



We are all of us other

Dwight Turner challenges us to recognise that we are all of us ‘other’, or potentially so, and it is this realisation we fear when we encounter difference

Illustration by David Doran

As a minority black, male transpersonal psychotherapist in the world of counselling and psychotherapy, I am always interested to read about difference from the perspectives of those who identify as other. Whatever form they take, from podcasts to academic articles, these writings have been important both in mirroring an understanding of my own experience of being an outsider living in the UK and now also in forming the backbone to my PhD studies in using creative techniques to understand the unconscious process involved in being the other. The words of these many disparate authors present a unique vision on psychotherapy that challenges the white, male, heteronormative perspective often presented in the literature, and offer a more participatory understanding of human nature.

I was therefore pleased to read Nicola Codner’s well-written and widely researched article on ‘Mixed race identity and counselling’ in the December 2015

Therapy Today,¹ and her call for a broader understanding of what it means to be mixed race – a call that is particularly relevant, given the multicultural world more and more of us inhabit.

I had a very different response to William Johnston’s letter,² two months later in the February 2016 letters pages, where he presents in the very first paragraph his weariness at there being another article on difference in *Therapy Today*. It is not the aim of this article to add to this debate; nor is it my place to criticise Johnston’s letter, as his opinion is as important as anyone’s in this ongoing discussion about difference. My aim here is to explore what these two pieces of writing exemplify for me: just how difficult it is for us to discuss difference as we attempt to understand this incredibly complex subject. I also want to explore the further issue that, even though our understanding of difference and diversity is governed by the various laws and strictures that society has put in place over the past 50

years or more, in the world of psychotherapy our deeper understanding of the unconscious experience of being seen as different or the other, together with what it might mean unconsciously for us when we encounter the other, still lags some good way behind thinking in the political sphere.

Eurocentric approaches to difference

Johnston's letter raises an important point in highlighting a possible beginning in our understanding of difference – that we identify our self not just by who we are but also by who we are not. Yet his idea is nothing new; such notions in the West stretch back centuries. Hegel,³ for example, centres much of his writing around this subject/other paradigm, recognising that the other needs the subject as much as vice versa and that they identify each other by what they believe they are not.

Psychotherapeutically, even the most basic Lacanian approach allows us to recognise that there is a detrimental psychological impact on the other from not being witnessed by the subject. Also, this lens then logically recognises the selfishness of the subject as it forms its own identity: it has no responsibility for the other, doesn't need to recognise the other, and will even go to great lengths to undermine the humanity of the other in order to maintain its dominance and therefore its identity.

In addition, from a Western perspective, this constant need to identify oneself via the mirror of the other is rooted in the earliest of childhood experience, as Weil and Piaget explain.⁴ Their argument is that, when growing up, we all form groups and ostracise the other at various times in our formative years, in an attempt to understand who we are. This supposition adds to the debate the notion that this process is narcissistically driven out of a need to form one's own ego identity. It also adds a layer to the power dynamic formed around such an exchange. So Johnston's letter, although necessary and important, highlights the interplay around power that this subject will always generate when raised in this way.

Psychotherapy also adds knowledge to this debate in its recognition of the splitting and projections at play in the formation of an egoic self via the mirror of the other. Although a Kleinian term, splitting here involves ego formation against a background of cultural, societal, gender and other influences that encourage and mould us into being what our corner of society needs us to be.⁵

This is the underside of how we form certain groups: we are moulded into being by the rules of these groups, so another group with different rules is therefore seen as alien to us, and threatening. Yet it often holds aspects of our sense of self that we cannot own, due to our membership of the original group. This is an important point that von Franz,⁶ from a Jungian perspective, acknowledged when she explored the idea that groups will often project much of their unconscious material onto other groups, and whole cultures, genders, religions, can do exactly this in the belief that they are forming an identity of their own.

However, viewed from a purely psychotherapeutic perspective, such theories root identity formation within a very psychodynamic or object relations paradigm, where the subject uses the other for its own needs. The process is predominantly non-relational; there is a major power imbalance and, although this means of interacting with the other allows the subject agency in forming its own identity, it leaves the other feeling invisible. It is this invisibility that is challenged when people like Codner, and many others, find the courage to write about difference from their own, non-majority culture perspective. So, when I read important articles like this, one of the ideas that strikes me most about them is that the author has allowed him- or herself to be seen, to be visible. It also strikes me that an inevitable consequence of this is a reaction from the majority that threatens to silence them or make them invisible again.

So, what happens when the other chooses not to just sit and hold the projection? What happens when the other speaks up? The ego of the subject feels threatened and reacts against that threat to its sense of omnipotence. The best examples of this are the political shifts to the right witnessed currently in the world in reaction to the refugees fleeing the Middle East.

In psychotherapy, this is one of the reasons why there is often so much conflict within trainings on diversity when we discuss the very human presence of the other. Ultimately, what needs to be recognised is that working with the other involves a recognition that we are now suddenly in contact with that which we have naively deemed we are not. Or, more importantly, when the objectified other chooses not to remain invisible, we are left facing our own shadow. This is the cost I recognise now of this more objective position in

understanding difference – it involves the stimulation of a shadow that, if not recognised, is either difficult to contain or is ignored and suppressed.

Recognising our sense of difference

When I lecture about working with difference, one means of countering this shadow of difference in the room that works for me is to begin with the recognition that we all have an experience of being other. For example, there will be women reading this article who will have been objectified in some fashion, or people from the LGBT community who have experienced prejudice and exclusion, or minority students who have struggled to find their voice amongst their majority culture peers. Although all of these experiences are different, and although all of these experiences are painful, they are all real and they need to be acknowledged when working with our own relationship to being different, in whatever capacity. This I find is the first step to working safely with difference, because it moves us away from a purely object-relations approach to understanding difference, and this in turn allows a less Eurocentric understanding of the importance of engaging with difference.

The influences on my working with difference are manifold, with a good number coming from around the globe. For example, the African spiritual philosophy of Ubuntu⁷ speaks strongly of the interconnectedness of all things, echoing ideas from Maori culture, the Brahma Kumaris traditions and many others.^{8,9} The philosophies here speak in varying ways of the responsibility that I have for the other, as the other has for me, while recognising that I am as much the other as they are me, and that my identity is tied up in my mirror image.

Such influences are therefore a departure from the more power-based, psychodynamic understanding of our relationship to the other, and speak from a more settled and secure sense of egoic self, and one that does not need the constant narcissistic reassurance of its own identity.

But these ideas are present too in some streams of Western philosophy. The theologian Martin Buber¹⁰ raised this idea from a more European perspective. His thinking, born from his wartime experiences, proposes two types of relationship: an I-It relationship, which in the context of this article fits with the idea that the other is used in service of the subject, and an I-Thou relationship of mutuality. Although some of these ideas

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hold a somewhat idealised vision of humanity, in comparison with a more psychodynamic perspective, they allow more possibility of moving beyond external power dynamics in the formation of a sense of self, towards a personal recognition of the impact that being the other has on all of us. This is what an egoic approach to difference protects us from – the pain of being the other, the recognition that we have all been objectified, judged, rejected, abused, beaten, or (far, far worse) just deemed as other, or threatening. This, more relational and more transpersonal vision of the other then challenges or softens this power dynamic and allows me to recognise that I am not just identified by the other, but that I am actually the other, and vice versa. So that which I see and fear over there is actually just a reflection of that which I may be unwilling to acknowledge in myself.

Towards individuation

I should add here that I do not in any way consider it to be an easy process to recognise one’s own experience as different and work with it. It is not. Sitting with all the moments when the majority has attacked your sense of self in a way that has led to a form of exclusion is an incredibly difficult and painful experience, whether this occurred in childhood interactions with peers or in being marginalised into one of the more traditional politicised categories. This is one of the reasons why so many of us hide as much as possible in groups, so that we can avoid the deep wellspring of pain that comes from being an outsider. It is also why, at times, so many of us sacrifice our identity in order to fit in with the majority, or why those who have themselves been marginalised then subsequently choose to marginalise others in turn.

Even with his own prejudices and racism, Jung¹¹ recognised that the shadow was the other. My own understanding builds on this idea, seeing an appreciation of our own sense of otherness as a route towards individuation and realising that, the more we consider our own sense of outsidership, the less we need others to mirror our sense of egoic self. The relational allows for an intrapsychic exploration of what it is to be the other and a consideration of how this internalised/unconscious other helps our identity, thereby separating us from the narcissistic objectification of the interpersonal other that we use for our own needs.

This is a hugely important point. In my own work, for example, I have found myself working with a good number of clients and supervisees who, for one reason or another, have felt excluded in their course, placement or workplace. What has helped me here is the work I have done, and will continue to do, on my own sense of otherness. This work has given me a greater empathy for the experiences I hear about on such a regular basis. This empathy has in turn enabled me to work with difference in many forms, prompting me to ask questions of myself and learn more about the cultural, gender-based and other differences that separate me from the people who sit across from me in my consulting room. It is this work on my own sense of outsidership that has also encouraged me, as other, to lecture students at all levels and of all experiences, to demonstrate that these experiences can be put to good use if accessed and held.

This is why the move from a more traditional, object relations experience of being other to one that is more relational is so hugely important – because the other then may be able to allow themselves to be seen perhaps for the very first time. ■

Dwight Turner is a psychotherapist and supervisor at Dwight Turner Counselling in London. He is currently completing his PhD on ‘Our Experience as Other’ through the CCPE and the University of Northampton.

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