‘Stream of consciousness’ and ‘ownership of thought’ in indigenous people in Central Australia

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Abstract: Fifteen Central Australian Aboriginal adults (8 patients, 7 colleagues) were presented with a culturally modified version of Flavell’s ‘stream of consciousness’ experiment (pictures of persons with empty or ‘busy’ thought-bubbles, and an invitation to assign a picture to the mental state of a second experimenter seen reading or sitting quietly). Only 4 people assigned the empty thought bubble to the quiet experimenter. This result was at least as good as that of a sample of Stanford College students tested by Flavell. The experiment provoked detailed comments from the informants about subjectivity, suggesting great subtlety of phenomenological awareness in Central Australian Aboriginal people, and attributing a kind of subjectivity to non-human entities, including inanimate elements. We learnt that the Western Deserts dialect term watiya was reserved for the subjectivity attributed to trees and rocks. The ownership of all thought was attributed to the tjukurpa (the Aboriginal dreaming). These Aboriginal cultural attributions were compared and contrasted with reflections developed by Jung and the post-Jungian David Holt on the nature of subjectivity, and religious notions of the redemption of matter.

Key words: Australian, Aboriginal, Flavell, David Holt, Jung, ownership of thought, redemption of matter, stream of consciousness, subjectivity, theory of mind, tjukurpa, watiya, Western Deserts dialect.

The concept of ‘stream of consciousness’

One of the qualities of experienced self is flow. The metaphor of ‘stream of consciousness’ refers to the common human experience of mental life as a more or less continuous flow of mental contents (in the waking state at least), that is not necessarily primed by external stimuli or problem solving activities.

Awareness of the streaming nature of inner life must be very ancient indeed. We find it referred to throughout the Abhidhamma (see Nyanatiloka 1970 passim), the Canonical Buddhist texts on psychology. In modern times, the practice of free association in psychoanalysis attempted precisely to investigate this ‘stream’ and its dynamics. But it was also studied by the introspectionists, of whom the principal exponent was probably the psychologist William James.
(1892) who wrote around the end of the nineteenth century. With the triumph of behaviourism, all studies of subjectivity fell into disrepute in academic psychology, and it was not until the 1980s that it became possible again for academic psychologists to make introspectionist studies without incurring contempt.

In the 1990s, the Stanford psychologist John Flavell and colleagues (1993) investigated the understanding of children and adults of the ‘stream of consciousness’. The investigators noted that, from pre-school to adulthood, there was a marked increase in the tendency for subjects to ascribe an inner life (that is, a ‘theory of mind’) to a person who was just sitting waiting, rather than construing them as ‘empty of thoughts and ideas’. There seemed to be a critical shift around the fifth year, connected with the emergence of a conscious capacity for self-representation. Various workers in developmental and self-psychology have researched this latter function, and the subject is very well reviewed by Meares (1992) in his book *The Metaphor of Play*. As he recognizes, awareness, constitution and ownership of stream of consciousness are only some of the functions of the self; reflexiveness, cohesiveness, unity, virtual ‘spatiality’ and agency are other categories that he describes (on the basis of an exhaustive review of the field). There are various ways of thinking about ‘theory of mind’, the ability to conceptualize other people’s mental states. Briefer overviews of some of the different investigative approaches, particularly in psychotic states, are available in papers by Drury et al. (1998) and Doody et al. (1998).

Returning to ‘stream’ studies, we note that, in a survey of 234 college students, Flavell et al. (1993) found that 76% (178) thought that the following statement was ‘probably true’: ‘Conscious mental events (ideas, precepts, images, feelings) normally follow one another more or less continuously in a person who is awake. They form a kind of “stream of consciousness”, with first one conscious mental event happening, then another’. The investigators concluded however, that pre-schoolers (4 year olds) ‘were largely unaware of this important property of the mind’ (Flavell et al. 1993).

**The ownership of thought**

It is a truism that in our Western culture, the Cartesian ‘I’ has become the authorized locus of Western subjectivity to such an extent that it is taken completely for granted. Deviations are seen as psychopathological. Karl Jaspers writes:

> We take it for granted that when we think, it is we who think, a thought is our thought and the notions that strike us – and perhaps make us say not ‘I think’ but ‘it occurs to me – are still at the same time our thoughts, executed by us’ … [Furthermore, it becomes a matter of psychopathology when] Descartes’s ‘cogito ergo sum’ … may still be superficially cogitated but it is no longer a valid experience.

(Jaspers 1962, p. 122)
The characteristics of the Western ‘I’ are well reviewed in Hillman’s *Re-Visioning Psychology* (Hillman 1977). They are principally, *ownership*, a monopoly on what is ‘real’ (that is, *literalism*, taking itself and its views for real), and *expansionism* (appropriation, ‘having it all’, at any cost).

The politico-legal problematic of ‘intellectual ownership’ which in other ages would have been couched in the language of ‘gifts’ and ‘graces’ from Gods or Muses, give ample evidence of this appropriative thrust.

However, even in this century, there have been dissenting voices, of which Jung’s has been one of the most powerful. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung describes a turning point.

Philemon and other figures of my fantasy brought home to me the crucial insight that there are things in the psyche that I do not produce ... he said I treated thoughts as if I generated them myself, but in his view thoughts were like the animals in the forest, or people in a room, or birds in the air, and added, ‘If you should see people in a room, you would not think that you had made these people, or that you were responsible for them’. It was he who taught me psychic objectivity, the reality of the psyche.

(Jung 1963)

It became obvious to us during this study that our informants’ views on the constitution and ownership of subjectivity resemble those of Jung more than Descartes’s. A characteristic and striking pattern of response to the experimental presentation emerged, as we shall see later. We were thus naturally led to wonder how indigenous Australians might actually experience these attributive aspects of self-process. We decided to systematize our enquiries further. Since Flavell et al. had not studied ownership, nor, to our awareness, had any other investigator, we had to evolve our own protocols for the second half of the study.

**Method**

In 1994 and 1995, opportunities (in the form of a Commonwealth grant) presented for the author to spend a year in Central Australia as a consultant psychiatrist focusing on indigenous mental health. Before leaving Sydney, he approached the psychiatrist and self-psychologist Professor Russell Meares at Sydney University Department of Psychiatry, Westmead Hospital Campus, for suggestions as to how a small systematic step might be taken towards a better understanding of self-process in indigenous Australians, within the severe constraints of time and work-role. Meares enjoined him to consider Flavell et al.’s approach. This was to prove a fruitful suggestion.

The Flavell et al. procedure, suitably modified for cultural congruence, was combined, during the second half of the survey, with a further investigation into *ownership and autonomy of mental experience*. This modification, as we shall see, flowed inevitably out of the interesting responses we got from people performing the first investigation.
Flavell et al.’s (1993) method in essence consisted of presenting children with ‘two schematic drawings of faces, ... one with a thought bubble that was empty, and one with a thought bubble containing ... asterisks, established during the warm-up period as representing thoughts and ideas’. The experimenter had an assistant who looked either at an animal picture or at a blank wall. The subject was accordingly asked to ‘point to the picture that shows how her mind is while she is looking at the picture’, or ‘point to the picture that shows how her mind is while she is sitting there’.

Our own data were collected over the periods 1 December 1994 to 14 January 1995, and 5 July 1995 to 30 December 1995, mainly on visits to bush communities. Our procedure was modified as follows to suit local conditions:

- The interviews were conducted primarily in the Pitjantjatjara language.
- In outdoor settings, the assistant (Psychiatric Registrar Dr Pratap Naidu or Mental Health Nurse Mr Larry Tierney) was instructed to either look at an active scene (for example, children playing a game) or close his eyes, in lieu of looking at a picture or staring at a blank wall (the latter can be in short supply in the desert).
- Participating patients were invited to help the author come to a closer understanding of their process through commenting on the pictures as an extension of a mental state review (mental status examination). They were also advised that results might be published but that identification data would be altered so that confidentiality could be ensured.
- It was decided to use a whole human figure instead of a face for the thought bubble presentations (see Figure). After all, our Western convention that
‘thinking’ takes place in the head is just that, a convention. It is not essential in any phenomenological sense. Certainly, the neurophysiology is cerebral, but the ‘topography’ of subjective experience is virtual, a trope, and the reader recalls well that many other cultures, including our own classical Greek tradition, ascribe different ‘loci’ for this process. The author did not want his cultural set to pre-empt other ‘localizations’.

- Constitution and ownership: Since these issues had not been formally addressed by Flavell et al., and since it emerged only half way through the study that issues of constitution and ownership were integral to most of the informants’ responses, the author decided to systematize study of them from subject number 10 onwards. It was also possible within the time frame of the investigation to return to four of the previous subjects to make focused enquiries. Thus a total of 9 people could be formally included in this latter part of the investigation. The issue of constitution initially came up quite spontaneously, when we noticed that, almost universally, people tended to either (i) have initial hesitations in attributing the asterisked picture to the assistant with closed eyes, or, equally frequently, (ii) would point to the asterisked picture but then qualify it, saying that there was less activity; usually with a statement like ‘Yuwa, nyangatja, tjinguru palu tjukutjuku (Yes, that one there, maybe/but less). This provoked the author to invite people to expand on their responses. The expansion led to the ownership issue, because ‘Kuru pati, Kulinytja wyaringanyi tjukutjuku. Kulinytja tjukurpangulu yaninika (eyes closed, thinking fades somewhat. But thinking comes from the tjukurpa [dreaming]!).’

Thus, for the last 5 subjects, and retrospectively for four other previous subjects, it was decided to formally put at the end of the first procedure, that ‘we Westerners usually think that we make our own thoughts’. In intercultural conversations in Central Australia, the contrasting terms Kadya (Westerners) and Yapa (Walpiri word for Aboriginal people) are often used. We wondered aloud what Yapa or Anangu (the Pitjantjatjara equivalent) might think about this Kadya proposition, and on where thoughts come from.

This usually provoked mirthful or incredulous responses, which we recast and re-received along the Carl Rogersian reflective listening model (1986), using both English and Western Desert dialect, to double check; as in

**Informant:**
‘Ha ha ha. We do not say like this. We say, that kunlinytja tjukurpangulu yaninika (thinking comes from the tjukurpa)’. 

**Investigator:**
‘The thinking, the thoughts, are tjukurpangulu? They come from the tjukurpa?’
Informant:
‘Yuwa, alatji, kulinytja tjukurpangulu (Yes, exactly. Thoughts Tkukurpa-from). Maybe, walpiri tjukurpangulu (from Walpiri tjukurpa), maybe kadya tjukurpangulu, (from Western tjukurpa) maybe Pintupi tjukurpangulu (etc)’.

Investigator:
‘Ngayuku wyia? (From myself no[t])?’

Informant:
‘Mulapa, nyuntumpa wyia (Excellent. From yourself no[t])’.

Tjukurpa is a Western Deserts dialect word for a conception found universally across the Aboriginal nations of Australia, which they themselves refer to as the Dreaming, when attempting to talk about it with English speakers. Its dimensions and nuanced referents defy neat definition, as anthropology scholars concede. There is a profound and authoritative treatment of the subject in the anthropologist Fred Myers’s Chapter 2 on ‘The Dreaming: Time and Space’ in his book Pintupi Country: Pintupi Self (Myers 1986), which I recommend. For a more Jungian readership, perhaps the terms pleroma and dharma might begin to approach an understanding of two of its principal vectors. There is the gnostic-like pleromatic cosmological/ontological vector. The tjukurpa is understood as the ground of all being. Everything comes from it. Linguistically, the term tjukurpa is contrasted with the term uti, which refers to manifestation into the phenomenal, sensorily apprehensible realm. But Aboriginal people will also translate tjukurpa as ‘the Law’, a pre-existing, foundationist order, which refers not only to the order in nature, but to the sacred underpinning of human laws. Here perhaps we have a more Buddhist-like dharmic nuance. Finally, the mythic doings of the dreamtime ancestors are held to actualize landscape and species, and in some similar sense, the individual’s nocturnal dreaming brings back material from the tjukurpa realm, to be actualized through negotiation into the life of the group.

Subjects
It is important to realize that given the strong sense of kunta (self-consciousness about private matters) of our informants, such conversations could not (and should not) be conducted without considerable prior contact with them. The informants were all either patients with whom the investigator had developed a strong therapeutic alliance, or personal friends usually of several years’ standing.

Our 15 subjects were adults (16–48):

1. Either currently living traditional life-styles, or having lived traditional life-styles for years;
2. genetically wholly or substantially indigenous;
3. Western Deserts dialect speakers (Pitjantjatjara/Pintubi/Loritja/Yankuntjatjara);
4. normal (friends of the author) or psychiatric patients seen on routine follow-up.

Results

Of 15 subjects interviewed, all 15 negotiated the calibration stage successfully. They grasped the analogy of asterisked thought bubble and mental content, and empty thought bubble and no mental content. They further connected the asterisked thought bubble with the assistant’s experience when he was engaged in looking at something, and 12 also indicated it when the assistant’s eyes were closed. But most qualified it by some statement about attenuation of mental activity. One of the ‘failures’, C.T. (Number 3), was almost certainly a false negative. It is worth looking at some of the details in each person’s responses:


   During the calibration phase, ‘nyanga anangu katangka kulinytja/kulinyntja pulka’ (here is a person with a lot of mental activity going on in their head: Author pointing to asterisked picture). ‘Ka pala anangu kulinytja wyia’ (and there is a person with nothing going on in their head: Author pointing to picture with empty thought bubble), C.L. assumed I was referring to him, but when I pointed out that the pictures referred to someone else, ‘anangu kutjupa’, he was able to proceed, and assigned the asterisked picture to the assistant with closed eyes, with the comment that it was ‘kulinytja tjukutjuku’ (thinking a little bit).

2. B.N. Male, 45. Yankuntjatjara. Senior man in a Southern community, friend of author. ‘There is something going on, but it’s kutini (auditory modality: author’s note), nyanganyi wyia (not visual activity)’.

   One of the informants we revisited, he told us that: i. thinking comes from the tjukurpa; ii. empty mind states are possible, but you have to get right away from people and be in a quiet place. ‘Yes, there Is a little bit of thinking. [But also] Yes, people CAN have an empty mind. Tjilpis (old men) … in quietness, by being quiet … in special places’.

3. C.T. Male, 48. Yankuntjatjara. Friend of author. His response was particularly thoughtful, because he associated a quiet or empty mind with maturity and well being, rather in the way of meditation teachers,
(see discussion section below) and was moved to comment on the mental lives of children and animals.

‘Kulinytja-wyia palya (Empty mind is a good thing) … katangka kulini pulkara, kata kura’ (lots of thoughts going on in the head is bad). ‘Rawangka kulinytja-wyia palya. Rawaku kulinytja pulkara kura’ (It is good to have a thoroughly empty mind, bad to be thinking continuously).

He then observed, ‘Tjitji rawangka kulini’ (Children have continuous mental activities). Pointing to a twitching kelpie sheep-dog taking refuge under a Toyota from the noon-time heat, C.T. commented: ‘Papa rawangka kulini, kukaku kulini, waru kulini, pikari kulini’ (So does a dog … thinking about meat, about the heat, about anger).

Yet, to our surprise, he was the only negative responder in the non-patient sample. We reflected later that he might have assumed (falsely) that my assistant and I were capable of achieving ‘empty mind’ states with ease. I have had the opportunity to revisit him since then, but not within the experimental time frame. He confirmed our suspicions, but I have left his results in the table as negative in conformity with experimental protocol (see Discussion).

4. F.C. Female, 36. Pitjantjatjara. Born in a traditional community in Central Australia. Taken into care at 8 by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs because her part-European father had died. Became very fluent in English. Returned to Central Australia in her early twenties to find her mother. She lived a traditional life-style from then on, but was so traumatized that she had several psychotic breakdowns. An articulate and thoughtful woman, in remission, one of her responses to the stream of consciousness presentation was, ‘Whenever there’s desire, there’s a busy mind’.

5. M.D. Male, 16. Yankuntjatjara. Post-petrol-sniffing psychosis, in remission. (With the introduction of Avgas into the indigenous communities, petrol-sniffing has been curtailed. Avgas does not produce a ‘high’ because it has a different solvent fraction composition. There is a withdrawal psycho-syndrome, but a number of ex-sniffers are developing psychotic syndromes some months after having had their withdrawal psychoses. Whether we are seeing some sort of ‘flash-back’ phenomenon, whether a predisposition to psychosis has been ignited, or whether these are the consequences of an adolescence spent totally ‘out of it’ is unclear). Nevertheless, M.D. seemed very psychologically immature, and in an (Ericksonian) adolescent identity crisis. He was one of the few patient respondents to judge the assistant with closed eyes as having no mental activity.

6. B.L. Male, 33. Walpiri, but could speak Pintubi. Thought by his community to be permanently cursed and hence incurable in principle. Had his first psychotic episode at 18 and had several hospitalizations since. Was currently in remission. His father had been a Police Aide, given to talking too freely in his cups about secret-sacred matters. This had offended
the elders who ‘had sung’ him and his son. In Central Australia, to ‘sing’ someone is generally understood to refer to an act of incantation. It is often malevolent; dark sorcery provoked by animosity or retribution for breaches of rituals or taboos. (But one can also ‘sing’ love magic.) Since these elders were now all dead, counter-sortilege was considered ritually ineffective. This man thought that the figure with the empty thought bubble represented someone who was ‘rama-rama’ (mad, probably referring to experiences of the thought disorder of ‘thought withdrawal’). He said that a person with a lot of mental activity could be a ‘ngangkari’ or shamanic healer.

7. S.Q. Male, 24. Pitjantjatjara. Petrol sniffer since age 12. Stopped sniffing 3 months ago with the introduction of Avgas. Had signs of residual cerebellar damage (hypotonia, dysdiadokokinesia, intentional tremor). Presented with an acute psychosis (not a withdrawal condition; see case number 5). Interviewed in remission, he thought that a psychotic person would have a lot of mental activity: ‘Katangka wangka pulka’ (lots of talking in the head). An assistant with her eyes closed was judged to have less mental activity: ‘wangka tjukutjuku’, but there would be mental activity nevertheless.

8. B.O. Female, 36. Walpiri/Pintubi. There was a history of psychotic episodes, which had previously been diagnosed as exacerbations of schizophrenia. The current presentation was rather more reactive and hysteriform. She was grief-stricken for her boyfriend, who had died 3 months ago, and whom she had met on the ward during a previous admission. Everything on the ward reminded her of him. Over the next 24 hours, the grieving extended to her other losses, and she sat on the floor keening for her dead mother and sisters and other relatives. Finally, she was convinced she would die herself, developed intense anxiety with tachycardia, bronchospasm and dyspnoea, and proceeded to vomit copiously, saying that bad stuff was coming out of her. She insisted that I pray that Jesus might save her from death, and with the help of some ventolin and oxygen and 0.5 mg of clonazepam, she settled.

She was a shrewd woman, fluent in English, but preferring to speak Pitjantjatjara.

Her response to the Flavell et al. presentation was a qualified one. The picture with the busy mind was one of a ‘rama-rama’ (psychotic) person, or someone who was very sad (‘tjiturutjituru’), though it could also be one of a ‘ngangkari’ (native healer) having visionary experiences. But definitely, when a person closed their eyes and attended to nothing in particular, they were still having internal experiences, ‘katangka kulinytja’ (thinking in the head), though attenuated ones ‘pulka wiya’. She insisted, out of therapeutic hope, that when I closed my eyes, I was likely, as her ‘ngangkari’, to be having visions of Jesus which would help her.

When the assistant’s eyes were open, and he was looking at something engaging (a book), her response was, ‘Yes, definitely kulini (he is thinking)’. When the assistant closed his eyes, there was a moment of hesitation, then, a response: ‘kulini tjukutjuku’ (he is thinking a little bit).

She talked about grades of ‘kulinytja’ (thinking); also ‘nyakanytja’ (visions, or thinking in pictures). ‘At night time, when you are going to sleep, not full asleep, lots of nyakanytja’. She thought that ngangkaris have a lot of nyakanytja. People with a lot of worry have a lot of kulinytja. So do the rama-rama (mad) ones.


His responses were, in transliteration: ‘the asterisked diagram is of a person with their eyes open’.

‘The empty thought bubble corresponds to a person who is asleep, also when their eyes are closed, but actually, there is still some kulinytja, but much less’.

His response to the ownership prompt was delivered in both English and Pitjantjatjara. ‘White people say that they make their own thoughts’.

‘Kadia/walpala alatji watjani; kulinytja palyani-na’ (translit. White person thus says ‘thinking make-I’) … but we don’t say like that. We say, thinking comes from tjukurpa. Suppose there’s three men, one Tjilpi (old wise man), knows all tjukurpa. Then another man, middle-age, knows a lot, but not all, and one young man, knows just a little bit. And the young man ask that old Tjilpi something, then the middle man’s mind becomes full of tjukurpa, he sits up and all mind full of tjukurpa, he knows. The thinking coming from tjukurpa, the dreams come from tjukurpa, everything comes from tjukurpa … Putukulini means forget. Putukulilpai (a state of forgetfulness). Sometimes, man sitting, he can hear you talking, but he not taking it in, forgetting (equates failure of consciousness with forgetting). ‘Remember’ is ‘kulini’.


Response to asterisked bubble: corresponds to a person who is awake and looking at something. When eyes are closed, the corresponding picture is the empty thought bubble.

Interviewer: ‘Kulinytja wyia rawa?’ (Is nothing at all going on in the person with the eyes closed?).

Responder: ‘Wyia; kulinytja tjukutjuku’ (No, there’s a little bit of activity). ‘Iriti, katangka kulinytja kulinu-na. Maa-pitja watjanu-na’ (In the past, I got voices in my head. I told them to go away). But thoughts come from the tjukurpa (‘Kulinytja tjukurpangul’).


The picture with the asterisked bubble corresponds to a person with ‘kulinytja’ (thought or mental activity). When the assistant’s eyes are closed, there is still kulinytja, but less. Points to asterisked picture.
This man had had a full Western education to Higher School Certificate level. He then volunteered, ‘thoughts come from tjukurpa’, and proceeded to give an epistemological account:

‘From the moment we’re born, “stories” are told about everything in the sensory world. Everything has its own story. So everything we see, plants, trees, animals, land, all have their story. Whenever we see anything, we think tjukurpa. Everything in the sensory world has its story, so everything is part of tjukurpa’. ‘Consciousness is made up mainly of sense experience [author’s reflection: replays of representations (?)], but what remains is tjukurpa, because everything has a “story’, is like a person [author’s reflection: personalized (?)], belongs to a bigger “story’ [author’s reflection: mythopoetic process (?)].

13. N.S. Female, 22. Pitjantjatjara patient. History suggesting a culturally informed depressive reaction with hallucinatory/delusional features. Quite psychotic at time of interview. History of outbursts of affect, uncontrollable laughter, pestering behaviours, checking people’s bracelets. Wearing a toy angel on a string around her neck.

Recognizes asterisked picture as similar to herself, full of mental activity. Preoccupied with this picture and interpretation, and not motivated to respond to empty thought bubble picture or closed eyes. Writes the content of her thinking, the name of her unrequited love, with the formula … Her name, the lover’s name, and OTL. States, ‘This stands for Only True Love’.


Asterisked thought bubble corresponds with thinking. Empty bubble corresponds with closed eyes, but then changes her mind within 10 seconds and says, ‘A little bit of thinking still going on’.

Where does that thinking come from? ‘Tjukurpa’.


The person with closed eyes, is doing nothing, still definitely has thoughts; fewer thoughts though. But ‘kulinytja tjukurpangulu yaninika’ (Thinking comes from the tjukurpa). We do not say, ‘I make my thoughts’. Do animals have kulinytja? Yuwa (Yes). Punu (Trees)? Yuwa (Yes). Apu, puli (Rocks)? Yuwa alatji (Yes, indeed!). But we call that ‘watiya’. ‘Punu munu puli watiyatjara, punu kulinytja, apu kulinytja, watiya’ (Trees and rocks have subjectivity, tree thinking, rock thinking, we call that watiya).

Some methodological points

There are several procedures that the hermeneutic spiral requires, as one passes and repasses through the ‘text’. 
Attention to the quality of the relationship

We have already noted that only long-standing colleagues, friends and patients who had developed a strong therapeutic alliance were exposed to this protocol. To do otherwise would have been not only insensitive, but also misinformative. Questioning was kept to an absolute minimum (the direct questioning mode is considered impertinent in Central Australian culture), and wherever possible, a question would be put in the form of a statement for response. Thus, instead of asking; ‘What are you thinking about (Nyaa-ku nyuntu kulini?)’, we might say, ‘I imagine you are thinking (Kulini-na ka nyuntu kulini)’ and simply wait for a response. Talk about mental subjectivity is sensitive, but when a relationship has been established, people enjoy discussing fine points of phenomenology. Conversely, precocious investigations in traditional Aboriginal settings result in silence, misleading information or a compliant ‘telling you what they think you want to hear’.

Serial validations of interpretations

Material was always recast and re-received, using a Rogerian ‘reflective listening’, ‘active listening’ mode, a sort of ‘hermeneutics in action’.

The reflections of peers

Discussions with my colleague, a social ecologist and ethnopsychoanalyst, Craig San Roque, who has been working in Central Australia for the last four years on the social ecology of drinking and petrol sniffing among indigenous people, offered further informal confirmations and amplifications (San Roque 1996). I quote his responses.

Notions of autonomy and personal responsibility inform an important stream of ‘alcohol work’ in Western clinical and counselling practice. We derive from this that in the European model, the emphasis on taking personal responsibility depends on a belief that feelings, ideas and action are generated by the self (that is to say, a ‘self’ that corresponds closely to the psychoanalytical ‘Ego’). The conventional response in such circles is that, if clients are not taking personal responsibility, they must be in ‘denial’ (I would endorse this formulation for Western people only), but if your primary experience is that you are not responsible, don’t make your own thoughts and feelings, then taking personal responsibility is not only personally problematic but potentially dangerous to the vitality of the tjukurpa itself, because you are setting yourself at a distance from or becoming indifferent to it. This does not mean Aboriginal people are irresponsible. There is a strong system of social control and sanction operating from within the kinship and cultural matrix which creates a mental containment … I note the especial significance of dreams of family to Aboriginal people … ‘I didn’t dream that dream, the family dreamt it to me’. ‘I also have to note that many of the tjukurpa beings are involved in ‘amoral’ activities, so we must not lose our sense of human beings’ poly-psychic states, their capacity for irony, humour, trickiness, ‘cheekiness’, manipulative negotiations with the tjukurpa … that is, Aboriginal people are not robots locked into prescriptive patterns.
My observations of Aboriginal drunkenness and intoxication ... persuade me that something seems to alter ... an ‘altered state’ of mind, a kind of ellipsis, in which relationship with *tjukurpa* becomes wobbly, questions begin to be raised, an existential questioning, almost as if the experience of intoxication has a role in exploration.

**Results and their implications**

It would seem that, for our small sample at least, indigenous Australians recognize and attribute stream of consciousness at least as often as Flavell et al.’s 234 Stanford college students ($\chi^2 = 0.0579$, df = 1, alpha $>0.9$). See Table.

Table: All Probands

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<th>Proband</th>
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<th>Calibration achieved</th>
<th>Attribution of stream</th>
<th>Attenuation on closing eyes</th>
<th>Attribution of subjectivity to non-human entities</th>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>– Tjukurpa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.S.</td>
<td>Patient</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.X.H.</td>
<td>Non-patient</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes Tjukurpa</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>N.M.</td>
<td>Non-patient</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes Tjukurpa</td>
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<tr>
<td>A.M.</td>
<td>Non-patient</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes Tjukurpa</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.T.</td>
<td>Non-patient</td>
<td>Yes ? False neg.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes Tjukurpa</td>
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<tr>
<td>H.Q.</td>
<td>Non-patient</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>B.K.</td>
<td>Non-patient</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.I.</td>
<td>Non-patient</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes Tjukurpa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

? = equivocal or doubtful response
– = not tested formally

Total no. of positive attributions of ‘stream of consciousness’ = 11
Total no. of attenuation responses = 13
Total no. of attributors of subjectivity to trees and rocks (of 9 tested) = 8
Total no. of attributors of ownership of thought to *tjukurpa* (of 9 tested) = 9

Note: All non-patients in the sample attribute ownership of thought to the *Tjukurpa*. In a comparative Western sample, one would expect the ‘abnormals’ to attribute thought to a non-egoic source.

The patient probands were initially not tested formally on attribution of ownership to the *tjukurpa*, so that the symbol ‘–’ is used in the appropriate cells, but subsequent investigations revealed that both those that could be re-contacted and new patients presenting to the Service overwhelmingly tended to make this attribution as well.
We also noted that the patient subgroup, struggling with their own phenomenological storms, tended to perform more incoherently, rather as we might expect (see Frith & Corcoran’s observation in their study, ‘exploring theory of mind in people with schizophrenia’, 1996). Even so, only 3 out of 8 patients failed to attribute stream of consciousness!

Of course, awareness, constitution and ownership of stream of consciousness are only some of the functions of the self. A phenomenological understanding of indigenous self process must also take factors of reflexiveness, cohesiveness, unity, and agency into account, as Meares points out (1992), and the present investigation is but part of a larger project which proposes to address some of these factors.

Furthermore, there are many compelling (and competing) structural models of self, as the reader well knows, and this is not the place to review them, but perhaps one of the most relevant theme to this discussion is the dichotomy: textual/narrative versus somatic/iconic self, as implied by theorists as diverse as Winnicott (1971), with his true self/false self systems, Jaynes (1982) with his bicameral models of mental experience, and post-modernist depth psychology theorists like Paul Kugler (1990). It is worth noting that at least two Australian ethnopsychiatrists, Cawte (1980), and Hunter (1993) have found Jaynes’s formulations useful in understanding so-called ‘culturally-informed’ experiences (like visions) in indigenous Australians.

To refresh the reader’s memory, Jaynes hypothesizes that up until about 2000 BC there was a sense in which everybody was ‘schizophrenic’ (his term), with minimal ego-consciousness, but with right hemispheric processes sorting out the diversity of experience and arriving at patterns or gestalts which presented to awareness as divine imperatives, telling the individual what to do next. In his view, there is internal (linguistic/syntactic) evidence in the Iliad (understood as a transcribed oral epic), to suggest that pre-Homeric humans experienced right hemisphere activity as autonomous and hallucination-like, the ‘voices of the gods’. Consciousness, in the sense of self-reflexive rational ego awareness, is a relatively late cultural development and Jaynes defines it as ‘the work of lexical metaphor’ or again as ‘the invention of an analog world on the basis of language, paralleling the behavioural world even as the world of mathematics parallels the world of quantities of things’. How much of this categorical division is ‘vertical’ (for instance, a function of bi-hemisphericity), or ‘horizontal’ (a constructivist ‘laying down’ of self through experience), or both, remains an open question. Given the overwhelming tendency of our sample to be conscious of stream of consciousness, a Jaynesian formulation of indigenous mental experience would have to be relativistic rather than quantal. That is, there might be degrees of ‘camerality’ rather than monolithic, ‘either-or’ states. That is, the compartmentalization of inner experience is unlikely to be limited to left versus right hemisphere states. We (Petchkovsky & San Roque 1994) do note, in support of the modified Jaynesian formulation, that in psychodrama work with indigenous groups in Australia and New Zealand,
the director must take particular care lest the protagonist becomes completely carried away by the role. There is an interesting moment in Jane Campion’s film (1992), ‘The Piano’, set in nineteenth century New Zealand, where a young Maori warrior, watching a European enactment of Bluebeard, leaps up on stage with the cry, ‘You coward, we’ll see how brave you are with this war-club up your arse’.

Four further observations need to be noted. I simply present them as empirical findings, with the occasional tentative theoretical formulation.

In the Western Desert dialects, the word ‘kulini’ (verb: ‘is thinking’), ‘kulinytjal/kulinynpa’ (nominalized form: ‘thinking’) (Goddard 1981) is the nearest equivalent to our English ‘thinking’ (both in the sense of cognition and reflexive subjective experience). However, ‘kulini’ is also the word for hearing. Are we to infer that ‘thinking’ is best understood in Central Australian Aboriginal culture as a kind of inner ‘conversation’? It would be worth establishing whether this usage is peculiar to Western Desert languages alone, or more generally distributed among the Aboriginal languages.

By contrast, inner visual processes seem to be differently categorized by our respondents, who made frequent references to ‘ngangkari’ (medicine man/native healer) experiences, in which vivid inner life, and especially a visually modalized one, is culturally expected. In the practice of his craft, the ngangkari has to exercise a form of diagnosis by seeing clairvoyantly into the patient’s body, and to make ‘journeys’ to spirit realms.

Busy-ness of inner process, an ultra-‘high asterisk’ state, was universally thought by our informants to be characteristic of children (tjitji-tjuta), madmen (rama-rama-tjuta), and, in a more controlled way, in shamans (ngangkari-tjuta). One obvious Jungian interpretation might be that all three kinds of individual are somehow ‘closer’ to the collective unconscious; the first developmentally, the second through psychopathology, and the third through aptitude and training. But this would have to be the subject of a more detailed study. Here I am merely reporting some preliminary empirical findings.

The possible false negative response of case 3 suggests sophisticated members of this culture distinguish between gross and fine awarenesses of ‘empty-mindedness’ beyond the limitations of Flavell’s paradigm. This finer-grained description of empty-mindedness recognizes particularly tranquil states of being in which very little activity of a ‘thinking’ kind is taking place. There may be (reflexive) sensory awareness, but the usual flow of inner dialogue and lexically-mediated fantasy is minimal. This is well-recognized by meditation teachers in both the Zen and Theravada Buddhist traditions. The Sayadaw U Janika, Abbot of Chanmyay Yeiktha, a leading Theravadin Monastery in Myanmar (Burma), and a representative of arguably the purest unbroken meditation tradition in South East Asia, remarked to me in a visit to Australia in 1990: ‘Two weeks into an intensive meditation retreat, when the concentration is good enough, the meditator notes that he may only get one thought every three minutes or so’. This slowing of thought is well documented in the
Abidhamma, the Pali Canonical text on the phenomenology of meditative states (Nyanatiloka 1970).

We are left with an impression of a culture of richly differentiated subjectivity.

Conclusions

It is clear, within the limitations of sample size, that most of our informants were very observant introspectionists, and had an awareness of stream of consciousness at least as acute as Flavell et al.’s sample of Stanford College students. However, their ‘theory of mind’ (in the broader sense of the term) is different in certain dramatic ways from our own somewhat implicit Western one, predicated by the appropriative ‘Ego’ so well delineated by Hillman (1977). What are some of these differences?

The stream of thought was clearly considered to be sensorily constituted to a larger degree than one might expect in Westerners. (The comparative Western studies have not been done yet to my knowledge.) Informants kept mentioning attenuation through shutting the eyes and reducing stimulation. There were also tantalizing hints that such states of attenuation were regarded as valuable. One surmises that sensory modulation of the stream is a matter of considerable salience in Central Australians, otherwise it would not have provoked such consistent spontaneous comment.

The remainder, that which is not sensorily constituted, was universally attributed to the tjukurpa rather than the Ego’s doings. I would argue at this stage that this is not an absolute attribution, but more a matter of focus on different categories of experience. Anangu (Aboriginal people) are clearly aware of personal agency. However, whereas a Western person might focus on/value what they produce; as in ‘I’ ‘made’ this thought (we will not go into the epistemics of the illusory/versus absolutist nature of human agency), the indigenous person, living in a culture which regards ‘I’-driven activities as deplorably alienating and infantile, although remediable, would be much more interested in an orientation towards the tjukurpa, the ‘collective’ aspects of mental life that Jung described as ‘the objective psyche’ in our quote above. The anthropologist Myers (1986) made interesting observations of Pintupi regarding ‘self-willed’ activities in children as age-congruent and not blameable, but revealing a lack of awareness of ‘internal states as extensively connected with a web of significant others’, or with ‘objects’ that Westerners would describe as external to the self (ibid., p. 158), including, as Nancy Munn (1970) has pointed out, the material world. This condition was remedied through growing up and the initiation ceremonies, with their resultant deepening awareness of tjukurpa Law.

Subjectivity was also attributed to non-human entities, including trees and rocks. Lest we rush to dismiss such notions as absurd, let us remember Bell’s theorem. The Irish physicist John Bell formulated a theorem in 1964,
which holds that the reality of the universe must be non-local. Other contemporary theorists such as David Bohm, who have examined the implications of this, have proposed a universal information field which has a form of ‘knowledge’ as one of its essential properties. There may thus be a rudimentary ‘subjectivity’ at even the subatomic level.

Thus the indigenous experience of self is both more exclusive and inclusive than the Western one, in terms of the locus of subjectivity, as well as in terms of its focus, what is considered of importance.

The foregoing has important implications in ‘death in custody syndromes’ in the Australian Prison system, psychotherapy with indigenous patients, and diagnosis of psychopathology in the indigenous subject. This is not the place to develop these themes in detail, but we can venture a forensic recommendation.

For an indigenous person, who derives self-sustenance from ‘country’, a hostile, solitary, alienating and non-empathic (in Kohut’s sense) environment like solitary confinement fragments the self even more forcefully, with a resulting radical anxiety and anxious rage which is directed towards the self as well as others. At the very least, some forensic equivalent of psychiatric ‘specialing’ is required. Nor is it any good to provide emotionally tokenist or (worse still) contemptuous surveillance. People in self-fragmentational distress are acutely aware of even subtle ill-will and failure of empathy on the part of their supposed carers. (In good quality ‘specialing’, an empathic nurse is appointed to be constantly with the patient. The psychodynamic rationale is that the empathy and continuous presence constellate something of a ‘self-object’ experience for the patient, whose existential anxiety and rage might then settle quickly, rather in the way that a firm but empathic maternal presence works to settle a distraught toddler.)

Finally, this study, quite unintentionally, generated a small but important linguistic revision. Consider the Western Desert Languages word wati-ya, the term given by our respondents to describe the subjectivity of non-animate entities like trees and rocks (Petchkovsky 1999). Enquiries and lexical research revealed that this aspect of the term (which itself featured in only one lexicon, Cliff Goddard’s Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara Dictionary (1981), and even then in the wati-prefix form only) had never previously been recorded or remarked upon.

In Goddard’s dictionary, we read:

Wati- verb prefix. 1. (with actions especially motion) across, moving from one side of your field of vision to the other ... 2. (with posture, stance) facing to the side, presenting a side-on view, in profile’.

What is not picked up in Goddard’s text is that the metaphor of ‘stance’ or ‘profile’ has subjectivist implications.

Clearly, the questions that might elicit the more nuanced meaning had never been asked. (Or to put it more correctly, since the direct asking of questions is considered culturally discourteous, the appropriate invocations had never been made.)
No sensible human being would call the Aboriginal attribution of subjectivity to rocks psychotic. But let us ask why? It cannot be just because traditional dwellers are so plainly highly functional, and recognize madness (rama-rama) as a possible state of being. Nor is the naïve cultural relativity argument so favoured by psychiatry (DSM-IV and ICD 10) and post-modernist ideology persuasive. (‘You can believe in superefficacious cosmic dingbats just so long as most people in your culture do’.) Just what are the boundaries of a ‘culture’ anyway? And what about a belief in the redeeming value of child sacrifice, etc.? Perhaps what is emerging is a hierarchy of mind-matter discourses? Perhaps we have a sense that there are some trivial ways of minding matter, and some more profound ones?

The Aborigines I know have no difficulty in discriminating between subject and object, and they are well aware of the futility of wishful thinking. So the usual reductionist ‘explanations’ of animistic ontologies along the lines of ‘magical thinking’ (the infantile wish and infantile failure to discriminate between subject and object) are not very satisfactory. Are there levels of ‘magical thinking’ which might not be based on naïveté or pathology, but on intimations of unity? Meditators spend life-times trying to regain glimpses of the pre-dualistic ‘oceanic’ consciousness of infancy. Jung’s notion, borrowed from alchemy, of the unus mundus (one world), is another expression of this vision.

Finally, I am reminded that, within the Jungian literature, probably the most evocative contemporary treatment of this theme of watiya, the subjectivity of matter, is to be found in David Holt’s delightfully provocative The Psychology of C. G. Jung, Essays on Application and Deconstruction, where he invites us to:

Consider the chain of being which extends through animal to vegetable to mineral. Animals are attentive … until recently it is probably true that the great majority of people on earth were aware of animals expecting, fearing something of them. There was a real sense of an animal world of attentiveness out there in our surroundings.

But plants, stones, minerals? Does it make any sense to speak of them as attentive? Thirty five years ago, when that question first stirred in my mind in response to certain of my dreams, the only support I could find for an affirmative answer was in the work of mystic and pantheistic poets. But today … [with ‘deep ecology’ and Jim Lovelock’s Gaia, my condensation] … however ridiculous it may seem to our subject/object consciousness, there is a voice which cries: ‘Yes. animals, plants, minerals, stones, the whole environment, animate and inanimate- it is not indifferent. It’s not just out there. It’s here, in attendance. We are together, caught in the same act’.

(Holt 1992)

My indigenous mentors would approve.
Quinze adultes aborigènes d’Australie centrale (8 patients, 7 collègues) ont passé le test un peu modifié du « stream of consciousness » de Flavell (des images de personnes avec des bulles (de pensées) vides ou remplies, et une invitation à assigner une image à l’état d’esprit d’un second expérimentateur qui est en train de tranquillement être assis ou lire). Quatre seulement parmi les personnes testées ont assigné la bulle vide à l’expérimentateur montré dans sa tranquillité. Ce résultat est au moins aussi bon que celui trouvé chez des étudiants du Collège Stanford testés par Flavell. L’expérience a provoqué chez ceux qui étaient interrogés, des commentaires détaillés sur la subjectivité, donnant à penser qu’il y a une grande subtilité de conscience phénoménologique chez les aborigènes d’Australie centrale, ceux-ci attribuant une forme de subjectivité aux entités non humaines, y compris à des éléments inanimés. Nous avons ainsi appris que le mot Watiya du dialecte utilisé dans les déserts de l’ouest, est réservé à la subjectivité attribuée aux arbres et aux rochers. L’appartenance de toute pensée est attribuée à Tjurkurpa (la fonction des rêves aborigènes). Ces attributions culturelles aborigènes sont comparées et différenciées avec les reflexions de Jung et du post-jungien David Holt sur la nature de la subjectivité, et les notions religieuses de rédemption de la matière.
di Stanford testati da Flavell. L'esperimento suscitò particolari commenti da parte degli informatori sulla soggettività, che fa pensare che nella popolazione Aborigena dell'Australia Centrale vi sia una grande sottigliezza nella consapevolezza fenomenologica e la tendenza ad attribuire una sorta di soggettività a entità non umane, ivi compresi elementi inanimati. Abbiamo appreso che Watiya, termine del Dialetto dei Deserti Occidentali, era riservato alla soggettività attribuita agli alberi e alle rocce. Il possesso di tutto il pensiero era attribuito al Tjukurpa (Lo stato di sogno degli Aborigeni). Tali attribuzioni della cultura Aborigena vennero confrontate e contrapposte alle riflessioni sviluppate da Jung e dal post-junguiano David Holt a proposito della natura della soggettività e delle nozioni religiose sulla redenzione della materia.

Quince adultos aborígenes de Australia Central (8 pacientes y 7 colegas) fueron presentados en una modificación cultural del experimento de Flavell “La Corriente de la conscientización” (se trata de representaciones de personas con bombas de pensamiento vacías, y con una invitación a asignar un determinado estado mental a la imagen de un segundo experimentador a quien se aprecia leyendo o tranquilamente sentado). Solo 4 de las personas le asignaron la burbuja de pensamiento vacía al tranquilo observador. Este resultado fue al menos tan bueno como el probado por Flavell en su muestra con estudiantes de la universidad de Stanford. El experimento provocó detallados comentarios de los informantes acerca de la subjetividad, sugiriendo gran sutilidad de conciencia fenomenológica en los aborígenes de Australia Central, y atribuyendo una suerte de subjetividad a las entidades no-humanas, incluidos los elementos inanimados. Aprendimos que el término watiya del Dialecdo de los Desiertos Occidentales se reserva a la subjetividad de los árboles y las rocas. La posesión de todos los pensamientos se le atribuye a Tjukurpa (El sueño aborigen). Estos atributos de la cultura aborigen se compararon y contrastaron con las reflexiones desarrolladas por Jung y el post-junguiano David Holt sobre la naturaleza de la subjetividad, y las nociones religiosas de la redención de la materia.

References


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