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Universal Difference? Understanding relationality and difference in Transpersonal Psychotherapy

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Introduction

As a working class, black, male, who is the son of immigrants who travelled to the United Kingdom as part of the Windrush Generation, I often feel at odds with my psychotherapy profession, dominated as it is by middle class, white, women, who typically have a British family line that flows back several generations. My sense of Otherness is therefore with me throughout my working day as I sit with a range of clients within the complex context of contemporary 'multicultural' Britain. The sense of myself as 'other' impacts on, and to some degree constitutes, therapeutic relationality. Yet, within Psychotherapy, the other and our daily experience of difference is rarely and only recently considered. Hiles (2007), rightly in my view, talks of the limitations encountered thus far when looking at difference when he states that this has become 'a "science" that has achieved little more than a classification and pigeon-holing of people' (p.1). Drawing on the work of Buber (2010), Levinas (2006) and later on Kristeva (1994) and others during the 20th Century, the Other reminds us of our moral and ethical obligation to each other. In this case, as a psychotherapist, it encourages us to consider more closely the deeper relational impact of difference, together with our own sense of otherness, and not to avoid the occasional difficult discourse around difference by hiding it within the cognitive categories used more widely for example within the political arena. In terms of difference within psychotherapy, it seems a little strange that a modality based so heavily upon relationships has struggled to find a means of understanding difference for so long, my view being that perhaps for psychotherapy has only touches upon the cognitive perspective previously mentioned. Of those few analysts who, in particular, have ventured down this path, it is the likes of Frosh (2002), Poland (2011) et al who wisely state that in the psychotherapeutic alliance it is the therapist who is the Other in the room, not the client, a statement which immediately reminds us of our own position when sitting within the various individually unique worlds of clients. This though also raises a problem. How do we

as counsellors, therapists and other health professionals start to look at our own experience of difference? What are the difficult emotions that emerge when we feel different? And how could this information be of benefit to understanding the experience of being different for our clients?

The Transpersonal, like most forms of psychotherapy, involves the therapist assisting the client on their course towards individuation (Stevens 1990), a process that involves the rediscovery of aspects of themselves located within the collective unconscious. Within Transpersonal psychotherapy much of this work is done not just through the relationship between the therapist and the client, a major aspect that as Yalom (2001) regularly discusses, can on its own be very healing, but also by using a variety of creative techniques as a means of accessing the same unconscious. Dreams, drawing, visualisations, sand tray work and other methods of 'play' are all often used in the work to draw to the surface client material that they may not necessarily be aware of, or have actively suppressed (Storr 1979). In this paper, we will therefore explore ways of carving out a space using a transpersonal approach to consider the relational context of therapy, and to explore the constitution of 'othering' within this therapeutic context. This paper outlines how the use of visualisations, drawing and sand tray work can be used in research on therapy to explore the emotional bodily and relational experience of difference, for the client themselves, between the client and the therapist, and also between the researcher and the researched.

Design of the study

The methods chosen for this project were designed to ascertain the more felt experience of Difference, thereby moving beyond the ego, as defined by Jung (1971), to work more with the unconscious experience of Difference. From the Transpersonal perspective this is most easily accessed through methods of play and the use of creativity, which as Rowan (1993) states, helps take clients in Transpersonal psychotherapy beyond 'Aristotelian logic' (p. 8), where appropriate, from whence they can access the irrational via Intuition, Creativity, and Peak Experiences. In this research I felt it was important to use techniques which encourage a more relational exploration of difference, allowing participants to engage with the body to access the felt experience of difference, and also to look at the little explored experience of difference between a researcher and the researched. My research therefore involved the interviewing of 25 participants about their experience of difference, with each of the interview being split into three distinct sections:

1. A semi-structured interview where the participant would discuss in some depth their cognitive understanding of difference together with an exploration of how difference has impacted on their own life. One of the aims of this section was to allow space for the more rational response to difference to emerge, so one can then hopefully put this to one side and access the more subtle felt experiences of relational difference;

2. A visualisation exercise based around one of the aforementioned experiences of difference, where the participant would be invited to work with the memory. Any felt responses to the memory would be encouraged to resurface through the body. The visualisation was designed to bring up an experience of difference using the imagination, the emotions, the felt body experience, and the intuition, moving beyond the mind, and therefore the ego, in the process;

3. A Sand Tray exercise where both myself and my co-researcher would choose symbols from a pre-determined selection that represent both myself, themselves, and the relationship between us. We would then both discuss what we saw in the tray, and what it meant to us and look at any feelings the symbols engender within us. The idea to use symbols and Sand Tray techniques comes from a psychotherapeutic technique designed around working creatively with adults and children (Turner 2005).

To say a little more about why symbols and play were used I should briefly mention that the idea of introjection (Klein 1952) where as children we takes wider worldly experiences into our personality as a means of building ego strength so we can learn to rely on ourselves. Is a central theme within psychotherapy. Leaning towards a more Transpersonal perspective Washburn (2000) compares this to Intermodal Translation, or the child's ability to take an external experience and therefore translate this experience into corresponding motoric expressions, for example, when a mother smiles at a child, the child mimics the smile of the mother. It is the reverse of this process that is important for this project, and brings in the ideas of Jung () who suggested that using symbols in psychotherapy encouraged outer expression of this internalised symbolic world, and Winnicott (1958/1992) who states 'one characteristic of the transference at this stage is the way in which we must allow the patient's past to be the present' (p. 279). Within the field of Sand Play it is therefore felt that that 'the symbols carry the client's historical experience' (Turner 2005, p. 95). So, within this project, the client was therefore encouraged to transfer his internalised experience of difference onto the symbol chosen which could then be analysed in the holding space created by the client and the therapist together.

I should also state that for my own research, the Phenomenological Research Method as designed by Moustakas (1994), was then used to consider our on-going relationship to difference and to begin to consider just what difference is as an entity, together with how we actually relate to difference and how it relates to us, i.e. our actual experience of difference.

<u>Results</u>

Client Example

I would now like to present 'Michael' a 35 year old white male, who was one of my participants. It was the fact he was a twin that drew him to my research as he felt that it was this which set him apart from his peers as he and his brother were viewed as unique. However, even his relationship with his twin was interesting in that even though they looked almost the same there were strong differences between them. For example, his brother was strong academically whereas he was an excellent cox having rowed for his county from the age of 13.

During the Semi-Structured Interview section, Michael talked of his experience of being a twin meant that he often felt he was not alone, that there would always be someone alongside him who understood. This was countered by a certain amount of confusion and a feeling that he was unseen as an individual. As he stated:

'There's always the sense of not being on your own, having a friend who gets you, having support somehow." and;

"Teachers don't know who you are. You're kind of confused and treated as being the same."

In his case though, the positive of being in his own little group of two was countered by something more aggressive, the competition to be seen as independent to the other sibling, something that resulted in numerous fights:

"It used to be a kind of battle to the death…we could have literally killed each other, and one particular fight at about 10 or 11, I broke his arm and he broke my nose."

The nature of this conflict was something that was, with hindsight, to run all the way through our interview it appeared.

The Visualisation

When working with the visualisation, Michael chose to work with a memory of himself being in a classroom with a teacher who, whilst telling him off for some minor misdemeanour, mistook him for his twin brother. He acknowledged feelings of 'confusion' as he felt that he knew the teacher, but because he was a twin she didn't seem to know him, mistaking him for his brother. This left him with a sense of not really knowing what was going on, and of not knowing the rules. We then worked with the body, and when encouraged Michael felt the pain of this confusion in his core around his solar plexus. Staying with his core, he then produced the following image of himself being held under water by another figure.

Image One: Being held under water

Some of the views he had of the image were as follows:

"Life and death, in that I'm under water and this is air, and I die or um, and its life and death, or living and dying, killing something to live or something."

"Am I doing it to myself? Could I do it? No, I couldn't do it to myself. There is a lot of tension in it, existing, not existing!"

"What do I have to kill off in myself or my twin in order to live?"

The aim of the visualisation was to look at the internalised experience of being different. In this example the internalised experience literally became a life and death struggle where the client had to remain alive against his internalised brother that wanted to destroy him.

Sand Tray Exercise

The next section brought up the idea of the other as an object to be projected upon (Winnicott 1968) in our exercise. Michael saw me as a student with a graduation cap on, whilst he himself was a boy with a bag off to training, and our relationship was represented by a panda bear.

Image Two: First Sand Tray Exercise

Talking about how he saw me, Michael stated of the character:

"There's an old-fashionedness in that a kind of old school, doing it right kind of, not right, but you know, dedication, and its clothes seem a bit unconfortable."

When it came to look at himself, he still seemed to picture himself as the boy who would go off to row on the river early every morning, stating:

"This reminded me of one of the bags I would have had because we were speaking of swimming, there was always the kind of training bag around, a kind of dedicated-ness."

We then looked at the character that represented the relationship as he saw it, which he presented as the black and white panda bear

"A panda bear: there's a strength there that I think is resolute on both sides, and I think the colours, it seems so glaringly obvious (both laugh). It's how they are supposed to be."

In his explanation he notes his presentation of our colour difference in his choice of animal, although it could also be said to be representative of the black and white thinking presented in the earlier exercise, e.g. the idea of living and dying. It should be noted that his seeing me as studious and himself still as the sportsperson he has projected an aspect of himself onto me, the researcher, an obvious projection in some ways because I am undertaking this period of study but also an important one. I am therefore an object for him to project his internalised brother onto within the research space.

Sand Tray Exercise Two

We then undertook one final exercise where both the researcher and the researched were asked to present an image of themselves as they view themselves, and not to consider the other person in the room. The aim of this exercise was to begin to take away the projections onto the other person in the room and to then consider what remains. Michael chose a simple brown block with lines running through it, whereas I chose a dark horse.

Image 3 – Second Sand Tray Exercise

Michael talked about his stone in the following fashion:

"It's a sort of pyramid stone. I don't particularly like the shape it is, um, not very refined, but I like that there's a happiness to it, a solidity. I'm rejecting it as well as liking it."

My presentation about my horse mirrored Michael's in some ways including being slightly ambivalent in my choice of animal. For example, I used the statement:

"Horses can be cute, but I can be scared of them as well, as I'm not great with riding horses and that sort of thing."

Of how they interact, Michael states:

"I don't get a sense of a sort of conflict between them. They're going in the same direction."

Michael's presentation of a stone that can be both seen and can merge into the sand around it is telling in its simplicity but also notice the stripes on the stone, the slightly darker lines that were actually similar to the black and white of the panda bear presented earlier. In a way,

when encouraged to just look at himself creatively, Michael's choice of image brought home the conflict presented earlier in the drawing, and it could be said, asked him to consider just what he projects onto the world, i.e. the anger and confusion of being a twin.

Discussion

When considering difference, for Michael, two things emerge from the discussion section. Firstly, the confusion with not being seen was quite pronounced for him leading him to both want to be seen and at the same time happy to remain invisible; and secondly, his fight to be seen as himself was literally that, a fight to the death between himself and his brother to be seen as independent individuals. This conflict was then internalised via the visualisation exercise, where the conflict of life versus death had become embodied in the tightness of his solar plexus. One could argue that as a twin he was both subject and object, but instead of the pair being taught to care for each other, one had been taught to kill off the other, thereby taking its place and allowing it to be seen. In the third section, our relationship becomes most important, and I become the object for him to project his 'brother the student' onto. The panda bear could be representative of either our colour difference in the space or the simplistic conflicting nature of his relationship with brother. But it is the last exercise which is most interesting, as when Michael came back to himself we saw the containment of all these aspects; the split comes home in the lines, he is both seen and unseen, he can hide and he can be visible. This then allows me to be just a horse on a similar journey to himself, non-threatening, and just different to him.

Conclusion

Although this is just one example from an on-going exploration of difference using transpersonal techniques, Michael's case would seem to suggest that powerful negative experiences of difference are often retained and internalised within an individual. Through using a combination of techniques that sit at the core of the transpersonal, i.e. play, visualisation, and drawings, together with encouraging a more relational approach to the exploration of difference, it is therefore possible to help our clients uncover just how much of a negative, or positive, experience of difference they may have internalised or pushed into the shadow. It is my strong belief therefore, that a more relational approach to understanding difference within the arena of psychotherapy, and elsewhere, could sit positively alongside the more clinical or political perspectives popular in society today.

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