

## **The History of the Skin in Psychoanalysis Dermic Structures in Society and Culture** Leon S. Brenner

The skin is the largest organ in the human body. It takes shape very early in the development of the fetus, around weeks 5-8 of pregnancy, giving the fetus access to sensory experiences that precede the formation of the eyes, the ears, and the tongue. This makes skin sensations to be among the first sensory representations imprinted on the human psyche even before the fetus can hear the voice of the mother from inside the womb. This renders the skin itself to be a significant object of interest in many disciplines, especially in psychoanalysis.

The significance of the skin for the understanding of human psychic processes has been acknowledged in the field of psychoanalysis from its very inception. In Sigmund Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920) and "The Ego and the Id" (1923), one can find explicit specifications of the surface of the body as a crucial factor in the initiation and development of the ego. In the latter paper, Freud writes: "the ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body" (p. 26).

Following Freud, many other notable psychoanalysts like Donald Winnicott, Wilfrid Bion, Didier Anzieu, Donald Meltzer, Thomas Ogden, Frances Tustin, Esther Bick, and others, have come to comment on the indispensable function of the skin in the formation and integration of the human ego. Moreover, they suggest that disturbances in the skin function should determine most interpretations of psychopathology. Congruent with archival texts written by the aforementioned scholars, this research project concentrates on the psychic function of the skin. Particularly, it aims to transpose the psychoanalytic discussion on the skin from the realm of *ego construction* to that of Freudian *drive theory* (*Trieblehre*) and investigate its social and cultural implications. Drawing from this, the main research questions underlying this project are: (1) how can one think of the skin as a modality of the Freudian drive—the 'dermic drive'? (2) how can developments in the formation of the 'dermic' modality of the drive give structure to contemporary social and cultural phenomena? I intend to answer these questions by relying on a variety of archival psychoanalytic texts that address the skin function, trying to revive them by comparing them with more contemporary approaches to the body and the skin from the domain of the social and cultural sciences. In short, the project aims to address the psychoanalytic notion of the skin from a contemporary social and cultural perspectives in a monograph titled *Dermic Structures in Society and Culture* (already discussed with Springer Publishing). The Gerhard Fichtner scholarship will be devoted to writing the first chapter in the monograph that charts out the *history of the skin in psychoanalysis*.

### **Sources**

The bibliographical sources for this research projects are split into two groups: (1) psychoanalytic theories of the body's surface and (2) contemporary cultural theories of the skin. The first group includes texts in German written by: Freud (1920, 1923), Federn (1952), Schilder (1950); texts in French written by: Anzieu (1989, 1990a, 1990b), Houzel (1990); and texts written in English by: Bick (1987, 2002), Meltzer (1975, 1994), Ogden (1989, 1992), Pines (1994), Tustin (1981, 1984, 1991, 1992), Winnicott (1934, 1975), Bion (1962, 1967). A

further aim is to find more references written in German in the Bundesarchiv Koblenz. The second group includes contemporary social and cultural theories of the skin such as: Ahmed (2006), Benthien (2002), Castaneda (2001), Connor (2004), Grosz (1994), Kilby (2001), Prosser (1998), Weiss (1999), Shildrick (2008), Tate (2005), and Tyler (2001).

## **Research Method**

In his paper “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” (1915), Freud identifies the drive (*Trieb*) as one of the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis. According to Freud, the drive is the rootstock of psychic life and the basis of the experience of the unconscious. Freud named two major drives, the oral and the anal corresponding with the erogenous orifices of the body: the mouth and anus. The skin is not, strictly speaking, an orifice but it does provide a sensational opening to the world. It is the first to shape our sensorial experience, taking part in the formation of the infant’s first engagement with the world. Taking the above mentioned into account, this project transposes the psychoanalytic discussion on the psychic function of the skin to the realm of the Freudian drive, developing the notion of the ‘*dermic drive*’. This perspective initiates the interdisciplinary investigation of the skin function at the core of this project. By integrating a psychoanalytic theory of the skin as a modality of the drive with contemporary cultural theories of the skin, this interdisciplinary project presents a critical reflection on the notion of the skin that integrates ideas pertaining to psychoanalysis and social and cultural theory. The research methodology utilized in this project is qualitative and is comprised of theorizing, defining, and comparing psychoanalytic texts and supporting findings with examples from case studies. The project aims to produce innovations in psychoanalytic theory but also strives for application in ethics of psychology, and social and cultural critique. The scholarship duration will culminate in the publication of a paper on the *history of the skin function in psychoanalysis* that will be integrated into a chapter in a monograph on the function of the ‘*dermic drive*’ in society and culture. This monograph will serve as my habilitation project in the following years.

## **State of the Art**

Many cultural theorists have augmented their work on the skin using psychoanalytic theories (e.g. Benthien, 2002; Connor, 2004; Grosz, 1994; Tyler, 2001). These shed light on the immense importance of the body—and particularly the skin—in enabling our relationships to ourselves and our societies. In this they emphasize one of the more important tenets of contemporary cultural theory; namely, that the self and the social are always already embodied (Bordo, 1993; Grosz, 1994). However, these theorists commonly utilize the psychoanalytic notion of the skin to form cultural theories of the self. That is not for nothing, as the psychoanalytic literature published on the skin has strictly concerned its function in the construction of the ego. This is where this research project is distinct, in the fact that it comes to think about how exactly the skin makes us who and what we are socially and culturally from the vantage point of Freudian drive theory. In implementing the newly developed notion of the ‘*dermic drive*’ in examining contemporary social and cultural questions this project asks: how skin modification practices affect one’s belongingness the group? how skin containment affects the experience of sex, sexuality, and gender? how skin color impacts the development of the embodied self and embodies societies? All of these and more are developed into a contemporary study of the function of the skin in psychoanalysis and social and cultural theory. The scholarship duration will enable me to study the history of the skin function in psychoanalysis, charting a cross-linguistic psychoanalytic genealogy that has not yet been studied in a systematic way.

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