

# 'Allyship involves deep shadow work, where we endure the ego-shattering shame of our own oppressiveness'

In some ways, the work that we do as counsellors and psychotherapists makes us all allies, says **Dwight Turner**

In the spring of 2022, there was a sea change in the politics of the West, when the United States Supreme Court overturned an edict that had previously given women the right to abortion across the US. This decision was met with joy by those of the religious right, but with consternation and horror by many others, first and foremost the 36 million US women of all ages and creeds.<sup>1</sup> That this decision was made in the US does not mean such actions might not filter into the political psyche of the rest of the Global North, and especially the UK, where women have access to free and safe abortions, but it is still considered a criminal act, only permitted if two clinicians confirm that the pregnancy would be harmful to the mother's physical or mental health.

This removal across the Atlantic of decision rights from women or, more importantly, the refusal to return such decision making to those it impacts most, is also something that has inevitably entered our counselling and psychotherapy rooms. In my role as a practitioner, I have witnessed first-hand the devastating impact of this decision on the psyche of women, clients and colleagues alike. From the anger to the sadness and the awakening of an activist spirit, watching the reaction to such a devastating reversal on the path towards social equity has been hard. It has been hard to so many who are not me.

But if I am unable to support, to comfort, to hear the pain of the many women around me, what is my role as an ally? Given that allyship is something requested by racialised minority groups, where the struggle for the end of racism is embedded within not just the recognition and exploration and pain of blackness but also the exploration and pain

of the identity of adapted whiteness, there must be an unconscious route also for me, as there will be for all men, in understanding and engaging with their allyship for women.

This article, in recognising the intersectional nature of identities, therefore looks to explore just how those of us who do not hold the same identity might be allies to women during this current phase of the so-called 'culture war'.<sup>2</sup> In particular, it considers just what it is to be an ally, and what it is to take the difficult path towards conscious allyship from within the paradigms of counselling and psychotherapy. For many of us and for me, sometimes this exploration invades our dreams.

***Dream one:** I go into a bar to meet some women friends. I know a group of women there, but there are also others I do not recognise. We're all there to watch a well-known 90s pop-rock band, who have reformed for a special concert, live and online. When their lead singer comes on, though, he is a much older white man with a close-cropped grey beard and short, trimmed grey hair. He starts to sing, but is so bad that I am happy to go back to be with the others in my group. I enjoy spending time with my female friends, even though the singer is droning on behind us.*

## **Performative allyship**

Beyond the biological, so much of our behaviour as human beings, and the rules we all adhere to, are socially constructed. Our behavioural identities, be they male or female, have always been defined as a mirror to each other, so they are closely connected, with the male self-defining of self simultaneously making women 'other'. This core condition of the construction and definition of masculinity

has been an aspect of the patriarchy which has existed for possibly 12,000 years.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore sadly no surprise that this set of socially manipulated standards is still being used today to oppress women. That men have acted out their power over women in all walks of life is without argument. Even within the realms of counselling and psychotherapy, there have always been power dynamics - the abuses of male power over female clients have coloured our profession since the beginning.<sup>4</sup>

One means of alleviating themselves from the guilt of their own complicity within the system of patriarchy, which needs to be rooted out at source, is performative allyship.<sup>5</sup> Performative allyship is actually the denial of any sort of experience of being an oppressor. The part of the male psyche, in this instance, which may have in the past or present mansplained, interrupted, coerced or imposed some other such behaviour on a woman or a girl, is denied. In its place emerges a sort of superiority over those of their own gender and the imposition of a type of saviour complex whereby power shifts from one aspect of the patriarchally embedded identity to another. There is an insincerity to performative allyship that inevitably causes pain for those around the subject.<sup>6</sup>

True allyship is much deeper than this. As explored by a growing number of authors, real forms of allyship involve the recognition and an understanding of the power dynamics that rotate around the interactions between men and women, and their impact.<sup>7</sup> On a deeper level, true allyship is also about the excavation of the unconscious internalisations of male superiority, and how these may influence and also oppress not only the externality that is woman but men's own inner archetypal feminine as well.

**Dream two:** *I seem to be walking around an oil rig moored out in the sea. I am meandering around a collection of buildings. I see a black man to my right who is following a group of women, one of whom I recognise as a personal friend (named Rosalind in this article). As the group of women round a corner, I find myself feeling suspicious of the black man, and I watch as he drags Ros into one of the rooms. I hear shouts and pleas for help, so I rush forward and break into the room. I throw the black man aside to rescue Ros who hangs onto me feeling relieved. I then have the black man taken away by the security of the oil rig.*

These difficult dreams speak to this process.

In some ways, the work that we do as counsellors and psychotherapists makes us all allies. When we are students on our courses in counselling and psychotherapy, we mostly undertake our own therapy, exploring our own unconscious prejudices as we attempt to become allies for our clients on their psychological journeys towards wholeness. Within this process, we are challenged to disentangle ourselves from the internalised patriarchy and misogyny within which our gendered and intersectional personas were formed. We are challenged into acknowledging our own complicity within said systems to understand and challenge the power structures that made us so inauthentic and oppressive of self and, just as relevant here, of the other.

These dreams presented here speak of this process for me. As Jung himself intimated, that I am every aspect of these dreams is important to recognise and own, as it brings with it the shame and distress of these internalised social constructions of masculinity.<sup>8,9</sup> So, here I am, a white floating head fronting a band that I barely paid any attention to back in the 1990s, representative of just how unaware I was of what I was imbibing from majority culture in my formative years, yet how ready I was

to reject that part now. I am also the abusive black man on the oil rig from the second dream. Yet, here I am also the one who protects the woman, my friend, and who calls in the defenders of truth. Here the super ego, in the form of an inner authority, is moulded from an internal place and not formed out of some external societal statement of right and wrong. From this perspective, where he explored the process of individuation, Jung was right in his understanding that this deeper shadow work would uncover a deeper unconscious archetypal reference point of righteousness – a more authentic one, a more inclusive one.

### Ally as archetype

The ally at its root is an archetype, a symbol of immense spiritual importance. In the New Testament of the Bible, in Luke, chapter four, verses 18–19, we read that, ‘He has sent me... to set at liberty those who are oppressed,’ where Jesus lays out to those who would listen to him the route he felt they should follow. Those who have quoted this, and many other passages from numerous other texts, have noted the role of the ally in helping those in need. In fact, the Do Justice website sees allyship as something essential to not only our personal growth but to our community spirit of togetherness.<sup>10</sup> Allyship is therefore much more than performative. It is at its core a spiritual web that binds all together in a relational lattice, the like of which has the potential to free so many of us from the socially constructed oppressions of ages, whether around race, gender or sexuality.

Allyship involves deep shadow work where we endure the ego-shattering shame of our own oppressiveness until we are brought to our knees before the altar of our own humility and offered a path of support – in this case for the gendered other. It is a route we all have to follow, especially in the current societal wake of Roe v Wade, because if we men remain silent to the sadness and the suffering of our sisters, then how can we truly say that we ourselves are human? ■

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