Examining Buber's I: narcissism and the othering of the other

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SUMMARY: This article asks what psychotherapists in a majority culture dominated profession learn about themselves from interactions involving dual stereotyping.

KEY WORDS: Culture, narcissism, projection, Jung, Buber, othering.

Recently one of my clients Makeda, who was of a mixed cultural background, told me a story where while taking her two-year old child to school she was having a conversation with a white English friend about parenting. The other woman asked her if she slept in the same bed as her daughter, to which my client replied that, yes, she still did so. The friend then berated my client for allowing such behaviour on the basis that the reason the friend's own daughter was still sleeping in the same bed as her at the age of 10 was because the friend herself had failed to keep her in her own room at two years of age. The impact of this interaction left my client wondering if she really was a bad parent for allowing her two-year old daughter to sleep with her, and if she was doing her daughter severe psychological damage by encouraging such supposedly negative behaviour.

Our work with this exchange then led us to recognise that she had endured three separate disturbing experiences. First, the obvious projective identification, where the friend's unprocessed psychic distress at having made what she saw as a mistake with her own daughter was projected onto my client, who then identified with it and questioned her own identity. Second, there was the objectification of the client and her whole process; for example, her child was two, this was a different child, a different age, a different situation, and most importantly, of a

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totally different culture, yet all these aspects were rendered invisible by the needs of the friend. And third, once the other has been objectified and projected upon, what was also important to notice was the process of othering the client endured, where the other is made to be not just different but also becomes wrong/alien/bad in some fashion. Ultimately though, this interesting experience left me with a puzzling question. Just what is it about the cultural interaction also present in this exchange that meant the friend felt she had any right to assert her superiority over my client? And given that I regularly hear similar stories of stereotyping as much from within the world of psychotherapy as without, what can we as psychotherapists in a majority culture dominated profession learn about ourselves from such interactions?

Considering the first of my questions, Dalal (2015) argues that there is no real explanation for how certain groups come to create the means of sanction for their projections, adding that it is also puzzling how these also denigrated groups then don't have the same privilege to project as the initial majority. This view is incomplete as he fails to recognise the cascading nature of prejudice, where even within minority groups separate newer groupings around numerous other differences and prejudices are formed, like counties, within countries within a continent, and the formation and then marginalisation of the other continues. For example, the feminist Lorde's (1984) seminal work speaks of the struggles to be recognised as different and the prejudices and silencing she endured because she was an African American. Lorde's opinion seemingly challenges Dalal's perspective in that she recognises there is an inherent need within us all to create the other, to construct another object upon which we can project unwanted aspects of our self. Yet even this opinion only goes a small way towards explaining why this happens. I strongly believe this is driven by a form of grandiose narcissism which means that more regularly than we might accept, collectively we actively fail to relate to the other when we see them, instead using them as an object for our own unwanted psychic material. Much of this is driven by the individualistic nature of life in the Global North, where increasingly there are drives to escape our inadequacies, and the difficult feelings these engender within us, when we are not what we are told we can be, be it professionally or personally, or we do not have what we are told we should have, or we are not with the type of partner who looks the way we are told they should. The inability to manage the inadequacies of a life not lived to our society's expectations of perfection is therefore one driving force in the formation of a narcissistic splitting in the individual and therefore the collective. The grandiose narcissist in turn, in her attempts to maintain this internalised need to be perfect, creates the other in a form of othering where the minority group is then denigrated as being less than on some spuriously loose basis. This in turn creates one of two things; it either means the other in its struggle to contain the projections placed

upon it, forces these onto other others, thereby creating the types of conflicts with the initial majority noted by Lorde and Benjamin (1998) where ultimately no one wins; or secondly, the other internalises this shame and questions its own identity thereby othering itself. It is this second example that Makeda worked on in therapy, and it is the recognition of what was of her and what was nothing to do with her that assisted in her recovery from the interaction with the said friend.

Yet whilst many of these ideas emerge out of the psychodynamic, object relations influenced field of understanding human interaction, and whilst these are important, from a more transpersonal/Jungian angle there is an additional perspective which is hugely important here in recognising how prejudices form. From a transpersonal perspective first of all, Buber (2010) posited two types of relationship. The first relationship was the I-It relationship where the other takes on the form passed onto it by the subject. For example, to transpose Buber's idea into the modern era, the objectification of an other for the benefit of the subject could be seen as an I-It relationship. The second of these was the I-Thou relationship where the relationship is one of mutuality, and where the I sees itself reflected back by the Thou, and vice versa. Although Buber's idea here is borne out of his horrific experiences during the second world war, this second version is not just a western idea. Across many other cultures, the idea of a more relational experience of the other often sits central to their way of seeing and experiencing the world, for example, the African philosophy of Ubuntu (Hailey 2008) clearly recognises both our responsibility towards the other, and the importance of the other as a means of knowing one's self.

Yet even with this idea there were problems. Buber's contemporary and friend Emmanuel Levinas raised an interesting objection to the idealised I-Thou position, relating this back to his own experiences during WWII, himself believing that although we have a responsibility to the other there were other driving forces which might try to disrupt or destroy this relational dyad. From a psychotherapeutic perspective also, the problem with some of Buber's ideas is they consider relationship to be a purely interpersonal thing, and Buber's comprehensive works don't speak often enough about the intrapsychic experience of being the other. Indeed, it is interesting that Buber's writings were most popular during the time of Jung, and that there was such an intellectual gulf in thought between them given that in any correspondence between them Jung and Buber regularly disagreed on a variety of issues ranging from how to view the other to their understanding of spirituality (Stephens 2001). In relation to the other, Jung (Stevens 1990) saw the shadow as the other, meaning that what we see reflected back at our self from that which we deem as strange or wrong is actually a reflection of something we need to acknowledge intra-psychically. His words adding that missing intrapersonal perspective I have discussed here, and allowing us to begin to recognise the cost to the other in being othered so readily by the supposed majority.

Where this is most interesting is that it paradoxically highlights the unfortunate disconnection between Jung and Buber and at the same time the benefits combining approaches which are so incredibly similar in so many ways. For my own work in understanding difference, the other, and interactions like the one endured by Makeda, this has been important. My own attempts at creating such an interpersonal/intrapersonal connection led me to recognise that a combination of both Jungian and Buberian approaches leaves us with two very important ideas. Firstly, Buber rarely suggests that the I in both relationships ever changes. This I think is flawed. The I which would make the other an objectified other in the first example presented here, sees the interconnection within the dyad in a totally different fashion to the I who is looking for more relationality. This is where the psychodynamic approaches perhaps have some merit, in that the objectifying I has a narcissistic need for the other, whereas what I will call the relational I does not. Secondly, in my combining these two approaches, what you ultimately have is an *I-IT (Thou)* relationship, where the I makes the other into an object to serve itself, the true nature of the other is then suppressed into the unconscious, hence the bracketed (Thou). This means, objectification is a common means for us as a culture, and even as therapists, to rid ourselves of the guilt of holding such unwanted psychic material. Cultures, genders, sexualities, regularly use the other as a means of feeling better about themselves, and maintaining their sense of grandiosity. For example, the regular reports of the prison population in England and Wales being disproportionally higher from the black British community, masks the fact that, according to the Ministry of Justice nearly three quarters of that same prison population self-identified as white British (2013). What this does is create the circumstances where this problem is purely seen as a culturally specific one, separate from the majority culture, a perspective which then creates a mask against another very important reality about that same prison population within the majority culture. This is hugely important for a culture in a reading of Von Franz (1980) around her discussions on projection; her writings clearly state that what happens is that cultures, genders, and other groups can often collectively project upon the other as a means of asserting their superiority. Utilising the Kleinian ideas around envy, this could also be seen as a means of one culture ridding itself of the envy that it feels towards the other for what I will argue are its projected potential ideals, meaning that what the culture envies in the other is not the reality of the situation, but the potential for the other to do something the original culture was unable to perform within itself (Mitchell 1986). What the culture then does in order to maintain its narcissistic position of importance is to denigrate the other, much like Makeda's friend had done to her, in order to rid herself of the feelings of envy which she was unable to contain, and also maintain that sense of grandiosity seemingly embedded within her cultural position.

Buber's ideas, although incomplete when seen from the perspective of a psychotherapist, when combined with a Jungian perspective therefore offer an insight into the motivation of the I within us all. It recognises that this I position will at times attempt to rid itself of its flaws, projecting these outwards. Reviewing all of these ideas through Makeda's case though, having to process her friend's own sense of inferiority was a difficult experience, but also a fruitful one, as it ultimately led to her re-evaluating her friendship and questioning how she had come to play the role of an object which she had adopted for her now ex-friend. Issues of deficit were made conscious, as was her experience as the other of not feeling she had a voice, and she continues to work on maintaining and not losing her sense of self whilst in relationship with the majority. So whilst it is important for psychotherapists to be aware of the impact of being the other, it is also essential for us as psychotherapists who are often going to be cast into the position of the I to recognise our own inconsistencies, our own flaws, and in our management of our narcissistic tendencies to do otherwise, to own these flaws as they are essentially a part of who we are. Whilst also recognising that to project these onto our minority clients can cause them distress.

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