

When the Mirror is Warped: The Benefit of Applying Transitional Space and Play in a Cultural Context

“There is no doubt that creativity is the most important human resource of all. Without creativity, there would be no progress, and we would be forever repeating the same patterns.” — Edward de Bono

“Creativity is inventing, experimenting, growing, taking risks, breaking rules, making mistakes, and having fun.” — Mary Lou Cook

As a cultural theory, Object Relations and the development of transitional space as an opportunity to build self-stability through creative play has tremendous potential. There is much to gain by increasing awareness of the potential and experimenting along those lines. Trial and error in a safe container, what Winnicott referred to as *reality testing*, engenders creative discovery and development. In fact, it is relevant to note that by undertaking consideration of this very question in an exploratory paper allows me to begin to extend into that realm of transitional space, permitting me as the writer and researcher to experiment and “play” with how the constructs of my own inner reality correspond to that outer (and sometimes terrifying) reality of the culture around me and how I perceive it. Additionally, I propose that instead of attempting to *create* the transitional space within our culture through individual talk therapy or group work, by tapping two powerful arenas that already exist, imagery and nature, we may be able to access a well of creativity and healing potential that is massively underutilized in our contemporary culture today.

Object Relations in Infancy

According to Object Relations theory, an infant begins life in undifferentiated unity, not able to differentiate where she ends and her mother begins, nor what is inside and outside of herself, or between herself and others (Elliott, 2002). Winnicott theorized that selfhood emerges through interpersonal relations, especially through early interactions between the caregiver (often the mother) and her child. In order for the infant to develop, the caregiver must gradually and

carefully allow disillusionment so that the child realizes she is a separate individual but feels safe and empowered as she increases this awareness and grows. This process occurs as the infant begins to sense that her needs and emotions are not immediately met because her mother is not an extension of herself. During this phase, she needs to be mirrored and held by her mother in order to feel powerful and safe, in order to navigate and integrate the emotions and needs she is experiencing.

Healthy separation happens when the infant's emotions are reflected back to her and adequately held without crisis occurring. This mirroring and holding creates what Winnicott calls *transitional space*, a container where the infant feels safe enough and powerful enough to navigate and integrate her needs and emotions allowing her to develop a stable sense of self that can develop authentic emotional connections in everyday interactions with others while still feeling some sense of control. Transitional space is "a separate and autonomous subjective space" (Elliott, 2002, p. 72). If the transitional space is not created through effective mirroring/ mothering, the infant fails to develop a stable sense of self, inhibiting her ability to form successful early relationships and likely leading to later pathology.

It is natural and crucial, Winnicott argues, for infants to have access to transitional space and to create objects which are also transitional—that is, they are somewhat controlled by the infant but also influenced by others. *Transitional objects*, like a toy or a blanket, enable the infant to orient toward outer reality by bridging the inner world of self and fantasy and the outer world of people and things while maintaining some understanding that the object also belongs to the world inhabited by other people (Elliott, 2002). An infant's interest in her transitional objects gradually becomes decathected over time: she loses interest in it as her cultural development and interest in culture grows (Winnicott, 1971).

Play Space, Reality Testing, Play, and Creativity

As we established, in mirroring the infant, the mother gives the infant the impression she is safe and that she has the power and capacity to create something (good or pleasant). This narcissistic illusion is essential to the infant's development, Winnicott argues, because it corresponds to her perceived capacity to create. Winnicott labels the transitional realm as "potential space," a place where self and other meet, as do fantasy and reality. He argues it is essential for creative involvement with both others and with culture; from this arena that culture and social life emerge. Transitional space, then is vital for development of the self, whether it emerges as inhibition or the capacity to create, and for both individual creativity and for cultural experience (Elliott, 2002).

Winnicott's theory of symbolic language and play help a child develop a capacity for transitional living, to differentiate between fantasy and reality, to mitigate between her felt sense of self and that which others perceive and expect. If the caregiver is "good enough", there is no discrepancy between outward objects and the child's feelings of power and the capacity to create. In this transitional realm, the child senses enough "magic" that her initial feelings of omnipotence are supported and she feels safe enough to experiment. After the initial stage of reality testing, of being made to feel safe through initial trial and error, the caretaker needs to introduce frustration, gradually disillusioning the infant so that she might begin to understand and deal with reality, even if she hates the challenge. When at play in a space that is safe and not challenged, continuity of the experience allows one to become "lost" in the experience of pleasure and play—that is, creativity (Kalsched, 1996). Though play is sometimes viewed as irrelevant recreation by adults, for children it is a vehicle for learning and adapting to the real world. In early play, children experience and experiment with objects. Later on, as adolescents and adults, they copy and rehearse practical life scenarios in order to understand and integrate social codes in culture.

The Individual and Pathology

As an individual moves through childhood and into adulthood, if she does not know how to deal with her own emotions and needs and does not experience shared feeling and understanding with those around her, she cannot develop and maintain a stable sense of self (Elliott, 2002). In clinical therapy, Winnicott distinguishes between the developing tendency toward a *false self* one which has not managed to develop a strong ego identity and lacks the necessary trust in the world and the people around her to feel safe and the *true self* which is capable of creative living (Elliott, 2002). The true self allows for “creative and spontaneous expression of human needs and feels” (p. 75). If an infant was not mirrored, she ends up giving up her own authentic felt sense of self to gain acceptance or to navigate the powerful needs and emotions (Berman, 1989). When this occurs, pathology results because the infant’s self is “annihilated.” The false self embodies “emotional vulnerability in the face of social relations” (Elliott, 2002, p. 75). The child is left emotionally unable to interact with others and perceives human interaction and the world around her as terrifying.

I would also argue that not only does she not know what to do with her own emotions and wants, but she also doesn’t know what to do with others’ emotions and wants she perceives. She can’t integrate or locate them, cannot identify them as something she can handle, and therefore may feel overwhelmed and frightened at the emotions coming her way from the outside, from others. She cannot mitigate her environment and the demands she perceives it requires of her, so she retreats, stifling creative capacity. The “wants” of others translate into “demands” or are perceived as overwhelming “obligations.”

To mitigate a sense of fear and potential overwhelm, it is common to resort to a system of coping techniques that act as a decoy or a deflector to make us feel safer. Some people act out or become aggressive; others hide themselves away, unable to make authentic connections that lead

to valid interpersonal relationships. Many turn to addictions to distract themselves or numb the pain. Others create or act out constant dramas in which they act out their unmitigated demands and emotions. The unmitigated emotions become part of the *shadow*, repressed or disowned, unknown and not recognized or accepted. We continue to live in fear of the outer world, not trusting our inner reality but unable to navigate the discrepancy between our inner felt sense of self and the outer reality of others actions, expectations, and perceptions (Berman, 1989).

Object Relations in Clinical Therapy

In a therapeutic environment, then, according to Winnicott, the therapist provide a holding environment for the client so she has the opportunity to finally mitigate the ego needs that have been neglected and to navigate her emotions. If the therapist managed to create a safe holding environment and to exercise patience, the individual's true self could emerge (Winnicott, 1971).

Pathology is usually a result of a chronic disjunction between our inner state and an outer event or state. The fantasy of a patient in therapy is to “get rid of something” that is “not me, not mine,” something that encroaches from outer to inner, causing fear or concern. The reality is that the individual needs to integrate the experience, to accept it, own it, and weave it into their psyche so that it is part of the fabric of their reality. Psychotherapy is one way in our current culture that we attempt to link the discrepancy between inner and outer, to create that transitional space required to allow each individual to feel safe and to play. Thus, in a clinical sense, we manage to attempt, at least, to recreate that much-needed transitional realm which an infant requires for adequate ego-development (Elliott, 2002).

Culture and Pathology

It appears impossible to separate the individual from the culture in which they are embedded. A culture is made up of individuals all being conditioned to a set of values and beliefs

which is propagated over and over by her surroundings. Just as the infant, at first, does not differentiate what is inside and outside of herself, nor between herself and others, often an individual, even as an adult, does not differentiate what is her self and what is her culture. She takes on the beliefs, values, traditions, roles, and behaviors that are manifest by virtually everyone around her and which have often been manifest historically.

Elliott (2002) quotes British sociologist, Anthony Giddens, who insists we must experience a sense of personal trust in order to manage the “demands and dangers of everyday social life” (p. 76). Trust offsets anxiety. If one does not have confidence in the continuity of self and the constancy of her environment, the world around her, she is not able to trust nor, therefore, to function. Elliott suggests modernity introduces new elements into the picture and asks how the increase of information and globalization affect the transitional realm in which the culture is embedded. The fragmentation and lack of unity manifests in instability, ambivalence, and lack of focus in contemporary culture according to Elliott (2002), a pattern that is imprinted onto our individual constructs of our selves. I wonder if we are currently experiencing a “false culture,” a society that does not have a strong sense of self because the individuals that make it up have not been provided with adequate mirroring and transitional space. The critical social and cultural changes wrought by globalization, mass communication, and technology lead to questions about how any of us can face the risks presented by modernity without the “dislocation and dispersal of the self” (Giddens, as quoted in Elliott, 2002, p. 76). Giddens calls for a forging of the self with which we combat unbearable anxiety, a cultivation of trust stemming from constancy and allowing a feeling of safety that allows the individual to sustain hope and courage. He points to the importance for maintaining and revising ‘narratives’ of self-identity” (in Elliott, p. 77), narratives that I believe can be provided by establishing transitional space.

Globalization, mass communication, and technology also contribute to another frightening

pathology, in that the more we see of the horrors going on in the world, the more shallowly they are treated and disseminated by the mass media, the more “normal” they appear to us. With an increasing sense of powerlessness to do anything about the perceived pervasive horrors, we retreat into fear, numbing our senses. With not space in which we feel safe, creativity and the potential and capacity to take action are reduced. Correspondingly, technology provides us movies and video games where violence is pervasive and has no consequence, and an abrupt ringing cell phone demands to be answered alleviating constancy and quality time in a holding and supportive environment.

So, with increasing modernization, our culture fails to “mother” us, to mirror and hold our own needs and emotions, and on an individual level, caretakers and mothers are less likely to provide the mirroring and holding because their own emotions and wants are unmitigated. As well, the fast pace of modern culture virtually ensure they are “busy” with TV, Blackberries, internet, twittering, and other technology that does not allow them to concentrate or focus quality time/uninterrupted attention on the infants of today, perpetuating the pathology into adulthood and into the future of the culture and all the individuals that make it up.

Berman reminds us that alienation was not a rapid shift that resulted from technology and industrialization, but rather was the deterioration of a series of steps that led to a loss of the our non-human mirrors that are crucial at various steps of forging our identities. I believe because we are no longer witnessed, we can no longer witness ourselves. It becomes a vicious circle. Who/what/where is the “Mother” in our culture today that creates a container in which we are mirrored and made to feel safe? Relentless seeking of the possessions, entertainment, and social status that seems to epitomize our culture cannot provide a reliable mirror, but rather offers a reflections of the self that is warped and twisted. Even archetypal “Mother Earth” has been

abused, devastated, mined, and depleted to the extent that potentially she can no longer hold and mirror us properly. If the mirror is broken, we are all affected, both individually and culturally.

Transitional Space and Play in a Cultural Context

It is arguable that if we had a cultural container in which individuals experiencing pathology (perhaps through not being held and mirrored themselves as infants), a place or program where they could be held and mirrored at whatever stage in their lives, they might develop enough trust to begin experimentation and play and ultimately manage to make the connection between their inner reality and outer reality. In fact, some earth-based and indigenous cultures, this concept exists, and those who exhibit symptoms of soul loss or malaise are brought into a circle or domicile where they can be surrounded, supported, and witnessed until they work their way through the malaise and out the other side, often emerging with a gift. Sometimes, this is a shamanic illness, and the former patient emerges as a shaman or healer who is ready to serve on behalf of the community who nursed him to health (Eliade, 1974).

There are existing realms that can serve as transitional space. Two, in particular, are fairly easy to access and are natural options to seek from within our culture that is fragmented and broken. These are nature and imagery. Both provide mirroring, holding, and safe space along with plenty of potential objects with which an individual can experiment and play.

Image as Transitional Space

Imagery is the language of the inner self. Carl Jung, and James Hillman after him, both championed entry into the realm of myth and symbol to find transformation. "Image is soul," insisted Jung, and soul is the ultimate state of balance. When the imagination opens, new possibilities arise (Hillman, 1975). Dialogue and interaction with images create narratives in which an individual can locate herself, can test options and integrate outcomes in relationship to

the image. She can bring the story back with her to the inner reality knowing she can navigate through what life throws at her from outside herself, allowing her to digest what she sees as challenging or frightening and empowering her and creating continuity and security through experience. Imaginal work allows more digestive space to work with the connection; more “play” space. Image produces personal images and metaphorical themes, providing an active and "playful" approach empowering the individual to work with her imagination and in contemplate meaning in the experience. Sheik (2003) asserts that the nonintrusive symbolic character of imagery is less likely to trigger defenses or resistance, allowing revelation to emerge. "A single image can symbolize or arouse an entire constellation of meanings, which can then be explored. (Hutchinson as quoted in Sheikh, 2003).

Nature as Transitional Space

Berman (1989) writes about Nature as transitional space, a place where there is continuity in the cycles of life and death and life again. It is a holding space where one can locate oneself in something bigger and begin to relate to the outside world, building the trust Giddens insists we must have in order to cope with modernity with its huge consequential risks. It is a space filled with cycles, patterns, and objects ripe with potential, in which we can see ourselves, locate ourselves, experience possibilities, and feel held like a mother’s gaze looking back at us. However, again, if I am overtly aware of the devastation humans are perpetrating on nature, I perceive an imbalance of power, thinking humans may ultimately overwhelm nature and its not big enough to sustain the assault. The continuity and “natural” cycles are disrupted through deforestation, mining, drilling, the use of explosives, pollution, and toxic waste dumps. Just knowing this, I feel anxious. If nature is disturbed, how can she hold me and mirror me? Who is mirroring Nature? What is her transitional space, I wonder, where she is safe and can place what is happening in

context? I still believe she is “good enough,” for the moment at least.

Additionally, it occurs to me that nature can provide a container or transitional space for the horrors emerging in culture; but culture, when healthy, can also provide a container for the devouring aspect of nature which instigates devastating natural disasters. Each, culture and nature, can act as a holding container, a witness, in fact, to the abruptness, inconstancy, and devouring nature of the other. Perhaps, ultimately it is the power of the witnessing aspect that makes or breaks a culture by making it a safe place where creativity can emerge.

Summary

In closing, *if*, indeed, Winnicott is right in that creation of transitional space is the only way an individual can be empowered enough to access creative potential and establish safety and a stable sense of self, and *if* our culture is a reflection of the myriad individuals that make it up, then our culture *requires* that we establish more awareness on the critical need for mirroring and holding, for the creation or identification and *use of* a safe space like nature or imagery filled with potential transitional objects in which individuals could work through their issues through testing and experiencing satisfactory results. In this way, each person is enabled to navigate and take forward action in a world that feels safe and abundant, ultimate even producing contributions like art, music, poetry, and ideas that contribute to the enrichment of society. Certainly, it appears nothing is lost in establishing the opportunity for potentiality to occur and for health and stability to emerge. In short, the world might become a very different place if the better part of the culture had the benefit of transitional space. In fact, it may even be a necessity that we move in this direction in order to re-establish the balance, restoring and making transitional space available to our potential cultural containers, image and nature, so they can continue to hold and support us.

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