

Strange relationship

Dwight Turner explores the link between prejudice, narcissism and individuation, and finds that prejudice may well be a key to recovering much of who we are

At a recent workshop, a client of mine, who I shall call David, was asked what he did for a living. When he said that he was a psychotherapist, the facilitator said he did not look much like a psychotherapist to her, and that in fact he looked more like a bouncer!

The experience of David being stereotyped and disrespected reminded me of some of my own experiences over the years and of the numerous ways that prejudice plays a part in all our lives. Borrowing from McDermott, who stated that 'a [therapist] must learn how to be receptive, not only to the words that come into his ears, but to everything he experiences',¹ David's experience led me to want to understand what the possible purpose of prejudice might be and why it is so common and so demeaning at the same time.

Pre-personal development and difference

Prejudices have an impact on us all in some way, because of our gender, sexual orientation, race, culture, age or religion. They are present from the cradle to the grave, and it is my assertion that they have a large role to play in helping us to understand our true nature.

To go back to the very beginning, it is worth understanding how prejudices come into being. Biles,²

in her article on racial and cultural awareness in children, suggests an outline for the development stages of prejudice. Borrowing from her work, I have provided a brief breakdown of these stages, showing at what age children reach differing levels of awareness of difference:

Figure 1: Childhood development and prejudice

Age	Level of awareness of difference
0-2	Children are learning what is 'me' and what is 'not me' and mimic the behaviour of adults.
3-4	Children are better at noticing differences in people, but their thinking is limited, distorted and inconsistent. They often believe stereotypes and form pre-prejudices.
5-6	Children continue to ask questions about difference and can understand the explanations given to them. They can now make distinctions between members of the same racial or cultural group.
7-8	Children experience feelings of shame and pride at this age, and they are aware of racism against their own group.

For an individual child there is a natural curiosity about other children around them from a very early age. This solidifies as children grow and attempt to understand themselves as well as the 'other'. In her work on prejudice in children, Aboud states that 'the age of four is probably a safe bet if one wanted to pick a single age at which children express negative reactions to certain ethnic members',³ suggesting that this is the point where possible prejudice takes root. She adds, surprisingly perhaps, that 'pre-seven children do not adopt their parents' attitudes and are often more prejudiced than their parents. Post-seven children are influenced by their parents but not solely by them.'³

Children gain this knowledge from a variety of sources – from TV, society or history, for example – but it is via the weight of knowledge handed down through their family and community that they gain the greatest understanding around difference. As Ponterotto et al mention: 'When our children see us pondering and reflecting on multicultural issues such as racism, homophobia, sexism, ageism, and so forth, it signals to them that such self reflection is healthy.'⁴ This statement raises the idea of just how vital, yet also sadly how rare, it is for parents to take responsibility for their child's development from this perspective.

In my own experience, it was in these same early years that I first sat and pondered such issues as racism, and became aware of homophobia and sexism. For me, these influences included sitting silently



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‘I recall my first feelings of shame, anger and sadness whilst watching *Roots*... Seeing aspects of my cultural history played out on television was a chastening experience’

before the TV with my parents watching *Roots*, the rich generational journey presented in Alex Haley’s story, with feelings of shame, anger and sadness.

This realisation of difference for children, if not handled appropriately, can bring with it a sense of shame as held either within the culture, religion, class, or family etc. Jacoby states, ‘Membership of a certain race or family, for instance, can also provoke a sense of inferiority. Thus shame results from the manner in which my entire being or self is valued – or more precisely, devalued – not only by others but by myself.’⁵

I’m going to argue here that the growth of the child’s ego contains within it the developmental stages outlined above. To take this idea further, the process of developing an ego has to involve a process of both identifying and understanding ‘the other’, not just the difference between mother, father and siblings, but even in cultural, sexual and other ways. This process works on many subtle levels, and involves working out for oneself what Stevens calls ‘our conscious awareness of existing, together with a sense of personal identity’.⁶

So, as the child’s ego develops, so does a sense of difference; not only influenced by the parental network, but also from many other sources. The child can then contend with difficult feelings, for example, shame, guilt or worthlessness. From personal experience I can recall this period quite clearly. When I was

perhaps seven or eight, seeing aspects of my cultural history played out in *Roots* was a chastening experience. I remember the sadness and the grounding nature of the experience; a stark difference from the days I would spend running around in the playground with my friends of different sexes and cultures. I doubt though if my family back then knew how to help me normalise these feelings; some may have been suppressed, and I am sure others have been acted out inappropriately over the years.

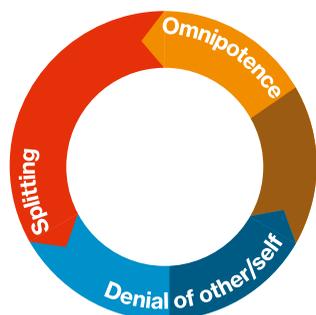
Sometimes though, following these experiences, the child is unaware of how to process the shame, anger or other emotion and, because of a desire, built from love, to copy the position of the parents or society, these feelings can be projected onto ‘an other’. At this point prejudices have already taken a firm hold, and can take on a stronger form as the ego stabilises and the child emerges into the adult world.

Narcissism and prejudice

If this ego position remains uncontested, the teenager can emerge into early adulthood still holding the outmoded prejudices of their early years. This creates a challenge in that often the sense of self is identified with these, and a level of destructive narcissism creeps in as the ego fights to retain these prejudices.

The diagram on the next page outlines this split, showing what happens with the aspects of the self that are pushed into the shadow.

Figure 2: Narcissism and the denial of the other



Dalal talks of prejudice as ‘a dehumanising process, through which “an other” is transformed into “the other”, from one of “us” into one of “them”. The racialised and dehumanised other is positioned outside the moral universe with all its attendant requirements and obligations to fellow human beings.’⁷ It is as if, in order to maintain this process and affirm the sense of superiority gained through the projection of unwanted aspects onto another, the narcissist needs ‘the other’ to be a certain way. Should this fail to happen then the ego ‘cracks’, leading to the recovery of all that has been dismissed as part of the self, together with a sense of shame at what the ego has done to ‘the other’. The confirmation that the ego is right normally emerges through an unconscious process of

projective identification, with ‘the other’ being prejudiced against or stereotyped and then acting out that given role.

Far too often, however, this unconscious dance can take on quite an aggressive air, as the stereotyper literally fights to maintain that air of omnipotence. In her paper on Irigaray, the American psychotherapist Whitford speaks of something similar: ‘Narcissism here is the instinctive hostility to anything new or different or other than self (what for the infant was the impingement of reality on its fantasy or possession of, and permanent union with, the mother).’⁸

The impact on the stereotyped could even be considered as a type of what I would call ‘enforced counter-transference’, which, if one is not fully conscious of it, is then acted out, leaving the receiver resentful that they have failed to be true to themselves. Laing speaks about this most eloquently when he states that, ‘If one does succumb, if one is seduced, one becomes estranged from oneself and is guilty thereby of self-betrayal.’⁹

Client example

To describe my original client further: David is a white, working-class, broad shouldered, heterosexual male psychotherapist with tattoos on his arms. He has often described having to hold different stereotypes, both in his working and private life. His presenting issue in

our work was the anger he held within him, with his history including an abusive father and his late teenage years spent enduring various conflicts with authority.

Given his past experiences, the facilitator’s comment could have been seen as yet another attempt to put him down and leave him feeling ashamed of himself for not ‘looking like a therapist should’; something reminiscent of his experiences with his parents. They might even have left him detached from the group and unable to complete the workshop he had paid a lot of money to attend, whilst also feeling some resentment towards the facilitator.

Following years of work around his parents and their emotional abuse, what David chose to do was to feel the blow of the comment and not take it on, which allowed him to stay engaged with the facilitator. Then he challenged the comment and said, ‘Psychotherapist. Bouncer. Given that comment, what’s the difference?’ He noticed this lightened the mood both for himself and the other participants.

In our work I asked what that was like for him, and he said it was ‘challenging but worthwhile’. In the past, comments like that from his parents would have left him feeling resentful as he would replay the scenario over and over in his mind. In engaging further with the facilitator though, and not allowing the feelings to take root, he got what he needed from the workshop, and felt able to connect with the facilitator in a way that surprised him and ‘hopefully the facilitator as well’.

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Individuation and difference

As therapists we have all, I like to believe, entered this profession with a view to understanding ourselves that little bit better. Another means of viewing psychotherapy therefore could be that our true self at some point wants to recover much of what has been judged and then split off from itself in the earlier stages of development. Khan speaks of this when he says, 'the person who could be described as uptight is actually closing himself into his own ego centre and is not enriching himself. He becomes judgmental of other people and he becomes judgmental as he sees the other person as an "it".'¹⁰

To add to this view, Stevens, one could argue, offers Jung's position on the narcissistic position I described earlier, and the path therapy takes us towards becoming whole once again. He states that Jung is not 'advocating a narcissistic withdrawal from the world, the termination of relationships or the abrogation of social responsibilities. On the contrary, "Individuation does not shut out the world but gathers the world to oneself".'¹⁶ Tennes talks about this from a different perspective when she says, 'At a transpersonal level, the personal self must encounter ontological otherness – that which is beyond the personal altogether'.¹¹

In the context of prejudices, all of these quotes suggest the need for a move away from the ego position to one which

involves the recovery of the other aspects split off from the self in childhood. Therefore, as therapists, facilitators, or whoever else in the helping professions, the challenge for us is to notice these prejudices when they appear, or when our fears lead us to drive the other away, as this creates a distance in relationship borne out of our deeper fear of an aspect of our true self. This aspect may have been lost during our lifetime, or over several generations, and there is an enormous challenge in retrieving it, but there is also a greater responsibility and reward.

For me, learning to be comfortable with my own authority as a black supervisor is a good example of the struggle to regain that which has been previously split off from me. Briefly, from a personal perspective, my own childhood was one of emotional abuse from undermining parents, so the idea of being a black man in a position of authority has always troubled me. Yet, through relating to my colleagues, talking to them and watching how they own, or even struggle to own, their authority, this has been one route to becoming more comfortable with this aspect of myself. Personal therapy has been another invaluable route to this rediscovery.

What I am saying is that prejudices may well be a key to the recovery of much of who we are. Too often though, prejudices just become judged or suppressed or both, and the opportunity to learn from them is lost. Prejudices are challenging, are also

often held with an almost aggressive stubbornness, and can be extremely painful to the person on the receiving end of them. But from a psychological perspective, prejudices are simply aspects of ourselves forcibly projected onto others. So we have an obligation in the current cultural, sexual and religious climate to see prejudice as another route to internal growth: one that may take a lifetime to complete but will aid ourselves and our clients. We have an obligation to learn from 'the other' and to risk them becoming just 'an other', before reincorporating that aspect back into our self.

Finally, as Ponterotto et al mention, speaking about one aspect of prejudice and our means of moving beyond it, 'multicultural development, in its various forms, is a lifelong task, and even seasoned multicultural counsellors need to stay informed, update their training, and perform thorough self-examination on a regular basis.'¹⁴ I would suggest the passage of this development is one of the means of moving from a position of 'me' to one of 'we', through the challenges of relationship with oneself and with others. Yet the end result is often something so rich and far removed from what we might have guessed it could be. ■

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