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## Johan Asplund's The Elementary Forms of Social Life

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By Lika Rodin



[Det sociala livets elementära former](#)

[\[The Elementary Forms of Social Life\]](#)

by Johan Asplund

Bokförlaget Korpen, 1987/2000, 268 pages.

Johan Asplund, whose work has been rather underrepresented in the international academic arena, is frequently seen as the “father” of contemporary Swedish social psychology. Remarkably productive, Asplund gained popularity in the 1970–1980s, and his books are still widely used in academic curricula across the country (Eriksson, 2005). *The Elementary Forms of Social Life* is one of Asplund’s most famous and favored writings. Released in 1987, it introduces a distinctive view of the nature and mechanisms of sociality: the theory of social responsiveness. The concept is employed to explain a concrete social

phenomenon – burnout – and, thus, has the potential to attract the attention of academics, policy makers, and the general public. The author refers to a variety of social and philosophical theories, as well as to fiction literature, although his ground is symbolic interactionism, which sees an individual as a social creature and thus virtually inconceivable outside relationships with others.

The book comprises three parts that are organized as a discussion of the fundamental aspects of human sociality. Each chapter is divided into a number of subsections, which facilitate the reader's navigation. The book opens with an extended introduction that outlines the main concepts therein and provides a brief overview of the text. This is followed by a detailed presentation of the central theoretical framework (Chapter 1), a discussion of burnout in terms of the theory of social responsiveness (Chapter 2), and the author's ideas on the implications of his findings for the foundations of social psychology as an academic field (Chapter 3). I will focus on the first two chapters as directly related to the issue of the social determinants of health and illness.

Asplund borrows the notion of “elementary forms” of social life – a collective basis of individual behavior (p. 30) – from the classics of social theory, striving to develop a distinctive social-psychological conception, grounded in the notion of *social responsiveness*. Social responsiveness is pre-normative but not pre-linguistic, potentially creative and destructive, driven by spontaneity to make up a social individual. Asplund explains: “That a human is a responsive creature means just that she has a general tendency to respond to stimuli” (p. 33, my translation here and throughout), although, in contrast to reflex, the response is never pre-programmed. Responsiveness is not a mechanistic and standardized reaction, and a responsive individual appears as an “interested creature” (p. 34).

To exemplify the concept of social responsiveness as an elementary form of social life, Asplund reflects upon an interaction between a kite and kite flyer. The kite's free-floating movements in the sky and its erratic “reply” to the directions of the kite flyer help to illustrate the type of unstructured social exchange associated with social responsiveness. In the introductory chapter, the author warns the reader not to take the example literally: the kite flyer just “imagines the activity to be social,” “personifying” the kite or “taking its position,” in Herbert Mead's terms (p. 15). Similarly, in another example of the interaction between a car and a driver, Asplund does not claim to acknowledge the agency of non-humans (objects and machines), as do Callon (1986) and Latour (2005), relying instead on elaborations of symbolic interactionism about an ongoing conversation between different parts of the self. This idea becomes especially useful in the further discussion on burnout, which I will turn to shortly.

Extreme forms of responsiveness may produce contradictory effects and, therefore, are frequently subjected to societal control. Asplund discusses the phenomenon of fetishism as an exaggerated manifestation of social responsiveness resulting from obsession with an object or stimulus and one's eventual identification with it, followed by a stimulus-response stereotypy. He explains: "The fetishist emerges as a libidinous machine. The ambiguous and uncertain social responsiveness becomes unambiguous and deterministic. The fetish is confusingly similar to a key stimulus, something which triggers a fixed pattern of motions" (p. 74). When social responsiveness reaches its extreme, it transforms into social reflex and may play out as deviant actions that society tends to control by means of total institutions, such as psychiatric clinics and prisons. Asplund refers to the Foucauldian notion of "discipline" to explain a mechanism of the societal regulation of responsiveness. The spontaneity of stimulus-reaction relationships becomes restricted and organized. Discipline works through the invention of time scheduling, isolation, and the suppression of elementary affective replies.

Social responsiveness is considered in a complex relationship with its opposition, namely elementary asocial unresponsiveness or natural tiredness, leading to a switch of focus from the current to another stimulus (p. 13). Apart from that, the author elaborates on the notion of secondary asocial unresponsiveness as an effect of life in modern society. Natural attitude becomes restricted by in-socialized norms and developed rituals. *The Little Prince*, a fairy-tale by Antoine Saint Exupéry, is introduced as an example to ensure the reader's comprehension of the concept. A childhood failure in getting adults to recognize a snake that swallowed an elephant uncovers a gap between the early-age social responsiveness and the secondary asocial unresponsiveness of the grown up and civilized individual. The prince appears as a "genius in social responsiveness," whose behavior is authentic, informal, and meaningful (p. 115). His behavior contrasts with modern sociality, structured and limited by norms and (self-) regulations, a world of interactions characterized by self-absorption, lack of imagination, isolation, insensitivity, and standardization. Asplund emphasizes that ritualization of social life leads to the development of asocial unresponsiveness in society members suppressing social improvisation.

In the second chapter, the author replies to the Christina Maslach's book [\*Burnout: The Cost of Caring\*](#), published in 1985, with respect and a number of critical points, followed by a reformulation of the central phenomenon – burnout – in terms of the theory of social responsiveness. According to Maslach, burnout affects professionals whose labor content presupposes social interactions, such as in the sphere of welfare and service provision (e.g., a psychologist or social worker). Asplund immediately notices that many of these professions are relatively new,

and, moreover, they deal with social interactions shaped by practices and ideologies of (post) industrial society. Burnout is “a process and a product of the social interactions” (p. 142). It manifests, according to Maslach, with three symptoms: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a limited effectiveness of job performance (p. 143). Asplund is interested in emotional exhaustion, which is explained with the metaphor of an empty pot. This pot was once filled with water that had eventually evaporated. Thus, emotions appear as an internal resource of a person that is brought into social relationships from within and consumed. Asplund resists such a “mechanical” interpretation of emotions – “as if feelings would be petrol and that a social worker consequently would need to be filled up after the end of the workday” (Ibid.) – and the separation of emotions from interactions.

Work overloads, workplace conflicts, and unclear working requirements are some of the prerequisites of burnout for Maslach, but for Asplund, a tired social worker shouting at a client or a tired school principal who quits his job after several tough years does not necessarily suffer from burnout. What should be stressed instead, he insists, is an absence of feedback that would come as recognition of one’s existence: “If one is assumed as non-existing, so finds one oneself in a risk zone for burnout, or the experience of non-existence is already a full-developed burnout” (p. 149). Emotions are constitutive for feedback. They can be imagined as a “pendulum” in the interactive process: “When burnout has happened, the pendulum has stopped beating between ego and alter” (p. 150). Thus, burnout originates outside the individual as an outcome of social interactions; the absence of a response aborts emotionality (Ibid.).

What can cause this condition? One’s identification with their social role as a result of misbalanced relationships between the socialized and the affective part of the self, replies Asplund. In the context of the “abstract sociality” that emerged as a byproduct of the industrial-era modernization and the expansion of social sciences, people increasingly live in a “clean and empty, and abstract society”, “an invisible but omnipresent medium which pervades all specific social institutions, without coinciding with them and instead is somehow separate from them or stands above them” (p. 152). Asplund insists that burnout is a morbid state of an “abstract individual in an abstract society” (Ibid).

Abstract sociality is non-productive and blank. Interactions are not internally grounded and enacted for their own sake. Responses are “pure,” feelings are “empty”; they emerge and subside in a formalized exchange (p. 171). Concrete sociality, in contrast, is focused and meaningful. It is like a flow of the lively exchanges in which “[r]esponses and feelings do not need to consume themselves without power to speak outside” (Ibid.). Asplund acknowledges that concrete sociality is not

without shortcomings (e.g., domestic conflicts). Furthermore, natural tiredness can cause a state of elementary asocial unresponsiveness, which is, however, differentiated from burnout. A doctor, who associates fully with the role of a mass-service provider, develops fixed routines and a style of reception of patients as “abstract social beings”, should be defined, according to Asplund, as suffering burnout; even beyond that, “[O]ne cannot harbor caring with abstract social creatures, empathize with them or treat them in a personal way, especially not if oneself is forced to act as an abstract social creature. Consequently, there will be not only burnout, but burnout plus a feeling of guilt” (p. 173).

Maslach’s book concludes with an emphasis on physical exercise and psychological relaxation, and Asplund does not find much new in this suggestion. He instead problematizes the role of relaxation courses as rather strengthening an individual’s experience of the self as an abstract being involved in an abstract activity. Burnout is not about the exhaustion that results from an overload of work; it signifies a shortage or lack of social responsiveness in contemporary society, which is dominated by abstract social relationships. “The pure, empty and abstract sociality is a reality and we cannot escape it. We cannot take off our social creature, our role-playing doppelganger, as if it was an overcoat” (p. 178). The only way to deal with burnout, as follows from the book, is by fostering social responsiveness in society members and the re-humanization of both private and professional interactions.

Asplund is rather an atypical writer, very popular, but hardly fully accepted within the national academic domain (Eriksson, 2005), probably due to his trans-disciplinary ambition and certain fascination with an underrepresented field of social psychology. However, his view on burnout and his critique of Maslach’s US-based studies can be seen as reflecting a particularity of the national intellectual and social-economic landscape. The developed Swedish labor protective legislation and practices, as well as the expansion of welfare state in the spheres of health care and social work (Lundström and Wjstrom, 1997) that tend to entail institutionalization, professionalization and, eventually, industrialization of service provider-consumer relationships, allow one to imagine the specific type of burnout described in Asplund’s theory. Work overload seems to be not the primary issue in the national context. Instead, the scholar views the formalization of social interactions as a major risk factor for people’s wellbeing at work. He is somewhat pessimistic in his prognosis and offers a rather limited range of solutions, since the reason for burnout is defined not as individual-psychological, but as emerging from a wide social transformation toward the standardization of different spheres of social life. Asplund appear to long for the unstructured interactions that he believes are essential and fundamentally healthy for the individual. Psychological troubles, in his view, result from suppressing and disciplining the

elementary social spontaneity. This interpretation contrasts with yet another US-based exchange-type theory of overwhelming work duties and unsatisfying emotional feedback that service workers increasingly receive from their customers (Hochschild, 2005). Asplund's book can hardly clarify whether burnout is the same for American flight attendants and health care workers in Sweden, but it certainly provokes this question and offers an alternative theoretical framework to assist the search for possible answers. The contextualization of Asplund's writing allows the recognition of its value for a contemporary discussion of the issues of health and social-psychological wellbeing.

[Lika Rodin](#) is a lecturer in social psychology at the University of Skövde, Sweden.

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