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Relating to the Other: a transpersonal exploration of our internalized experience of difference

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Aims and Purpose

The aim of the research was to explore the universal experience of internalised othering utilising creative techniques common to transpersonal psychotherapy.

Research Background

- This research asserts our experience of otherness to be one we all encounter, and grounds itself in the I/Thou & in particular the I/It relational ideas of Buber (1937/2010) where the other is objectified by a subject.
- Creative techniques of active imagination and visualisation were therefore selected to entice the internalised symbolic experience of this phenomena from the unconscious (Jung, 1968; Stevens, 1990).
- In its use of creative techniques this research presents a route for psychotherapy to assist clients in understanding their own sense of difference (Rowan, 1993).

Methodology

25 participants were interviewed to explore their experience of being different. The stages involved:

- A semi-structured interview in which the participant discussed their various experiences of being the other.
- The participant was asked to visualise a past experience of othering, reconnecting with the felt experience in the body, and then drawing the image that came up for this memory.
- Finally, Moustakas' (1994) Phenomenological Research method was utilised to analyse the data. This involved creating textual and structural pictures of the participant experience of difference allowing this researcher to present a collective understanding of the other and therefore its actual nature.

To highlight the universality of this experience this paper will now present a single atypical case study example .

Case Study Example

To offer now, a single case study: Michael was a 32 year old Scottish man for whom being a twin meant he experienced being singled out as the other as a child. He suggests that his experience of being the other he says led to a lifelong conflict with his brother. Two of the themes that arose are:

- **Conflict between self and other.** Discussing his relationship to his brother: *"we could have literally killed each other, and one during one particular fight at about 10 or 11, I broke his arm and he broke my nose."*
- **Other sacrifices self for majority.** Talking about the abuse he endured: *"I wasn't the only person in it, but it was kind of escalating and escalating and it was somebody who my parents knew. This man would drive us to school, so it was horrendous. And I think I saved xxxxxxxx in some way, and saved my family."*

In undertaking the visualisation Michael presented an his experience of feeling unseen by his teacher. In bringing forth a symbol for his experience, Michael subsequently drew the following:



Image 1: Michael's Internalised Other

The image Michael drew was of himself being held underwater by a pair of hands, with bubbles of air escaping from his mouth. As he said of the image, *"I think I mind it, life and death, in that I'm under water an this is air and I dieI'm going really blank, um, it's life and death, or living and dying. Existing and not existing."*

Discussion

- For Michael, his internalised sense of otherness involved his questioning his very existence,
- The internalised sense of otherness produced a feeling of needing to kill something off within himself, and he clearly experienced the self-destructive impulse from his being an outsider
- Being other also led to a belief he should sacrifice himself for the subject. He believed this led to the abuse he suffered.

Conclusion

The singular example presented here is typical of the difficult collective internalised sense of difference uncovered by this research. Most participants presented imagery representative of how difficult for them this experience of othering was.

Through the presentation of this singular example, this study highlights the credibility of combining creative methods common to psychotherapy with a phenomenological methodology to ascertain the human experience of a phenomenon universal to us all.

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