

From the Editorial Board

'You can either be right, or you can be open'

Humans and chimpanzees are 98.8% the same, genetically. If we're that similar to chimpanzees - who, for all their brilliance, have never managed to deliver a compelling webinar or offer a cogent opinion on, say, EMDR - imagine how similar we are to each other.

In all the most important ways, you are actually just like some random human on the other side of the world, your arch enemy, a neighbour, a client who sits before you, weeping over an ancient, lost hurt. You are just like me.

And yet there is nobody else quite like you. Only you were born into your body, at that time, to those people, in that place; only you have had your complex web of relationships, encounters and experiences. You are a one-off prism that refracts and casts a unique light on what it is to be human.

So who are you? Friend or foe?

What do we say after we say hello?

Our survival has depended on a certain level of anxiety, vigilance and distrust towards the unknown, and an affiliation with the safety of the known - this has been our evolutionary process. We navigate through life with the help of what Malcolm Gladwell describes as 'thin-slicing',¹ in which we use our senses, our experience and our beliefs to process a given situation very quickly, largely unconsciously, and take action. Yet so often the red warning light flashes completely unnecessarily. The results of such bad intelligence can be devastating, especially when poor light, adrenaline and police firearms are involved. Thin-slicing draws heavily on groupthink - social identity theory suggests that we categorise members of a group as being all the same.

Since time immemorial, people who have power have deemed groups of people who do not to be 'different' - and usually inferior. Edward Said called this 'Orientalism'.² Sometimes it is done wittingly - the British empire was built on a savage belief in its own, white supremacy atop a human caste system that was solidified and exploited in order to 'divide and rule'.

Marginalised groups seeking justice are often successful in presenting a united front in demanding change, but when identity politics becomes too dogmatic, inward-looking and sectarian, it can paradoxically reinforce the very barriers it seeks to abolish. I identify as a 'person with a disability' - not a 'disabled person', which the social model mandates. Black History Month, the Paralympics, Pride - these are a step forward from exclusion, but they are essentially segregationist and would not be necessary in a truly inclusive society.

Psychotherapy, of course, is meant to build bridges, but it too is not immune from unwittingly reinforcing walls - Orientalism isn't always conscious. Is our profession, for example, person-centred or white person-centred? In England, if you're black, you are four times more likely to be sectioned than if you're white. Or how about disability? Such clients can

sometimes struggle to find a therapist who will take them on, and when they do they sometimes report feeling pitied, patronised or pressured to conform to the therapist's assumptions of what is normal. The worst word in our language might be 'invalid'.

How much do we question our own biases and prejudices? Do we tell ourselves that our approach, modality, research method, our way of being a therapist, is the right one, that our brilliant interventions and interpretations are surely correct? Do we indiscriminately reduce, label and pigeonhole clients with CORE scores, simplistic models and clinical diagnoses that are, perhaps, little more than adjectives dressed up and repackaged as nouns? (As Yalom observes: 'Even the most liberal system of psychiatric nomenclature does violence to the being of another'.³)

We tell ourselves we know. And when we do this - what the poet Keats called 'irritable reaching after fact and reason'⁴ - we perhaps stop listening, and talking therapy becomes telling therapy, and 'being with' becomes 'doing unto'. The therapist exerts power; the client shrinks. My supervisor, Mark Gullidge, once said to me: 'You can either be right, or you can be open.' Or, in the mournful words of TS Eliot: 'The only wisdom we can hope to acquire/ Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless. The houses are all gone under the sea.'⁵

We must question ourselves, and what we think we know about humans. We must be like fish trying to understand the concept of water. We must be xenophiles. We should know about and be sensitive to the struggles and history of disadvantaged groups, but we must assume nothing about the person before us. Spinelli says therapists should aspire to be un-knowing - as opposed to 'unknowing'. We should be pluralist, integrative, flexible, perhaps creating what Jung described as a new therapy with each client.

As WH Auden says in his poem 'As I Walked Out One Evening': 'You shall love your crooked neighbour/With your crooked heart.' ■



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1. Gladwell M. Blink: The power of thinking without thinking. London: Penguin, 2006. 2. Said E. Orientalism. London: Penguin, 1978. 3. Yalom ID. Love's executioner and other tales of psychotherapy. New York: Basic Books, 2012. 4. www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69384/selections-from-keats-letters 5. Eliot TS. East Coker. In: The Four Quartets. London: Faber & Faber, 2001.