

# ***Globalisation and the Complexity of Self: The relevance of psychotherapy***

***Les Todres***

## **Abstract**

The increasing globalisation of culture presents a particular kind of challenge to some of our western cultural institutions. This is because the process of globalisation is not just a one-way "Americanisation" of the rest of the world, even though it is sometimes portrayed as such. Rather it may involve a plural and dialectical "conversation" in which the "packages" of certain cultural institutions may change beyond recognition or even be superseded by new forms.

Psychotherapy is one such institution. Interesting historical and cultural analyses have been done on why psychotherapy, as a discretely defined activity, emerged when it did, how it did, and for whom it did.

The present paper attempts to address some of these issues by considering:

- How culture and the nature of the self is changing through globalisation.
- How psychotherapy has evolved historically to essentially address problems of the self.
- How an empirical-phenomenological study of clients' experiences of psychotherapy help to articulate some essences of what conversational psychotherapy is as it is currently practised.

I hope to show that understanding the process of psychotherapy at an existentially foundational level allows us to see that which is fundamentally human, that is, that which transcends both the institution of psychotherapy as well as cultural differences. As such, one may begin to consider a form of human support and facilitation that is presently referred to as "psychotherapy", but which does not necessarily need to survive in its present forms.

## **Introduction**

I have been wondering about the future of psychotherapy in an increasingly plural and global culture and would like to share some emerging reflections based on my engagement in both theory and research. These thoughts have been informed by a number of related questions and contexts that I will need to touch on. They are:

- How culture and the nature of the self is changing through globalisation.

- How psychotherapy has evolved historically to essentially address problems of the self.
- How an empirical-phenomenological studies of clients' experiences of psychotherapy help to articulate some essences of what conversational psychotherapy is as it is currently practised.

In considering these questions and contexts, I would like to suggest that the essential task of psychotherapy will continue to be relevant in a more global world where the plural challenges of living 'in the borderlines' of multiple contexts pose both great freedoms as well as challenges for human identity.

## **Globalisation and self-identity**

Although Ritzer (1993) has referred to the 'MacDonaldization' of the world, other social theorists of globalisation have extended their analysis beyond the economic dimensions to consider its implications for our cultural experiences and sense of self-identity.

Within this spirit, Featherstone (1995) does not see a form of globalisation that results in a homogenisation of culture; where tradition gives way to American consumer culture. Rather, he sees it as much more complex than this. In his book, *Undoing Culture: Globalisation, Postmodernism and Identity*, he provides evidence for multiple forms of mutual cultural exchange. In this view, there is a greater mixing and 'syncretism' of cultures which were formerly held as separate. He asserts that :

- a. More people are crossing cultural boundaries than ever before and have multiple affiliations which question taken-for-granted stereotypes. The way that he puts this is that more people live between cultures, 'on the borderlines'.
- b. There has been a shift in the global balance of power away from the West to the extent that it cannot now avoid listening to the 'other' or assume that the latter is in an earlier stage of development.

(p12).

He concludes this stage of a much more detailed exposition by saying:

*The process of globalisation then, does not seem to be producing cultural uniformity; rather it makes us aware of new levels of diversity.*

(pp13-14).

For the purposes of this paper, we can leave him here and ask about the implications of such a trend for the practice of psychotherapy. In order to

approach this question, we first need to take an excursion into the history of psychotherapy.

## **What the history of psychotherapy may tell us about its central task**

Philip Cushman (1992), in a helpfully provocative interpretation, looks at how the history of psychotherapy is intertwined with the history of the United States of America, and characterises the psychotherapist as the 'doctor of the interior'. He claims that this can apply across a range of psychotherapeutic theories - psychodynamic, humanistic, self psychology and cognitive therapy.

In the context of the present analysis, I would like to agree with certain aspects of Cushman's argument, but put a different emphasis on his analysis of self and the extent to which the psychotherapeutic task addresses historical issues and the extent to which it addresses more universal, existential issues.

I agree with his understanding of the popularity of psychotherapy that:

*Psychotherapy is so accurately attuned to the twentieth century cultural frame of reference that it has come to provide human services that are crucial, perhaps indispensable, to our current way of life.*

(Cushman, 1992, p24)

As such, he sees psychotherapy as 'emblematic of the post-modern era' and insightfully traces various theoretical and practical developments in psychotherapy since Freud. He shows how these changes of emphasis mirrored nuances of concern in our post-modern culture - concerns which centre on the challenges of forging an individual self in a rapidly changing world.

He sees these challenges as having an essentially historical source, and therefore, psychotherapy as addressing these historical, essentially capitalist nuances. So, for example, with Freud, psychotherapy addresses a morally overbound self, with Winnicott and Kohut, a bounded, lonely self, and with Humanistic Psychology, an empty self.

In these ways, according to Cushman (1992):

*Psychotherapists shape, maintain and heal the realm of the private that the modern era has located within each self-contained individual.*

(p22).

The problems of this self-contained individual with their different historical and cultural nuances can essentially be understood within the context of capitalist culture.

So Cushman sees the problems that psychotherapy addresses as being a fundamental product of a particular era. He builds on the work of Taylor (1989) in this regard who characterises the self of the current era as bounded, masterful and hypertrophied - a kind of self that is suffering from a condition of 'cramp' and 'contraction'.

In the development of this argument, Cushman also draws on Foucault (1980), to articulate the historical 'rise of the self-contained individual' and he pursues some of the dangers of such an individualistic agenda for mental health. Cushman sees the individualistic agenda of our culture as having:

*.....resulted in moral illiteracy, confusion, isolation, loneliness and self-pre-occupation leading to the need for the social practice of psychotherapy.*

(1992, pp27-28).

So, in this view, psychotherapy is a practice that attempts to heal the 'illnesses' of this masterful, bounded self.

The difference in emphasis that I would like to put on this is to suggest that the central task or essence of psychotherapy, although addressing our current historical-cultural occasion, essentially addresses a more universal existential dilemma that still applies in other cultures and other historical eras - though with different nuances.

The more fundamental, existential issue may be about the 'belonging' of human identity. This is a very old story and goes back into the mythological mists of various ancient cultures (for example, the story of Adam and Eve being thrown out of the Garden of Eden.)

The existential question is: What am I part of; what is me, and what is not me? This is a question about the self, about how the part relates to the whole, the 'inner' to the 'outer'. And I would like to suggest that religion, the family and community life has not been adequate to addressing this task in recent times.

Thus one may want to make a distinction between an existential, more universally human level, in which, as human beings, we have the question about the problem of belonging in common, and a cultural, historical level, in which the nuances of this task can emerge in diverse and even urgent ways. This can mean that:

- a. There **is**, as Cushman suggests, a particular post-modern dilemma in the way we experience our sense of personal identity.
- b. But that in facing this historical nuance of the overbounded, self-contained individual, we are also facing its deeper existential question of belonging - and that this dimension is transhistorical and transcultural.

So, what the history of psychotherapy may tell us about its central task is that it has been a secular way of addressing an existential task in ways that religions and communities did in other ways in other times and places.

And it also tells us that the particular problem of self-identity is changing, that it has become overbounded and too rigid, and that this has constituted symptoms of felt emptiness, isolation and inner conflict.

We now turn to the results of an empirical-phenomenological study of clients' experiences of psychotherapy towards the end of the twentieth century. I do this in order to suggest that the essential experience of psychotherapy may continue to be relevant in a post-modern, increasingly global culture of 'living in the borderlines' where the personal tasks of belonging become even more complex.

## **Clients' experiences of psychotherapy**

An empirical-phenomenological study was carried out to throw some light on the question: what is the essence of meaningful change for clients in psychotherapy and what enables this?

Because of time constraints, I cannot go into the detailed methodological steps that I took in gathering and analysing in a phenomenological way, the descriptions of clients experiences of psychotherapy. Suffice to say, that I was mainly informed by the work of Amedeo Giorgi (1970,1985,1997) and his recommendations for a procedure that modifies Husserl's philosophical work in a way that can be applied to Human Science and the analysis of the concrete experiences of others. The goal of such a procedure is to arrive at an insightful expression of the invariant structure of the phenomenon, in the case of the study, the nature of the kind of therapeutic self-insight that leads to a greater sense of freedom.

The concern with formulating an invariant structure involves a question about what makes something what it is. And this involves a description of its essential constituents and how these constituents inter-relate to form a meaningful whole. The articulation of such 'essences' of the experience of psychotherapy is based on an analysis of particular concrete experiences that were lived through by psychotherapy clients. The value of such a methodology for addressing the concerns of the present paper is that we are looking for transferable essences that may 'survive' changes in form. By understanding such essences, we could then imagine these essences still being able to occur in different historical and cultural forms. Thus the 'substance' of psychotherapy would not be attached to what it looks like from an external point of view, for example, two people sitting on chairs. The substance, such as its intention, experience and values could be expressed in different forms. This is what Husserl, the founder of philosophical phenomenology meant by 'imaginative variation'. That is, if we were to change this or that element, does it still retain its essence - what

makes it what it is? So, for example, one could have many different kinds of tables, with different numbers of legs or no legs, but it could still have a surface of some kind to put things on. Thus, a 'surface' is one of the essences of what makes a table a table. It is the invariant structure that may tell us something about what can survive about psychotherapy in an increasingly plural culture and global world.

The study I will refer to was not carried out at the time to make a cultural or comparative point. Nevertheless, the psychotherapy clients who made up the informants of the study could be said to have lived 'in the borderlines' as articulated by Featherstone, earlier. They were people who saw in psychotherapy the potential to help them with struggles with the sense of themselves, issues of belonging and who they were in relation to others and a wider world.

Ten people (six men and four women) who had been in psychotherapy for a minimum of four months were asked to describe a situation in psychotherapy in which they saw or understood something which carried a greater sense of freedom. All could recognise such an experience and, an analysis of their diverse experiences **did** reveal some invariant themes that tell us about the basic 'substance' or 'essence' of such an experience. I will not be able to give you the full, fairly lengthy, narrative account of this structure here, but will summarise these essential themes:

- Firstly, there is a personal narrative work that makes sense of personal identity - where one has been and where one is going, in the context of wider relationships with others, the world, culture and sometimes, God or a higher purpose.
- Such personal sense-making occurs through clients moving back into the concrete and specific details of their lives. Such details are credibly woven to form a patterned, meaningful story which makes sense of many things for them. The nature of the therapeutic relationship is such that it gives enough safety, permission and freedom to honestly explore such personally credible sense-making. There is an emotional healing to such sense-making in that a greater sense of personal agency becomes clearer in the weaving of details and patterns - like seeing more about where to walk because one is on higher ground.
- Even deeper than this increased sense of personal agency, is the achievement of a more complex experience of their own personal identity, and this complexity constitutes the 'sense of freedom' that they were referring to when responding to the research question. The sense of freedom is essentially an experience of 'being more than....'
  - Being more than what I had previously thought and felt
  - Being more than what I had said up till now
  - Being more than any premature judgement of myself - good or bad

- Being more than any 'thing' of self-enclosed entity that reacts to forces and causes

So the study revealed that, paradoxically, in returning clients to the concrete details of their lives, psychotherapy is a work of **un-specialisation**, of **de-role-ing**, a sense of complexity of personal identity that is 'more than' any definition can capture. Psychotherapy clients thus move beyond previous levels of self-enclosure and objectification. Such experiences of a more complex self credibly transcend premature self-definition - and it is this experience that may continue to be relevant in a post-modern, increasingly global culture.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

A world of living increasingly 'in the borderlines' as articulated by Featherstone, emphasises an existential dilemma in an unprecedented form. How do we achieve narratives of personal meaning in a historical situation where the givens of narrative, the centre, does not easily hold - narratives of religion, community and even science, do not easily hold.

The results of this study would indicate that the psychotherapy clients were not primarily engaged in problems of the 'private interior' as Cushman contends. This is part of the story, but the task is more relational. It is not so much that, in psychotherapy, the private interior is "protected, understood, cared for, healed, and made to thrive." (Cushman, 1992, p58.) Rather, it is that psychotherapy engages in a more existential, universally relational task that is an ambiguous project of self and other. It is a work of personal meaning-making that requires more fluidity and more personal artistry than ever before, and which can be addressed by the following essences of psychotherapy, whether that term survives or not:

- A work of personal narrative that is experienced as true to the felt, concrete details of one's life that undoes premature specialisation and objectification of identity, and creates a space of some fluidity and freedom.
- A work of personal meaning-making that is complex enough to move and understand itself within a plurality of contexts.

How different cultures and the future will give different forms to these essences remains to be seen.

**Les Todres**, PhD, is a clinical psychologist and Reader in Interprofessional Development at Bournemouth University, U.K. His research and practice interests include phenomenological approaches to qualitative research, integrative psychotherapy and transpersonal psychology. Address for correspondence: Les Todres, Institute of Health and Community Studies, Bournemouth University, Royal London House, Christchurch Road,

Bournemouth, BH1 3LT, United Kingdom. Email:  
ltodres@bournemouth.ac.uk

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