Brexit and the Counsellor: identity shifts, social responsibility and the therapeutic relationship

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SUMMARY: In this article, we (three colleagues at the University of East London) are reflecting on what Brexit is instigating in us and in our work as practitioners and counselling educators.

KEY WORDS: Brexit, splitting, othering, transference, social responsibility

Two years since the British referendum in June 2016, firing up the Brexit negotiations in Europe, we are still confronted by a maze of questions around the future – it has been called a *'Brexistential crisis'* (The Guardian, July 2016), raising issues of identity and self-definition for the UK, posed by a national split that has left everyone 'in flux'. As therapists we are both called upon to position ourselves in relation to social changes and to witness their impact upon our clients. Politics is considered a complex topic when it appears in the counselling room and therapists usually resist it (Avissar, 2016). However, can we remain congruent to our role if we are not open to a 'politically-conscious' therapy?

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Brexit and the counsellor: identity shifts

A Home Office envelope arrived on my (FC) doorstep last March containing my permanent residence card. Although after 16 years in England, I was positive that nobody would challenge my 'status', this 'stamp' reminded me that societies tend to segregate. I remembered when I first moved from Athens to Durham – one of the most prestigious British Universities - to pursue my postgraduate counselling training. I was full of pride and dreams which I pursued with great success. I later on became a Scholar of the University of Manchester for my PhD counselling studies. All these years, I have been employed by charities, the NHS, a number of Universities and, as another EU colleague has put it, 'I have cared for the mental health of this nation' with commitment, soulful dedication and passion for my work… and yet, that envelope made me feel somehow 'unwelcomed', even though it gives me permission to 'stay'. As an existentialist, I notice something shifting within my sense of 'being-in-the-world' – I realise how this world that is our 'shared home', is yet so divided by incongruent politics, unhealthy power dynamics and an attitude of scapegoating amongst groups. The 'Other' has become a member of the average family; but, who is this 'Other' after all? What does this 'psychological splitting' represent for this nation which has so far managed to relatively harmoniously integrate different cultural groups, despite a history of colonial trauma?

Something we enjoy most in our current positions at the University of East London (UEL) is its diversity, over 70 per cent of students come from black or ethnic minority backgrounds. The institution's staff members represent over 160 countries, many of them from the EU, bringing into this country some of the most globally respected talent. We work in a fruitful spirit of collaboration and our diverse cultural backgrounds enrich the interactions amongst and between us and our students.

Twenty months since the referendum result, I (VB) am still impacted by Brexit; shock, disbelief, grief, violation, powerlessness and anger were some of the early feelings that still encompass me. For me living with difference means security and belonging. I am British, born in the Midlands and grew up in the North. I've always identified as British, an inclusive term for a multi-diverse country. I identify as lesbian and inclusivity is my baseline for all.

I (LB) am a slow processer and take time to 'digest' certain experiences, especially when they trigger ambivalent feelings and may imply existentially difficult choices. When I heard the referendum result, I initially felt deeply disturbed and almost betrayed. I felt like my long term relationship with what I considered 'home' in my adult life (I moved to the UK from Italy almost 25 years ago, immediately after my first degree) was suddenly cracked and disrespected. I felt quite shocked and also scared. Previously, I often claimed, in response to my family and friends asking me if I missed Italy and if I ever wanted to consider going back, that in

this country I felt accepted, recognised, supported, as never in my native country. Although I trained in Italy as a Gestalt psychotherapist, only here was it possible for me to fulfil my passion to become a lecturer in Counselling and Psychotherapy while, in parallel, develop a small private practice. I was able to construct a life that I enjoy and I am proud, made possible because of the numerous opportunities that I encountered in this country, where I never felt 'the outsider' but, by contrast, always felt experienced as an equal by my colleagues and students.

I was taken by surprise by Brexit and still wonder: shall I leave the country and change home, again? Shall I apply for permanent residence and try to stay here, although now, to be honest, I suddenly feel quite unwanted? And… do I still want 'them', now? While I was going through this process of existential questions for me, I was quite shocked to hear Italian friends minimising the whole event (maybe to reassure me?), arguing that in the end nothing was going to change and that even if it did, it couldn't possibly have any impact on me, as I have been living and working here for so many years. As if it was only a practical question, 'If you can keep your job, nothing changes'. But my life has already changed; my sense of feeling suddenly 'homeless', lost, resentful, scared… and, what about my social responsibilities as EU citizen and as a psychotherapist?

In our peer supervision group, such processes have been shared during the past months, together with reflections around the effect of Brexit on our client work.

Brexit in the counselling room: relational dynamics

With reports about Brexit causing 'a mental health crisis' (The Guardian, 29 June 2016), we are called upon gaining an understanding about not only how such a political change may affect the multicultural communities living in Britain but also how this may affect the dynamics within our counselling and psychotherapy work. We have seen reports of families being potentially divided, with 'remaining parents' facing tough decisions about children or elder relatives who may not be permitted to stay; inter-cultural couples who are left with uncertainty around whether they can continue their relationship; and others facing existential questions about 'where is home' when you feel 'unwelcomed' and yet have created a life in a 'foreign land'. There is a 'feverish anxiety' that seems to strike even those who have voted for Britain to leave the EU; and yet, if one walks down the prestigious London Harley street, it is interesting to observe how many European surnames of doctors and specialists of the greatest talent appear on the doors.

Nearly two years on I recall that post referendum morning (VB) standing in the playground waiting for my seven-year-old to go into school. The school population was stunned, our differences apparent, the guilty white British, the

visceral annihilation of the Europeans and the visible vulnerability of many cultures. In theoretical terms I considered the work of Melanie Klein (1988) where she describes the split between the *good object* and the *bad object*. The news of The Brexit referendum invited each of us into one side of the split. In my consulting room, where I have worked as a long-term Relational Transactional Analyst Psychotherapist for 20 years – here I describe the evolving process (from 2016 to the present) shifting from *'you and I, 'us and them'* to *'you're with them'*. I realise that as a socially conscious psychotherapist quite a journey is ahead. I had for many years sat comfortably with my diverse practise representatives of London's city community. Only occasionally, I would feel an uncomfortable stirring; a racist comment, a heterosexist assumption, a polarised political view.

I consider how a political, socially conscious psychotherapist, may impact on the transferential phenomena, maybe causing rupture, promoting the negative or idealising transference, strengthening the real relationship or weakening it. I keep reflecting on transferential domains as described by Hargaden and Sills (2003) the first being the *introjective transference*, where the client seeks the 'longed for' relationship. In seeking to establish a symbiosis, the idealising, mirroring and twinning transferences are enabled (Kohut 1971) thus establishing the therapeutic relationship. Hargarden and Sills (2003) state:

> In this type of Transference the patient seeks to enter a symbiosis (Schaffer 1975) with the therapist in order to meet developmental needs. The patient seeks to introject the therapist as an unconscious psychological striving towards health and autonomy.

I ponder on the potential risk of rupture with some clients, a break in the 'needed' symbiosis. Perhaps it is a risk of moving from the 'you and me', (twinning, mirroring Transference) to a 'you're with them' negative transference split.

This leads me to Hargaden and Sills' second transformational domain, the *projective transference* where the client works through un-integrated experiences, where the therapist may become the good or the bad object. Thus, the therapist may become the 'them', 'you're with them'. Hargarden and Sills describe the third domain as the *transformational transference*: where unbearable feelings are disowned by the client and experienced by the therapist. The aim is for the client to bear their unbearable feelings. The therapist is to be willing to go through the 'dark night of the soul' with their clients. This is what needs to happen in the relationship, to facilitate change. Where do I stand?

Months passed following the referendum – my comfort had been in 'the us' which values all diversity, the 'us' that belongs. My relationship with my client from Poland changed, we had quickly established a strong bond, an emerging

twin-ship and I, the idealised other, the perfect mirror. We both voted remain which served to deepen our bond and affirm grievances and thus our symbiotic relationship. More recently our differences came into sharp focus; my client felt an outsider, marginalised in a country that she'd called home for ten years. Suddenly uncertainty grabbed her. The transferential phenomena took hold, the shift from 'you and me', 'us and them', (introjective transference) to 'you're with them.' (Projective transference)

The client has residence 'for now' but her future is uncertain, and her sense of belonging threatened – maybe it's irrelevant whether I voted remain or leave; 'the British voted to leave.' Shame ensued, primitive processes stirred and we have moved into the transformational transference. It is what Hargaden and Sills (2003) describe as the therapist 'giving up to the client', where the vulnerability of the therapist and meaningful self-disclosure allow a different experience to emerge. Thus, out of a painful dialogue and our owned difference comes the transformation. The Brexit rupture and embracing of uncertainty becomes the vehicle towards a deeper understanding of the self and the other.

Alongside this, clients who had voted 'to leave', now feel stirred, experiencing something different between us; thus, enabling the rupture of the mirroring/idealising transference. Over time the opportunity to work through has unfolded. It is from acknowledging the pain of our differences that the real self of the client is emerging.

As we continue to 'sit with uncertainty,' Brexit talks evolve, and daily headlines send out different messages. However, I would argue that the 'Brexit rupture' continues to keep differences visible in the consulting room, enabling transparency and intimacy. The 'elephant in the room' has a voice.

In another psychotherapy room, while I (LB) process how I feel about Brexit and the uncertainty of its possible consequences, I also witness my clients' response to it. I run part of my practice online and I work with some EU clients living in the UK, as well as with some UK clients, living in the EU. It was really noticeable, immediately since the referendum, how the topics of sessions were diverging to this epochal transition. Almost all of my clients, like me, were actually starting to question their whole life, with the choices made until now. All of them started to use therapy to contemplate the future and fear, confusion and existential dilemmas seemed the most common topics. One client stated, 'So, until now I had to work only on my fear of been rejected by others for who I am; with Brexit I am now dealing with the fear of been institutionally rejected for who I am'.

In Gestalt therapy one of the aims is to foster the client's maturity, meaning their capacity to develop self-support in the environment field (Perls, 1965). The field, as described by Yontef (1993) is 'a totality of mutually influencing forces that together form a unified interactive whole' (p295). The environment field is then

seen as in constant change and evolution and, consequently, also the individual's development and existence is considered as a process of ever changing boundaries and contact with this environment, co-constructed and interdependent (Woldt & Toman, 2005). The making of our life, in this perspective, in accordance with existential philosophy (Sartre, 1966) is inevitably the consequence of our constant adjustment to the environment, of how we respond to what happens to us. Indeed, the concept of 'creative adjustment to the environment' (Ginger, 2007) is key in Gestalt therapy and part of the therapeutic work is for the therapist to enhance and facilitate the client's capacity of experimenting with different ways of being in the world to overcome existential impasse. From this point of view, I see Brexit as potentially an ideal context to highlight more than ever the power of individual existential freedom and creative adjustment, in order to develop more self-support. My personal process around Brexit can facilitate a *dialogical dynamic*, especially with some clients, where we could overtly work around their possible options and feelings presented by this political moment. For some clients, Brexit could create such an extreme and magnified tension between the environment and their needs that could paradoxically allow them to process some existential choices, procrastinated about until now.

Two years on and currently none of my clients addresses the topic of Brexit. Probably, because in this phase they all came to terms with clear decisions about their life: some left the UK for good and moved to a sunny island; others went through the process of permanent residency and citizenship; others made their permanence in EU even more 'rooted'. Stability, certainty and a sense of 'being in charge of own life', seems to have been re-established for all of these individuals, in spite of Brexit being still an open process. The socio-political outcome of this transition is still unclear and undetermined, while my clients' pace to 'creatively adjust to the environment' moved much faster and reached for all of them a sort of 'final' decision. As always, I learn a lot from all of them and at the same time I keep being a slow processer, as mentioned before, with the result that, unlike them, I haven't decided yet what to do with my own life!

Social responsibility and the role of counselling in times of socio-political transitions

We have shared above some of our own identity shifts and practitioner reflections triggered by the prospect of Brexit. Also, the examples of our practice are telling with regards to how the concepts of 'power' and 'belonging' manifest themselves, in overt or covert ways – depending on the therapeutic dyad, the relational dynamics present noticeable juxtapositions: the insider-outsider, the powerful-powerless, the certain-the uncertain.

The term 'social responsibility' suggests an ethical framework through which a certain entity (individual, group or organisation) is making decisions and operating in ways that are for the benefit of the broader society. One example of our profession's awareness around the significance of that is the activities undertaken by the PCSR (Psychotherapists & Counsellors for Social Responsibility) – a non-profit organisation promoting an 'attitude of mind' that besides recognising the impact of the political dimension in the therapeutic relationship, aims at influencing political processes by raising ideas on how social , economic, political and cultural issues can be integrated into practice. More broadly, the link between counselling psychology/psychotherapy and social justice has become increasingly explicit over the recent years through a number of publications and conferences, in UK and internationally (Cooper, 2015). The recognition of the role of counselling in impacting political and social change on a national and international level is rapidly developing almost into a new branch of this profession, spreading from multicultural counselling to Continuous Professional Development and counselling training (D'Andrea & Daniels, 2017).

Oliva M. Espín, in her paper, Psychotherapy and Social Justice (2006) states:

> I believe that as practitioners of psychotherapy we are in a unique position to transform oppressive conditions and be agents of social justice. I propose that through our therapeutic work we can build for the future rather than wait passively or hope that some other humanitarian activities performed outside of our therapy work will bring it about.

Indeed, a commitment to transform, develop or enhance societal quality of life calls for and implies transformations in individual consciousness. And, any true transformation in the fabric of societal power relationships and cultural values 'is internalized by individuals as personality change'. (Pizer & Travers 1975)

Although this was quoted over 40 years ago, how timely it still is as society keeps operating through projections that lead to racialist phenomena as a result of distortions around 'sameness' and 'difference' and ultimately 'punishing' a scapegoat (Dalal, 2002)

Looking at the dynamics in EU relations from a group-analytic perspective, could perhaps move us towards a more humanitarian direction (see the example by Loutsos, 2016, on applying group-analytic principles towards understanding political complexities in Greece). There are significant 'unconscious dynamics' which are unacknowledged and as such powerfully perpetuating the prejudice and creation of 'us' and 'them' groups in the current society (Dalal, 2015). The irony of Brexit is that the UK has more citizens living abroad than any other EU country (www.metrocosm.com/eu-diaspora-map). Research (Dustmann & Frattini, 2013)

shows that immigrants from the EU are major contributors to British economy. But, the matter is obviously not just about the major financial implications, as often presented. Our invitation is to keep reflecting: If Britain was sitting on the client's chair, what understandings could we gain in relation to such unconscious processes? What is being 'disowned' and projected upon the EU relations? How do we perceive our role in such period of transition?

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