**, 31st January, p.8

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ *ibid*

experience may begin either in the womb or at birth. However, one considers actual post-birth life experiences, and the accumulation of such experiences through interaction with the wider environment, to be of a much greater significance in terms of shaping personality and the self than birth or existence within the womb. I, for example, cannot remember either my birth nor being in the womb.³⁸ From my perspective, it is simply ridiculous to even consider that such events have had a profound effect upon the individual that I am now.

Laing does not aid his cause by providing only vague responses to Taylor's questions in this area. To Taylor's above question, Laing produces only a tangential response, claiming that he could have taken the credit for starting off '...a pre-natal genetic account...'³⁹, and arguing that it was a burgeoning field at that time. Laing additionally claims that many people feel that experiences in the womb '...echo and resonate throughout life.'⁴⁰ This latter type of assertion is one that Laing repeats frequently in *The Facts of Life*.⁴¹ Rather than providing specific instances and using studies in this area, Laing resorts to claiming 'well, many people agree with me'. This is arguably as uncritical as Laing's work gets. He fails to corroborate his speculations by reference to any hard evidence. Taylor is not satisfied with Laing's response either. He states that he was not asking whether this area was fashionable, but whether '...intra-uterine psychology...'⁴² was actually compatible with the rest of Laing's work.

³⁸ A relative of mine's daughter did, however, state to her mother that she did not like it before she was born because it was dark and she could not move.

³⁹ Taylor, L, (1983), Revisiting the explorer of experience: The Times Profile: R.D. Laing, **The Times**, 31st January, p.8

⁴⁰ *ibid*

⁴¹ See, for example, **The Facts of Life**, p.72

⁴² Taylor, L, (1983), Revisiting the explorer of experience: The Times Profile: R.D. Laing, **The Times**, 31st January, p.8

Was he really suggesting that the density of experience could somehow be reduced to, or explained by, intra-uterine events which occurred well before the advent of the language or the possibility of sensory discrimination?⁴³

Laing's response is again vague in some respects. He argues that he was '...sceptical of anything causal...' ⁴⁴ but fails to connect this with his musings in *The Facts of Life* and *The Voice of Experience*. It may have been of immense benefit if Laing had clarified his comments regarding the notion that mental patterns may reflect the human genetic life cycle, and the idea '...that all our experience in our life cycle from cell one is absorbed and stored from the beginning, perhaps especially in the beginning.'⁴⁵ Given that there are no statements to the contrary, my reading of this is that this does appear to be laying a causal pattern upon human life – something which is subject to much critique in the 'classic' Laingian texts. In the interview with Taylor, Laing suggests that the analogies and patterns between experience in the womb and that of birth, and later psychological events, formed the reason for his interest in this matter.⁴⁶ Taylor ends up deciding not to pursue this further in the interview, but provides some additional critique of this strand of Laing's work. He notes that 'it seemed the sort of soft Laingian impressionism which detracts from the many insights which still run through his work.'⁴⁷

I fully agree with this. Taylor's comments on this aspect of Laing's work are incisive and valid. He notes at the beginning of the interview that he was well aware of the entirety of Laing's work. This puts him

⁴³ *ibid*

⁴⁴ *ibid*

⁴⁵ **The Facts of Life**, p.36

⁴⁶ Taylor, L, (1983), Revisiting the explorer of experience: The Times Profile: R.D. Laing, **The Times**, 31st January, p.8

⁴⁷ *ibid*

in a good position to make criticisms of the biological diversion in Laing's later texts, and to point out the paradoxical nature of this.

What Laing's admirers find... worrying about some of his present work is the apparent confusion of levels: the attempt to describe the shifting modes of consciousness by biological analogy. After all, one of Laing's great strengths was the ability... to locate the forms which madness took within such apparently normal cultural settings as the to-and-fro of family life...⁴⁸

This quotation reinforces my earlier comments on the way that this element of Laing's work sits very uneasily with the rest of his arguments. Taylor additionally notes that it could also be seen as a complete withdrawal from any engagement with the social world. '...Finally the social has disappeared entirely as Laing burrows back within the womb for clues to our adult maladjustments.'⁴⁹

I cannot find fault with Taylor's critique of this strand of Laing's work. I also agree that 'it would be a pity... if critics did not hold [Laing's] achievements in more stable regard.'⁵⁰ There are, however, further problems with this matter. Despite Laing's comments on rebirth in *The Politics of Experience*, the material contained in *The Facts of Life* and *The Voice of Experience* on birth and pre-natal experience does appear to arise from no substantial precedents within Laing's previous work. However, it could be argued that it retains Laing's central focus within his main debates on the nature of human experience. Nevertheless, this strand of Laing's work does not investigate the experience of mental distress, other than reading this as the consequence of traumatic events in the womb or during birth. It is fair to claim that experience begins at birth, as I have already stated. However, is Laing

⁴⁸ *ibid*

⁴⁹ *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ *ibid*

committing the same error as psychoanalysis in suggesting that very early experiences can condition the remainder of life? In *The Facts of Life*, Laing notes that he is not simply suggesting that the past directly influences present experience.

How we now feel about a past that is beyond conscious recall does not necessarily tell us anything about the *past* as it was then. It may only tell of our present reactions, of our present fantasies of then.⁵¹

The lack of structure of the arguments in *The Facts of Life*, from my perspective, only serve to increase my confusion as to whether Laing is implying a causal relation here or not, as does the lack of any substantive relation to his previous ideas. The only other linking threads between this element of Laing's work and his former texts, (other than the nature of experience), lie within the idea of mapping, ('...that prenatal patterns may be mapped onto natal and postnatal experience'⁵²), and within some criticism of the scientific approach to birth.

The medical terminology that these discussions are couched in is extremely alienating. I continue to be unaware of what such terms as 'blastula',⁵³ 'zona pellucida',⁵⁴ 'chorionic villi',⁵⁵ and so forth, actually refer to. Laing does not bother to inform the reader as to what these are, in 'layperson's' terms. This can be seen as contradicting Laing's principles for a science of persons, where the personal should be addressed in personal terms. The use of confusing medical jargon is a feature of both *The*

⁵¹ **The Facts of Life**, p.71

⁵² *ibid*, p.57

⁵³ *ibid*, p.44

⁵⁴ *ibid*

⁵⁵ *ibid*, p.47

Facts of Life, and *The Voice of Experience*.⁵⁶ However, in the latter text, Laing does attempt to relate his discussions to a wider theoretical and anthropological context. The problem of the lack of evidence to support Laing's claims is most apparent within the former text, where, as I have mentioned, he tends to resort to assertions such as 'thousands of people in every walk of life... claim to remember their birth and before.'⁵⁷ Laing does not present these discussions within case studies of a comparable quality to those in his earlier texts, but within very vague statements of others' experiences.⁵⁸

Since I am addressing this material from a female point of view, it concerns me that it could give credibility to an anti-abortion perspective. If the experience of the first cells that eventually come to comprise a baby is considered as important as that of a post-birth child and adult, it could be used to argue that abortions should not be carried out. I do consider some of Laing's arguments to be dangerous in this way. However, Laing's inclusion of daft statements such as 'one could remain in love with one's placenta the rest of one's life'⁵⁹ should serve as a reminder to the reader that Laing's speculations should not be taken so seriously. Some of Laing's claims in these texts are far more outrageous, and mystical in some respects, than those made in the much-maligned last few chapters of *The Politics of Experience*. For example, 'is it possible that mother and embryo may communicate in some telepathic transpersonal way?'⁶⁰ This comment occurs in a chapter discussing 'The Prenatal Bond', where a woman's dream of a kitten being trapped inside a

⁵⁶ See, for example, the use of the term 'trophoblast' on p.141 of **The Voice of Experience**.

⁵⁷ **The Facts of Life**, p.56

⁵⁸ See, as an example, p.57 of **The Facts of Life**.

⁵⁹ **The Facts of Life**, p.63

⁶⁰ **The Voice of Experience**, p.105

box was interpreted as indicating that she was pregnant.⁶¹ This example is indicative of much of Laing's material on birth and before, since it is possible, and even plausible, but nevertheless raises profound difficulties of validation. Nevertheless, Laing sets this discussion within comments on the nature of how Western culture excludes the feasibility of such occurrences, and notes that it '...challenges a strategic checkpoint of possibility.'⁶² Such qualifications do not occur within *The Facts of Life. The Voice of Experience* is the better text for including the awareness of the incredible nature of what Laing is discussing.

However, some of Laing's comments within this element of his work do link in with his wider criticism of the scientific method. Laing criticises the medicalisation of birth in both *The Facts of Life* and *The Voice of Experience*.

The preference for unnatural childbirth practices... has led birth, in many places, to be a major psychobiological disaster zone, in which almost everything is done the exact opposite way from how it would happen, if allowed to.⁶³

I do find this aspect of Laing's comments on birth to be among the more coherent of his claims. However, it is worth recalling that giving birth is amongst one of the most dangerous things that a woman can do, and that therefore medical intervention may be necessary, as opposed to an arbitrary interference, as Laing appears to view it in the above quotation. It could be further suggested that such comments appear to be little other than a man speaking for women. The blunt, inchoate nature of Laing's remarks in *The Facts of Life* could be construed in this way. Nevertheless, in *The Voice of Experience*, Laing notes that the

⁶¹ *ibid*, pp.104-106. The interpretation was not originally made by Laing, but is cited by him as provided by Schneider (1956). However, Laing agrees with the interpretation.

⁶² *ibid*, p.104

⁶³ **The Facts of Life**, p.64

experience of birth for the mother herself is also ignored.⁶⁴ He also much more clearly relates his concern over the medicalisation of childbirth to a wider debate of the coldness of science.

...We do not see childbirth in some obstetric units any more. What goes on there no more resembles birth than artificial insemination resembles sexual intercourse or a tube feed resembles eating.

The obliteration of birth takes its place along with the obliteration of mind, and death, as footnotes to the scientific abolition of our world and ourselves.⁶⁵

These comments move closer to the 'classic' Laingian critique of the inhumanity of science. This aspect of his comments on birth and the possibility of experience within the womb form the only aspect of this strand of his work that I can engage with to some extent.

Unfortunately the vast majority of this material is, from my perspective, simply an exercise in speculation. The paradox between Laing having spent much of his career debunking the medical view of mental distress, and then apparently claiming in these later works that a traumatic birth may produce a traumatised individual in later life is striking. This radical change is one that was not properly addressed by Laing in any other instances than the Taylor interview that I am aware of. Even then, Laing provides only vague responses. It would appear that Laing may have become rather self-indulgent in later life with regard to what he saw as fit for publication. Since the vast majority of the critiques of Laing that have been reviewed in this thesis were produced prior to the publication of *The Facts of Life* and *The Voice of Experience*, this

⁶⁴ **The Voice of Experience**, p.82

⁶⁵ *ibid*

highly problematic strand of Laing's later work has not been subject to criticism, other than in this chapter, and by Taylor and Sedgwick.

However, have I fallen into the traps that I have identified with the poor critiques of Laing in my above criticisms?⁶⁶ All of the other texts by Laing that I have examined in this thesis are theoretical texts – they seek to explain aspects of the intelligibility of what is seen as mental illness, or, in *Reason and Violence*, to summarise a theory. In this section, I have treated *The Facts of Life* and *The Voice of Experience* as though they were theoretical texts, when this is not actually the case, since these latter texts are not seeking principally to explain anything. This may provide a reason for the lack of coherence between these later works and their predecessors. It may therefore be considered unfair to judge these texts by the same standards as the 'classic' theoretical texts by Laing. Nevertheless, there is theoretically-relevant material, if not actual theory itself, within *The Facts of Life* and *The Voice of Experience*.

As I have noted in this section, the theoretically-relevant material within these texts is consistent with Laing's emphasis upon human experience within his work. As a result, my above criticisms do involve picking out the speculative elements of these texts for criticism, and abstracting these aspects away from the coherence of these texts within Laing's focus upon experience in his wider work. My reading of the material on birth and pre-birth experiences as reflecting a form of biological reductionism could be seen as too strong, since Laing did state in the interview with Taylor that it was not intended to be of a causal nature. I could be potentially taking the absence of statements to

⁶⁶ I would like to extend my thanks to Lodziak for providing some of the criticism of my critique that I am discussing here, in an email dated 9/9/09.

the contrary within these texts as more indicative than it may be. I am also concerned that I may be taking my dislike of Laing's material on birth and pre-birth experiences as more of a valid basis for a critique than it truly is.

Nevertheless, I remain perplexed by this strand of Laing's work, and still retain the view that it is problematic in some respects.

10) Conclusion – Principles of Critique

To conclude this thesis, I would first of all like to state that it is shocking and surprising how poor the vast majority of the criticism of Laing's work is. In this conclusion, I wish to summarise the key problems involved in the critiques of Laing that have been reviewed in this thesis. I would also like to make some suggestions as to how these methodological errors could, potentially, be avoided. I will additionally be drawing upon some of Lodziak's work in this area, which serves to reinforce the arguments that I will be making.

The worst approach to the production of criticism is that of making *ad hominem* attacks upon the author concerned. This can take the form of a character assassination, or moralising over the author's life. Examples of this have been noted in this thesis within Showalter's, Sedgwick's and the conservative psychiatric 'critiques'. It does appear to be of relevance that such a poor approach is utilised by critics who fundamentally fail to engage with Laing's work on its own terms, and who lack in a real understanding of his work. This may render the critic incapable of producing a critique of theoretical material itself. Further problems involve using unverified second-hand evidence to create a character assassination, or promoting myths about an author's work.

The main set of problematic approaches to the production of criticism occur within issues surrounding the reading, interpretation and understanding of theoretical texts. The complications appear to arise from an inaccurate or virtually non-existent reading of the text, which produces a poor interpretation and understanding of the theory. The majority of

the criticism of Laing that has been reviewed in this thesis is subject to this particular cluster of methodological problems. All of these issues are closely related. Poor reading is demonstrated within critiques when it is apparent that the critic has not read all of an author's work. The latter aspect is important in terms of tracing the lines of development of concepts. Poor reading is also demonstrated through a lack of textual evidence being deployed within the criticism. Some of Laing's critics appear to have only quickly scanned through his work, since no evidence of a thorough reading of any of his texts is apparent within the criticism. This can take the form of abstracting quotations away from their context within the text that they inhabit, and is shown in a lack of engagement with the theory.

These issues can also be related to interpreting a text in such a way that the critic considers it to mean something substantially different than the meaning derived from a close reading of the text. Many of Laing's critics, such as the conservative psychiatric critics and Jacoby, appear to have approached Laing's theories with a pre-defined view of what his work consists of. Their criticism of his work then becomes little other than a critique of their misconceptions. Lodziak, rather worryingly, refers to these problems as '...standard academic practices, which in conjunction with misrepresentation, can transform critical discussion into an irrelevance.'¹ He identifies these two practices in the following quotations.

The first of these practices involves the articulation of the critic's own position under the guise of criticism of a book or theorist. It is normally the case that the ensuing 'criticism'

¹ Lodziak, C, and Tatman, J, (1997), **Andre Gorz: A Critical Introduction**, London, Pluto Press, p.94

reveals more about the critic than about the object of criticism.²

The second standard academic practice that can generate irrelevant criticism can be referred to as superfluous academic production. Essentially the critic misreads a theorist, for example, and then proceeds to criticise the theorist as if the misreading is in fact a truthful reading.³

The misreading of Laing as glorifying the schizophrenic voyage, and therefore romanticising ‘madness’, can be seen as an example of the second methodological error that Lodziak identifies in the above quotation.

A poor interpretation of a text can involve an ignorance of the author’s intentions for the work concerned. This is the case with much of the criticism of *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, where this text is critiqued for not following standard scientific methodologies. Lodziak notes that theoretical texts must be approached in a way that takes into account the fact that they are different types of texts to, for example, works of fiction. He emphasises that ‘...the specificity of theoretical texts is such that their interpretation requires an approach radically different from currently fashionable practices in literary criticism.’⁴ Lodziak argues that ‘...authorial intent...’⁵ is key in terms of ‘...understanding theoretical texts.’⁶

A poor understanding of a text can be demonstrated within a critique through criticising an author for not doing what the critic wanted them to. This occurs within Mitchell’s critique where she criticises Laing for not producing psychoanalytic interpretations of the material

² *ibid*, p.94

³ *op. cit.*, p.95

⁴ Lodziak, C, (1985), Notes on Theoretical Discourses in an Era of Expediency, **Trent Papers in Communication**, Vol.3, p.171

⁵ *ibid*, p.178

⁶ *ibid*

in his case studies. Many of Laing's critics approach his work with excessive expectations for him to have covered all possible angles of research. This is particularly apparent within left-wing critiques of Laing. The problematic approach of cutting out aspects of a theory which do not fit into the critic's representation of it is what I have termed the Procrustean critique. From my perspective this demonstrates a lack of understanding of a theory, since theories are usually constructed in such a way that omitting elements may ignore key features of the theory. Mitchell and Jacoby are particularly guilty of this. They also share a tendency to engage in using inappropriate means of critique, such as using psychoanalysis to criticise Laing's work, whilst ignoring his criticism of this approach.

A further disquieting aspect of the critiques of Laing is the blind reproduction of inaccurate criticisms by other critics, and the replication of the same poor approach to the production of criticism. Only Mitchell and Deleuze and Guattari manage to transcend in some respects the problems that I have summarised so far in this conclusion. At this point, I would like to draw upon two different conceptions of the best form of critique – the immanent critique. Adorno's conception of this method of critique has already been referred to in my chapter on Deleuze and Guattari. I am aware that the following quotation has already been used in this thesis. However, I am including it again in order for the reader to be clear about the differing views of the immanent critique.

Our critique of the ontological need brings us to an immanent critique of ontology itself. We have no power over the philosophy of Being if we reject it generally, from outside,

instead of taking it on in its own structure – turning its own force against it, in line with Hegel’s desideratum.⁷

Adorno’s conception of the immanent critique involves the production of criticism which is not based upon the rejection of a theory from outside of its proper domain. The vast majority of the critiques of Laing do involve such an outright rejection of Laing’s theories. Lodziak’s definition of the immanent critique is slightly different to that offered by Adorno.

To properly criticise a theorist’s work..., or a particular text, is to make judgements about the extent to which the substance of the theory fulfills the author’s self-presentation of his/her total project. We can refer to this as ‘immanent critique’. In practice..., immanent critique necessarily involves criticism of the particular (a single text, or an idea, for example) in relation to the total project, and as such demands that the critic is familiar with the total project.⁸

Lodziak suggests that the immanent critique should evaluate a theory in terms of its relation to the author’s overall intentions for their work. The above quotation emphasises the point that I have raised that knowledge of all of an author’s texts is necessary for this to occur. Adorno’s conception of the immanent critique involves moving within the same theoretical structure as what is being criticised.

In the previous chapter, where I have attempted to produce some of my own criticism of Laing, I have endeavoured to make use of some of the approaches to the production of criticism noted by Adorno and Lodziak. My examination of the lines of development of Laing’s use of mapping and its representation in notational sets, and its use within his texts (Laing’s intentions for this aspect of his work), rendered it as more coherent than it may

⁷ Adorno, T.W, (1973), **Negative Dialectics**, (trans. E.B. Ashton), London, Routledge, p.97

⁸ Lodziak, C, (1985), Notes on Theoretical Discourses in an Era of Expediency, **Trent Papers in Communication**, Vol.3, p.180

have been through using a less considered means of critique. These methodological principles also enabled me to criticise aspects of my critique. The need for such a reflexive analysis (to critique the critique) is lacking within the majority of the critiques of Laing, as is the provision of any counter-arguments against the criticism. The production of a critique should take a dialectical form, as opposed to assuming that any criticism has absolute validity. Mitchell's aims for her critique of Laing are close to Lodziak's view of the immanent critique. She attempts to evaluate Laing's work through his application of Sartrean concepts. This is laudable, despite the fact that the final product is not of the expected quality. Deleuze and Guattari also demonstrate a considerable level of engagement with Laing's work. Their criticism of Laing can be related to Adorno's idea of the immanent critique, since they attempt to criticise Laing out of the need for his work. No other authors, out of those reviewed in this thesis, other than Mitchell and Deleuze and Guattari, develop Laing's work to any extent. Critique should additionally serve this purpose – to attempt to move a theory forward.

I wish to summarise some ways in which the production of a poor critique may be avoided, before concluding this thesis. It may be assumed that reading a text is a simple matter. However, it is apparent that this is not the case, given that the poverty of much of the criticism of Laing has bad reading as the origin of the problem. The effort must be made to not read meanings into a text which are non-existent, or contrary to what the author was most probably attempting to say. Standardised lines of criticism can be misleading, as they are with claims that Laing romanticises mental distress. The critic must attempt to evaluate such lines of critique without assuming that they are correct, unless

textual evidence from primary sources is available to support the criticism. The critic's interpretation of the text or theory must be checked against the text itself. Close attention must be paid to the lines of development of concepts within the author's work, and to their intentions. This can only be facilitated by reading all of the author's work. As I have already stated, there is a need to critique the critique, to not simply assume that any criticism produced is simply correct. I would like to make it clear that I am not 'writing off' critique as an intellectual pursuit, but I wish to emphasise that a more careful approach needs to be undertaken than has been apparent within the majority of the criticism of Laing that has been reviewed in this thesis.

In my final comments, I wish to state that I consider my undertakings in this thesis to have been valuable. My review of the criticism of Laing has shown that much of it is extremely deficient in terms of actually critiquing Laing's theories. Since no extensive evaluation of these critiques is currently in existence, this thesis serves as a guide to the methodological errors that can occur in terms of attempting to criticise an author's work. In a negative way, the poverty of the critiques has enabled me to present the value of Laing's contributions to social theory. His phenomenological science of persons continues to be his main contribution. I hope to have shown within my chapter on arguments for a feminist reading of Laing that his project of demystifying mental distress is one which can be developed in the light of more recent empirical evidence. Now that the myths surrounding Laing's work have been debunked, one can only hope for more scholarly approaches to his work in the future.

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