

## **Breaking free from the shadow(s)**

*Dwight Turner's PhD thesis is a creative exploration of the conscious and unconscious experience of being the 'other'.*

I am a black, male, transpersonal psychotherapist. I am currently a PhD student; formerly I was a serviceman. It is these types of characteristics that supposedly make me different, with these differences marking me as separate and other on a daily basis.

In the Global North philosophers have often either seen the other as a hindrance or a burden on resources, whether they are from a different culture, gender or religion. Yet, from within psychotherapy itself, von Franz (1980), amongst many, recognised that the other was often prone to holding the unwanted projections placed upon it by the majority, while from the African philosophy of Ubuntu, Desmond Tutu's assertion that 'my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours' (Hailey 2008: 2) speaks of the delicate interpersonal connection between subject and other. Yet, for the other, what is it like to live as the shadow for the majority? And how does one emerge from the isolation of being the other, particularly as a PhD student? It was these types of questions, as part of my wider PhD study on what it was to be the other, which led to my using my own experience as other in a heuristic exploration of the subject. An exploration designed to understand not just the conscious experience, but also the unconscious experience of being the other.

## **Black dogs and cockroaches**

I decided to study my own experience as other using creative means, echoing Kalff (1991), who saw creativity as a route towards symbolically uniting our external and internal experiences of being other. Alongside sand play work, visualisations, diary entries, drawings and working with dreams were all employed over six months to ascertain my unconscious experience of being the other, my design following Lacan's (2003) idea that there is a conscious and unconscious relationship between signifier and signified, while also highlighting the experience of my PhD self as the signified.

As a student, some of my early diary entries spoke of feeling like the outsider at a meeting of fellow PhD students at the university. Although interested in the topics being presented, feelings of inadequacy prevented me from speaking up, reminding me of how it can sometimes be as the other, that the other, be it based on a projection or a reality, feels it is denied its own voice. At the same point, shadow dreams assailed me like the simple example below where:

*I'm in a room on my own and I'm being attacked by a pack of black dogs who tear the skin off my back as I try to fend them off. I woke up feeling quite low and depressed. The scene reminded me of Churchill's 'Black Dog' depression.*

Dreams like this or where I was being chased by my own internal other became a regular occurrence, my unconscious other presenting itself as anything from cockroaches, which would leap at me, to threatening or aggressive male others. Through my sitting with my own conscious experience of otherness, my unconscious other had begun to shout of the violent interplay between the intrapsychic and the interpersonal that I now believe sits central to our culture's reluctance to truly engage with the other. These difficulties were highlighted personally though, through my conscious egoic mind needing to wake me at the worst points of any dreams, rescuing itself from any unconscious challenge to its authority inherent in acknowledging my own otherness. Eventually, I became able to hold the tension of the opposites in order to see the unconscious split within myself, a split driven by the need to fit in with the majority so as not to be the other.

### **Reintegration**

The recognition of the splits within me then led to an opportunity for change. As a student, in this case, the change involved allowing myself to just be myself, to accept that I was not an outsider, just a doctoral student accessing the unconscious qualities inherent in taking on a new identity, one that would also involve the reintegration of aspects of my unconscious self previously suppressed in order to fit in with the cultural majority. This was an important lesson, which then allowed me to see beyond my own projections, and take what was offered from those who understood what I was attempting to achieve. This lesson, among many others, led

to a series of reintegration dreams, where the aspect of myself that was previously hidden was welcomed home, like the one presented below.

*I'm in the middle of the M1, and I'm watching as a group of people and cars come past me in celebration. I'm with several friends, including one guy who is cross-dressing, and my brother is to my right. We all wave and cheer the procession onwards as the traffic jam heads north out of the city. The guy in the sky blue dress behind me asks if he can give me a kiss. I say yes, but with no tongue (dryly), so he kisses me excitedly, smudging his lipstick on me. My brother sighs dryly next to me so we all just continue to watch the procession.*

The celebratory tone of the dream here speaks of the culmination of one process of reintegration among many, with its embracing of my trans other in a sky blue dress, and the presence of all black men in the car. I am also heading into the centre of London, while that which has been recovered is emerging outwards, beyond the self, and out to be witnessed by the wider world. So, while there are hints of more reintegration needed (in this case through my reaction to the request for a kiss), there was a growing authenticity in the dreams at this point different from those in the early stages of my heuristic process. An authenticity that began to translate itself outwards in my presenting papers alongside those same colleagues who years before I felt in deficit to, and indeed in the publication of this very paper within *The Psychotherapist*. These are the grounded lessons learnt by sitting with my own experience of being the other.

### **'Doing a PhD won't make you a better psychotherapist, you know!'**

Although my own experience as other has led me to recognise and see my own inauthenticity, and to own aspects of myself that I had suppressed in order to fit in with the supposed majority, this is not to say that this process has been easy. In his work on alchemy, Jung (1974) rightly speaks of the intense pain associated with acknowledging and working through these types of psychic splits. Yet also, as I endeavour to complete my PhD, the aggression of comments like the title of this section from fellow psychotherapists are an irregular reminder of what I am risking by stepping out of the shadows and taking my place amongst the dozens, nay

thousands, of majority-culture psychotherapists who have trodden this doctoral path before me. Interpersonally, these are a reminder that some will not like that the other, their other, has become more than just a Lacanian mirror for their narcissistic fantasies. While on an intrapersonal level, this is a reminder that to risk authenticity is to risk being seen, to risk stepping into my authority as a doctor of psychotherapy, an identity where speaking up is inherent, involves having a voice and using it to say something challenging about the nature of psychotherapy from my own unique perspective, something that might actually be heard.

As a final point, the political sphere suggests that there are only a few groups who are other, groups that rightly deserve equality and our respect. Yet I will argue here that the political, in its attempt to understand the other, often struggles to recognise the complex or combined nature of otherness, for example where there are layers of difference within a particular group. My own research has taught me that experiences of being the other range from anything from childhood bullying and separation from peers to the elderly being partitioned off in care homes away from their families and communities, with conscious and unconscious interactions between the signifier and signified meaning that at varying times throughout all our lives we will all experience being the other. It is therefore essential for psychotherapists and trainers to recognise that in order to understand the other we meet on our trainings or in our practices we have to continue learning from our own often very difficult experience as other.

## References

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