

Symposium Introduction¹

Therapists' Journeys of Transition and Transformation: Who can we become? – Where are we going?

All the things in nature arise, then fall; this is you.

(Hamer, 2022, p. 293)

Skilful living flows from a capacity for spontaneity and yields to what is, rather than from a struggle to exert control over self and others.

(Totton, 2012, p. 254)

This collection of articles was born and shaped in a world that is crumbling, a world in crisis, a world full of losses – one loss as we drew the articles together being the sad news that AHPb and *Self & Society* are in the stage of 'fall'. The collection began when a group of senior psychotherapists from different cultural backgrounds and theoretical orientations came together during the Covid lockdown to share and support each other's creativity, and drawing on their own personal and clinical experiences to explore how nurturing the process of transition and self-agency brings transformation and enhances our sense of self. That it evolved organically from recognition and valuing of difference, coupled with enjoyment and celebration of commonality, is surely a pointer to more of what is needed today.

Our sense of self is impacted by society's expectations and projections, which makes these articles timely in that they may be viewed as providing a counterpoint to the times in which we are living, where 'difference' is increasingly giving rise to

hostility. Maeja Raicar writes about her young Moslem client:

She vividly described to me her visceral and disorienting experience of having to be two different people while growing up in England, of daily switching language and identity – literally on the threshold of her home – in an attempt to fit in socially and culturally with her English peers at school. She would change in the morning into Western-style school uniform before leaving home to join her friends on their way to school, and converse in English all day.

On returning home in the evening she would immediately change back into traditional Pakistani dress, salwar and kameez, and simultaneously switch from English to Urdu when speaking to her mother and grandparents. Her daily double transformation was complete; but while clothes could be simply swapped, the switch from using her mother tongue to speaking in English and then back again in Urdu was far more profound and longer lasting in its impact on whom she felt she was allowed to be in the two conflicting cultures.

The group of contributors is rich not only in terms of race, nationality, language, gender and faith, but also in terms of the variety of psychotherapy modalities represented. They bring to their writing a wealth of cultural experiences, and draw on their personal and professional understandings; and they continue to meet to share their writing and their personal and professional perspectives on issues such as gender identity, race, language, trauma, othering and isolation, childlessness and parenthood, and illness and ageing. There is a richness and a rawness in the themes we have explored which we hope will resonate with and inspire the thinking of others.²

In his recollections about Nick Luxmore, Jim Pye noted Nick's trust in others coming up with what was necessary.

He imposed no special uniformity of theme for each conference, trusting that a theme would emerge as the workshops took shape – and when it did, it could be named, and become the title of the conference. In other words, creative himself, he trusted to our collective creativity.

This could be applied to the organic but also collective way that the articles and poems in this final edition of *Self & Society* have come together.

A meta-theme in our discussions has been about transitions and transformations in identity. Again referring to Pye's paper, he asks, 'What sort of a thing is a psychotherapist, and how did my identity change when I became one in the first place?'. The question could be expanded to ask, 'How does our identity keep changing as we journey in this work?', and 'How do losses and traumatic events transform us?'. Our sense of self, our identity, is fluid, and perhaps never more so in history than now. It concerns our individual and unique experiences and choices, as well as the specific groups and communities to which we belong. It is, in the words of the American poet Robert Penn Warren, 'continually expanding in a vital

process of definition, affirmation, revision, and growth, a process that is the image, we may say, of the life process of a healthy society itself' (Popova, 2017).

The Hopi Indians have a word '*Hakomi*' which, as Sue Wright mentions in her book review essay, means, in essence, 'Who am I, and how do I see and relate to what is going on around me?'. From our perspective, we could reframe the question as: 'Who can we become in a world where how we are accustomed to living our lives is becoming increasingly challenged?' We are constantly refashioning ourselves in response to moment-by-moment circumstances and the chance encounters we have with others. We are 'work in progress', all struggling with existential issues and the attachment-based need to feel that we fit in and belong. What a therapeutic lens can offer to this is reflexivity, that we can track our phenomenology and what we observe in others, then step back and try to make sense of it. This surely is what helps our revisioning to stay a vital, healthy process – a yielding to what is, 'rather than from a struggle to exert control over self and others' (Totton, 2012, p. 254).

In our discussions as an intercultural group, much has been said about feeling different and silenced because of dislocation from what was once home and the loss of mother tongue, and the challenge of having to navigate different cultures without losing touch with oneself. We have also talked about feeling different because of childlessness and how the impact of this, as Sheila O'Sullivan points out in her article, 'ebbs and flows with the passage of time and life-stages'. We have thought about the importance of being able to share one's story and be heard, and how, in this process, it becomes easier to integrate the different parts of ourselves. 'I want to tell myself my story rather than simply be in it', said Tamar Posner during one of the group's meetings; and in her article on difference, Caroline Adawole acknowledges that muted voices within her have clamoured for an

outlet to express themselves. ‘They were yearning to be heard.’ We need witnesses – witnesses who accept us as we are so that we don’t, as Adawole points out, ‘other ourselves in order to survive’. This is a human need, and perhaps deep down why many people come to therapy; and the presence of an external witness helps us to develop a more compassionate inner witness. As the essayist Rebecca Solnit said:

Writing is saying to no one and everyone the things it is not possible to say to someone. Or rather writing is saying to the no one who may eventually be the reader those things one has no someone to say them to. Matters that are so subtle, so personal, so obscure, that I ordinarily can’t imagine saying them to the people to whom I am closest. (Solnit, 2013, p. 64).

Meanwhile, as readers, perhaps a hidden wish, born of our need to belong, is to see if there are others who feel like us, and to discover how they have managed to survive difficult times.

As we encounter change on life’s journey – whether planned or unexpected, welcomed or viewed with ambivalence – and as we meet people whose stories and views are different from our own, our identity evolves. ‘It was still me’, says Gülcan Sutton Purser, ‘but the way I saw things was not the same’. Bruising attacks, accidents, illnesses and losses can shatter our assumptions. They force us to face ourselves, and writing does, too.

The process of writing is itself one of multiple revisions, and the work shifts in shape and identity as it matures. Somehow, with lots of effort, mutual encouragement and rich theoretical discussions, we have juggled to find sufficient balance as work demands and personal crises have taken over in order to stay thinking and writing. We have acknowledged our ambivalence about sharing our stories, and our doubts about the value of our words. The group has provided a valuable container for this process, just as a therapeutic relationship provides a container for those

‘personal, obscure matters that ordinarily we can’t imagine saying to others’; and with the encouragement of Richard House, the editor of *Self & Society*, this final edition of the journal has provided a container for our work. Final? Life is never static. Nature tells us this, and these offerings may not be the final version.

Note

- 1 *Editor’s note*: Sue Wright, who took on the main responsibility of assembling this great symposium, modestly declined to be named as the author of this Introduction, as she says that ‘it was the fruit of many collaborations over time, and after I wrote the basis of it, other thoughts from the group refined it’. So Sue wants it to be seen as ‘a collective enterprise’. [RH]
- 2 We also want to emphasise that the ideas we have put forward in this collection are our own perspectives, and they may not be those of other people.

References

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