

Using the macrocosm to understand the microcosm.

Black therapist, white client.

Politics in the therapy room.

When I meet in the therapy room with another person our life stories meet, do we creatively co create new stories enriching our lives or do we remain with the sense of truth that we already know, parting with the same old stories, with updated versions.

How do I as a therapist create a space so that my relationships with clients can enrich both our lives. I endeavour to do this by being willing to explore areas of relating which feels familiar, familiarity which can be either comfortable or uncomfortable. What I seek to foster is a sense of enquiry into whether the familiar is denying some aspect of my client or myself and hence stifling our physis¹ and autonomy². I wish to acknowledge that I have found it easier to identify and use familiar relating patterns that cause me discomfort to help clients and I to change. And the most insightful discomforts have been about how I am relating as a black person or how I am being related to as a black person; signifying that the politics of racism is also in the therapy room. So I think it is important that I regularly explore my familiar patterns of relating that are not causing me discomfort but may be causing others discomfort. My constant challenge is to find ways to facilitate this. A challenge I invite readers to also engage in.

The following example shows how my pattern of relating arose in a therapy session and how I used it to diagnose and form a treatment plan for a client. For several sessions, a white client Angela expressed her views and her opinions about the different therapies she had experienced and read about. I felt she wanted to be in control of the sessions. I listened and decided intuitively to suppress my views and opinions. My reactive countertransference was to want to look after her. Angela appeared to be comfortable in the sessions. I experienced the sessions as being stagnant. We were both in a familiar pattern of relating. She then told me about a friendship she had at public school with a black child. Angela felt she did not fit in at public school as her parents were from a working class background. She felt she could empathise with her black friend, who also did not fit in because she was a black person.

It was this story that alerted me to my familiar pattern of relating. From my family experiences, which were reinforced by the dynamics between the white and black society, I had learned to ignore my opinions and views in order 'to not rock the boat'. I had been a black child who was raised in a dominant white society. In the session, I used my awareness to remind myself that I had my own views and opinions and I could express my thinking if I chose to do so. I realised that if I had expressed a different view from Angela she would have felt criticised, hence I had been discounting my opinions and views in the therapy session. Angela had felt criticised by her mother and at school. I hypothesized that in her black friend she had found someone with whom she felt more powerful, someone who did not criticise her and put her down. I thought she was repeating this pattern with me.

With the above awareness I decided to confront Angela with my thinking that she may have been using the therapy session to show me how intelligent and well informed she was and I asked her whether this was meeting her need. I wondered whether intellectualising was a way of her behaving as her mother, and defending against negative messages she might have picked up, such as, 'Don't be important', 'Don't belong', 'Don't succeed'. I thought Angela's behaviour may also be a way of inviting others to take responsibility for her feelings by either caring for them or dismissing them. Angela confessed that this is how she had been with her previous therapist who eventually had told her she could not help her.

I had interrupted Angela repeating the same pattern of relating. Through being aware of how I was behaving, thinking and feeling I had been able to invite Angela to change her patterns of relating. Angela then began to take account and take responsibility for her feelings. As a result of this confrontation, Angela contracted to say how she felt about what she was thinking and her opinions.

By acknowledging to myself that Angela was discounting the political significance of the differences³ between colour and class discrimination, I realised she had invited me to discount the significance of the colour of my skin. I had accepted the invitation. By accepting the invitation I had also got into a psychological game. This occurs when two or more people unconsciously adopt roles as either a Rescuer, Persecutor or Victim⁴ and

do not get their authentic needs met. On an overt level, Angela was Rescuing me from expressing my opinions and views and I was the Victim, whilst on a covert level I was Rescuing her from feeling her pain and she was the Victim. I see a Victim as someone who is discounting their powers and abilities, whilst a Rescuer is someone who without asking, does for others what they can do for themselves or may not want.

I was able to use Angela's positive transference of her relationship with a black friend, to assist her to identify a pattern of relating that was no longer meeting her needs. I offered her a new experience. I did not criticise her and I invited her to think about whether her needs were being met. This gave her the opportunity to think about her needs and meet them more effectively. I had also gained, as I was able to reaffirm that I could also express my views and opinions, by being fully aware of my processes and opinions. Whenever familiar patterns of relating to others are broken, it is an opportunity for growth and to get unmet needs met in a healthy way, for both parties.

I have found that relationship dynamics in the microcosm of the therapeutic relationship is likely to be a reflection of the dynamics in the relationships between countries in the macrocosm of the world, especially between countries populated by different races. This understanding can be used to help clients change and grow. My experience is that the relationship dynamics is different for each therapeutic relationship. This is because each person is an individual and, due to their family and cultural experiences they will have an unique frame of reference in addressing issues. Nonetheless, a significant aspect of the relationship is still likely to be a reflection of the macrocosm.

The example I shared from my clinical practice illustrated how working directly with the impact of skin colour can bring rewards to a therapeutic relationship. I see this as a microcosm of dynamics between nations, with people of different skin colour. In my view, the relationship dynamics with this client at this particular point in time mirrored the dynamics between countries that are predominately populated by white people and countries populated by black people. It is important to note that my relationships with clients are wide and varied and they do not always mirror the dynamics between black and white countries. Other dynamics include gender, class, sexuality and language.

In what way am I linking the microcosm to the macrocosm? My thinking is that if you look at the world as a whole, the economic, social and political power is mainly held within countries where the population consists of mainly white skinned people. This can be evidenced by the G8, which consists of heads of state or governments of 8 major industrial democracies in the world, who meet annually to discuss major economical and political issues facing their domestic societies and the international community as a whole. Member countries are predominately populated by white skinned people except Japan. The other member countries are USA, Britain, Germany, France, Russia, Italy and Canada. This perpetuates white skinned dominated countries having their laws, views and culture dominating the world. This has led to a situation where countries mainly inhabited by black skinned people have either conformed, adapted or rebelled under this domination.

My thinking is that when white society ignores their own basic feelings and needs, that black society have been programmed over centuries to take care of white society needs. This may be because on an unconscious level, black society that has been dominated for so long, believes that if white society needs go unmet, black's society's needs will also go unmet. A similar pattern of relating can exist in a parent child relationship, when a parent is not caring for their own needs and the child sensing this decides to care for the parent; even though the parent is more powerful. In meeting white societies needs black society is likely to forgo their own basic needs, in order to placate and take care of white's society's needs; even though white society is more powerful. An economic illustration of this process in action is Africa exporting her wealth of natural resources to mainly white dominated countries whilst the majority of Africans go without their basic needs. Another example is black women caring for white children, whilst her children's needs are not met so effectively.

In the above description I have described black nations as adapting to domination by conforming but they may adapt by rebelling. It is usually when black nations adapt by rebelling that white society becomes uncomfortable in the familiar pattern of relating. Likewise in the therapeutic relationship when a client rebels it is an invitation for the therapist to become aware that there may be a familiar pattern of relating. The healing process is to not Persecute, that is using one's power to discount the other's power,

respect, rights and dignity in order to maintain the status quo. The healing process is to acknowledge yours and your clients needs that are not being met.

Countries like people are not always relating in familiar patterns which discounts aspects of themselves and others. Healthy societies are those that take responsibility for their own psychological, emotional and physiological needs whilst respecting that of others. They also take responsibility for honouring their own cultural values and opinions and take responsibility for getting things done, whilst respecting other's values and opinions.

What is it white society loses in the familiar pattern of relating? My thinking is it loses a sense of value for life and nature. Also white society loses it's sense of trust, fearing that black society may rebel at any time, therefore white society becomes more controlling, which perpetuates the likelihood of rebellion.

In conclusion, my thinking is that each person is psychologically vulnerable to being drawn into familiar patterns of relating to others due to their individual, family and cultural experiences. Therefore it is important for therapists and clients to be aware not only of their individual and family script but the inter play with their cultural and national patterns. Especially how this may play out in the therapy room. It was by noticing that Angela was discounting the political significance of the difference between class and race politics that I was alerted to the fact that we were both in a familiar pattern of relating. I was susceptible to this pattern of relating as I had made a decision as a young child that my opinions and views were not important, a decision based on messages from my parents, my culture and the dynamics between the countries which had influenced my upbringing.

In my experience a good way of preventing unnecessary familiar patterns of relating, which discount aspects of self and others, whilst creating a therapeutic environment in which the dynamics can be discussed, is to state the political differences between my client and myself, as soon as I assess it to be clinically appropriate. This embraces difference as part of the therapeutic milieu and thus the healing process. Finally, turning to the challenge that I have invited you and I to engage in. How can you and I identify familiar patterns of relating that are not causing discomfort but may be causing

our clients discomfort? I have some answers and I'm sure there are many more. One answer is supervision, however issues of differences can also be missed by supervisors, especially if they have similar backgrounds to our own. Another answer is to read widely about our clients' experiences from other sources, be it fiction, non fiction or newspapers. Finally, another solution is to become involved in groups that have a broad range of participants so that our frame of reference is constantly being challenged.

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Words 2,202 including footnotes.

¹ Eric Berne (1981). A Layman's Guide to Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis. Harmondsworth:Penguin Books (first published in 1969) P369-370.

² Eric Berne (1964). Games People Play. Penguin Books. P158

³ Valerie Batts (1998) Modern Racism: New Melody for the Same Old Tunes. Episcopal Divinity School Occasional Papers, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

⁴ Stephen Karpman (1968). Fairy Tales and Script Drama Analysis. Transactional Analysis Bulletin, Vol 17, No.6.

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