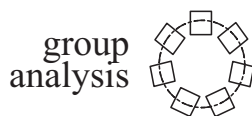


Article



Black and White: Applying Derrida to Contradictory Experiences in an Art Therapy Group for Victims of Torture

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This article applies the thinking of Jacques Derrida to contradictions raised in an art therapy group for victims of torture, in which the therapist was white and the group members black. It draws parallels between the hierarchical binaries of talk/art and white/black, understanding these pairs as both stemming from a mind/body binary. The paper explores whether Derrida's deconstruction of the talk/art binary might facilitate the deconstruction of the white/black and colonizer/colonized binaries, with the purpose of preventing us repeating patterns of domination as well as in keeping us open to the 'other'.

Key words: art therapy, groups, asylum seekers, race, deconstruction, Derrida

Introduction

This article is about difficulties in seeing things from different perspectives simultaneously, particularly when these perspectives are contradictory or opposites, and one of which is systematically undervalued. The different perspectives looked at in this article are those of 'white' and 'black' people, talk and art. The aim of the article is to explore the value of Derrida's thinking for enabling us to hear suppressed voices and thereby develop our practice.

I began thinking about the ideas for this article when writing about a painful and difficult verbal, art therapy supervision group experience that took place within the context of art therapy training. There were six women in the group, two of whom were black and four white and all between their mid 20s and early 40s; I was the white supervisor and a little older. The two black members in the supervision group had fallen silent and remained that way following a question raised by a white member, asking if it was appropriate to have one white child in a group of black children in an art therapy group that she was to run in a school. The subsequent dynamic in the supervision group seemed to parallel, though reverse, the minority race issue implied in the potential group of school children. To explore the parallel process for its relevance to the clinical issue meant talking about it, but talking had become problematic because the black members were silent despite repeated attempts by the white members to engage them in the discussion. I found that it was necessary to consider the black members' silence as a valid communication—an art work—and to promote this over what seemed more obviously, purposeful attempts to understand why the black group members chose not to speak (Skaife, 2007). The problem was that I found it very difficult to hold the contradictory positions involved in this dilemma, in mind, at the same time. Staying with the silence meant avoiding the task (exploring the clinical dilemma), performing the task meant obscuring the silence and what it communicated about the clinical dilemma. This contradictory situation seemed reflective of another that is well-known: 'First forget I'm black, second never forget I'm black', a reference to both the artificiality of the white/black division and the reality of racism.

Reading the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida's, deconstruction of binaries I noticed how the art, or the non-verbal, had become linked to the black students in the supervision group, and the verbal to the white students and thought that both these pairs might stem from the hierarchy in the mind/body binary. Derrida sought to disrupt constraining binaries by finding the contradictions in their logic. He used the term *aporia*, a word that in Ancient Greek meant an impasse arising from two statements, which, though individually plausible, together are contradictory, to describe the state of doubt arrived at as a result of the deconstruction of binaries (Macey, 2000). This term seemed to describe my experience in the supervision group.

More recently I have been running an art therapy group for women victims of torture in which the five group members at the time

discussed were black African (with the exception of one woman who was Middle Eastern). I have become interested in the potential of the contradictions involved in working with art and talk in the group for disrupting other binaries such as the white/black, colonized/colonizer and therapist/patient binaries in line with Derrida's thinking.

I thought that what I might find through this investigation might have relevance not only for working with race binaries, but also class and gender binaries in both art therapy and group analysis. Light might also be thrown on the relationship between art and talk in art therapy, and for the position of art therapy in relation to talking therapy such as group analysis. These are all related to the mind/body binary, as I will explain.

Binaries in Identity and Difference

Derrida (1997) describes how the privilege in western thinking given to 'consciousness of the present', that is, something experienced in thought, has led to the forming of oppositional binaries in which one side dominates and the other is suppressed. The binaries cognition/perception, mind/body, reflection/action relevant for considering the relationship between talking groups and arts-based groups and talk and art in therapy, have been embedded hierarchically. Derrida (1997: 30) describes Aristotle as saying 'Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words', (thus creating a hierarchy in which thoughts are the most 'real', followed by speech followed by writing. In this it appears that thinking or cognition (mental experience) is seen as superior to what is sensed and felt (speech), and written words or art, which are perhaps more 'material' than the sound waves of spoken words, come last.

Descartes, whose thinking has dominated two centuries of philosophical thought in the West, continued this privileging of the mind over the body in his separation of thought from what is thought about. The French linguist Saussure (1916) developed the idea of the sign in which there is a hierarchical binary between the idea, the signified, and its manifestation—the signifier. These come together in the sign whose identity is formed by its difference from other signs. But Derrida argues, the signifier though often seen as unimportant, is not necessarily attached to a single signified but refers also to other signifiers, for example, the word pig can make us think of big and pin as well as the idea of an animal. Derrida saw these hierarchical ways of

construing communication, which had dominated western thinking, as stemming from a traditional belief in God as the ultimate authority and as the 'Word', as it says in St John's Gospel.

This mind/body hierarchy is manifested in political terms in what Dalal (2002: 122) describes as the 'haves and the must not have' the competition that fuels capitalism. One voice dominates and the other is hidden as in black people's experience of racial discrimination as suppressed; likewise, knowledge being written by men without acknowledgement that this knowledge is from a male perspective only (Irigaray, 2004). In relation to class, Eagleton (2003) reminds us that the syllable 'prole' in proletarian refers to the use of the body in physical labour.

The group analyst Richard Blackwell has written extensively about the hierarchical and politically shaped binaries involved in persecutor/victim and colonizer/colonized relevant to his work with victims of torture. He talks of the language, religion and education of the colonized as that of the colonizer, the same of the colonized having been suppressed (2005). Blackwell speaks about these roles becoming embodied and ascribed to different members of the group at various times; held within the matrix of the group the roles can circulate fluidly and the powerful feelings attached to them can be felt, but not experienced as an identity (Blackwell, 1997).

Like the dance movement therapist Karen Callagan (1998), art therapists Lloyd and Kalmanovitz (2000) describe working symbolically with exile, anger and loss through the arts medium but not addressing it through talking. As an art therapist who is also trained as a group analyst, I have always been interested in the relationship between art and talking in art therapy groups. However, I have found that working with art and talk can often give me a sense of facing a contradiction, for example, that the group is about art-making with the talking as the necessary supportive matrix; or, that the group is about exploring interpersonal relationships with art as the means through which this is facilitated. Both these poles privilege either the art or the talk and I have found that in the first mode the interpersonal relationships in the group that determine the meaning of the art are often disregarded, and in the second mode the experience of the art making is often given little attention. However, it is often easier to default to one position or the other rather than face the either/or involved.

I have wondered if Derrida's deconstruction of binaries, which was his attempt to transcend our imprisonment by the social constructs

that determine the way we think and act, might be applied to the art/talk and black/white binaries in a way which opens us up to hear the voice of the 'other'. His use of the term *aporia* seems to describe the impasse, or feeling of being stopped in your tracks, I have experienced as a result of the various contradictions involved when working with race difference and with art and talk.

Derrida's *Deconstruction*

Deconstruction involves the overturning of two hierarchical terms in which what is assumed to be the secondary term is already implied in the primary term. In these pairs the first term is considered superior because it is closest to the idea of presence to consciousness or awareness of thought. Having overturned the hierarchy of a binary, the winning term is put *sous rature*, under erasure, to show both its inadequacy as well as its necessity (Sarup, 1993). So for example, body is privileged over mind, but the erasure shows that body is inadequate to describe all that is supposed to be contained in the concept. Thus the binary making itself is upset. Derrida's writing is always about questioning the assumed certainty of concepts, opening up meaning by showing that what is not said, or a contradictory viewpoint, is always shaping the point that is being made.

Derrida was particularly interested in the speech/writing binary because he wanted to explore the contradiction that although philosophy takes place within written language it privileges speech. Derrida shows that this is a false logic and his argument has important implications for how we think of the talk/art binary and thus perhaps the white/black binary if both are derived from the mind/body binary.

Derrida says:

In order for my 'written communication' to retain its function as writing, i.e. its readability, it must remain readable despite the absolute disappearance of any receiver, determined in general. My communication must be repeatable—iterable—in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of receivers. Such iterability—(*iter*, meaning 'again', probably comes from *itara*, 'other' in Sanskrit, and everything that follows can be read as the working out of the logic that ties repetition to alterity) structures the mark of writing itself, no matter what particular type of writing is involved. (Derrida 1988: 7)

As I understand it Derrida says that within the definition of writing is absence. This absence is more than the obvious point of writing communicating the idea to those not present; the writing, in order to be

writing, must be able to communicate in the absolute absence of reader or writer otherwise it would not be writing. Its language structure must be repeatable outside of any context of its being written or read. Being independent of both writer and reader it becomes something other. What is written changes in each different situation in which it is read; *iterability* is both again and other and thus self-contradictory.

Derrida goes on to say

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written . . . can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion. This does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any centre of absolute anchoring.' (Derrida 1988: 7)

There are some important points here for the talk/art binary.

Firstly, Derrida's logic suggests that both art and talk can be understood as *iterable* as both are defined by absence. Neither can be thought of as originating from an internal world or from the group itself, as they repeat already known signs. The art made will refer to other art and visual experience, just as the talk will repeat the use of words. Although their meaning might be understood in relation to the context of its making in the group, it is always more than this. In fact, the communications determine the context or matrix of the group. The total context, that is, the place of the group in the institution, the location and political context of both group members and host country are never fixed and are also known through signifiers.

Derrida refers to the absence that is the mark of writing as an absolute absence, death or non-being, which is something transcendent of context. At the same time it is only known within a context and it is this, which presents some sort of contradiction.

What emerged in the supervision group example earlier was a contradiction about the task, which seemed to paralyse the group. I felt that in staying with the contradiction rather than resolving it by interpreting the black members' silence as obstructive anger (for example), what was allowed space was the different viewpoints of white and black members. Perhaps then there was some sort of deconstruction taking place in this group. The silence was privileged and there was an awareness of both its inadequacy (in terms of resolving anything) and necessity. However, the same could also be said of the talking as both forms of communication are partial. The silence

allowed for the enactment of the experience of impotence in the face of history and this was instigated by the black members.

In reversing the privilege of talk in an art therapy group by promoting the non-verbal and visual but putting them under erasure, that is, as inadequate in terms of finite meaning and dependent on the words that come with them, might a space be created for absent voices? It was with this in mind that I approached the group for asylum seekers at Freedom from Torture (at the time of the example called the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture).

Method of Approaching the Clinical Material

Derrida argues that it is impossible to see beyond what we already know, but within what we already know is the possibility of seeing further and he feels this is an area that has been neglected. He was not concerned with creating a new kind of writing but with intervening in texts to reveal new meanings. Therefore, rather than the application of a theory to a practice (an artificial binary as theory writing is a practice and practice is a manifestation of theory), it is through working with the interrelationship of running the group, writing my process notes, and the many versions of writing the ideas in this paper that I am attempting to gain new understanding.

My account of two sessions of the art therapy group is drawn from my process notes. It has been written several times and during these I have consciously focussed on developing clarity and understanding about the relationship between the different binaries in the group. Whilst running the group I was aware of an interest in the topic of this paper, which then also influenced how I recorded the group in my process notes. The discussion, which follows the description of the group is a parallel commentary, which draws out of the narrative that is relevant to this article. Thus rather than an account of the 'truth' of the group sessions, albeit from a particular viewpoint, which is then discussed in the light of theoretical ideas, the text embodies *deconstruction* and *iterability*. In both running the group and writing about it I have been consciously aware of the contradiction within the binaries whereby they are simultaneously artificial but necessary. The art and talk have both involved iterability, that is, repeating codes of meaning of talk and art and these have been both similar to one another, for example, both the talking and the art-making have dealt with issues of race, and simultaneously different from one another.

Their iterable interaction creates the possibility for awareness of difference and contradiction.

Working with Identity and Difference in an Art Therapy Group for Victims of Torture

I have chosen to look at the following sessions from a group because they happened early on in my experience of working with this client group, a time when I was more aware of the cultural differences between a white therapist in her home country and black asylum seekers. This slow-open group had started two years and three months earlier with the previous art therapist who had now left for a new job. When I took over the group there were four members, one of whom never came during my time. I was building up the membership and at the time described, the group had five members. I had been running the group for almost three months before the sessions described. As with group analysis, the group had no set agenda but the possibility to use art and talk as they wished. However, the culture of the group was one in which they talked for a while, then made art, after which they put the art work on the wall to then talk about it.

The first session described is one in which a new member had joined. Kim arrived late in this, her first session. They began to make art fairly early on in the session and these were the images they made.

Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

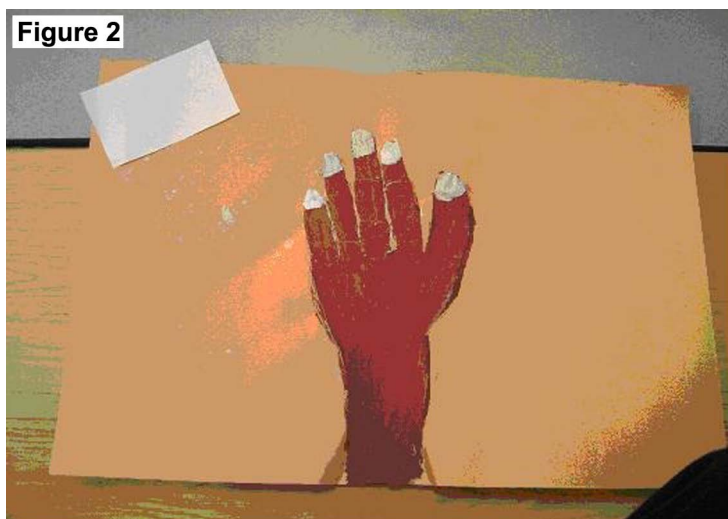
I was particularly struck by the way two of these images had been made; clay had been smeared onto paper and then paint applied on top, it put the images into relief and the smearing and mud effect had their own significations. My image was inspired by the use of yellow in the right hand corner in pictures made the previous week that had not been commented on and which I was curious about.

After the work had gone up on the wall there was a difficult silence in which I was unsure if they were waiting politely for me to ask about the pictures. I felt that if I did this I would simply enact a leadership role (the one with words). I also felt it might suggest that images cannot speak without words. In the end I did speak as I was afraid my silence might be misconstrued. I asked what people saw in the pictures in front of them. Christine replied that the black in her picture (figure 4) was despair, the red the fire in her, the blue was hope, and the yellow, occasional moments of joy. There was no response from the others.

Figure 1



Figure 2



I decided to talk about the reference in my painting (figure 5) to theirs the previous week. Elsie said that the yellow in her picture had been about hope; I had done a tree like she had painted the week before, she seemed pleased. She then said that she saw both mine and Christine's (figure 4) as hopeful. She thought mine was

Figure 3

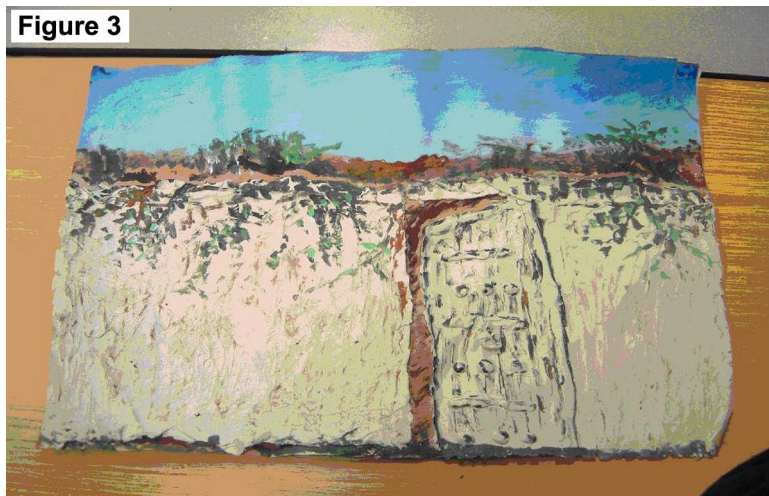


Figure 4



me or the centre reaching out to spread my light and hope to them. Kim, who had arrived too late to make an image, said that she saw all the images as connected, the helping hand, the helping centre—my helping them. Elsie said that her hand (figure 2) was actually about the people in her country; despite being the same

Figure 5

colour, there was terrible conflict between them. The government was corrupt and there were terrible atrocities committed black on black. Ohanna said her picture (figure 3) was of a beautiful garden that she went to when she was a child. Now, whenever she felt the need to escape she imagined herself in this beautiful garden. I was really surprised as I found the image very frightening—it looked to me like an underground prison. I think this was because the grey wall and door are painted on top of the clay and the ground runs over the top of the door. The door opens only onto clay; it looks like you are trapped. Berenice's picture (figure 1) was of two buildings, her church and the charity—two places, which had really helped her. She said both had given her hope and kept her going and how much better she felt than when she first came. I began to feel that I was being equated with God, spreading light and offering hope. I said that maybe there was hope that they might be able to help one another because they had all been through similar experiences.

The next week was the first week since I had been in the group that they just talked. They talked the whole session about the difficulties with getting asylum. It sounded horrendous, humiliating and scary. They were all shocked to hear of the situation of one of the women, and looked to me, as if to say and you have not got a clue about what to do about it. I felt rather stupid and useless.

Suddenly Christine asked me how long I had been in this country. I said that I had always been here and wondered if they felt that I would not be able to understand their problems because of it. They then began to talk about white people that they feared did not understand them, but quickly followed this by saying that black people were much worse. I was struck by the lack of reference to the art made the week before, and something was stopping me referring the group back to it.

In the fortnightly supervision group run by a white, woman group analyst, which I shared with three other group therapists (a mix of races) at the centre, people commented that the images looked very angry, mine looked like a fire and Christine's a fist. We went on to discuss the image of the hand—was it a helping hand or an abusing hand? What sort of helping hand was mine to give or to withhold (in the extent to which I helped them with the endless obstacles they had to face as asylum seekers) and either way they were forced to be grateful.

In my process notes I wrote the interpretation I would like to make to the group that I felt would be very hard to say and make sense: 'I think you might be angry with me—that I have so much power to either help you or not in terms of practical help, and that I am in a so much better situation than you—that is, paid to help you. You, through no fault of your own, are dependent on what I and the centre can give you. You are black and I am white—and behind us is a history of whites abusing blacks, even though it is blacks who have recently been abusing you.'

I never thought I would make this interpretation but the following week I tagged something like it onto a painting I had made of hands. I felt that the interpretation was heard, though no-one responded to it. It felt rather over powerful in the group but so did my image which was on a bigger sheet of paper than the other images. Christine followed it by talking about the fruit and vegetables in her picture as God's gifts in the world for which she was grateful. I was thinking that, as a newly arrived asylum seeker she had nothing and God was not providing for her.

Discussion

In this discussion I will work through my description of the group looking more closely at where opposing ideas were expressed. The

aim is to see if Derrida's deconstruction can help with keeping meaning open and thus give access to the voice, which gets suppressed.

By not immediately asking about the paintings when they were put up on the wall I was hoping to reverse the power associated with leadership and with talk and create ambiguity in the hierarchical binaries of talk/art and therapist/clients. I realize now that this therapist coded communication has to be repeated, in manageable doses, time and again in the various different contexts of each session for its purpose to be realized. What is held in balance is whether the communication is an act of power or a devolvement of power. This is particularly significant in a group of torture victims who might be disposed to repeat their experience of domination.

There is an interesting difference between what group members said about the art work and what appears, to me, to be in the images. Christine described her painting (the one seen in supervision as an angry fist or as a penetration) in a detached way, associating the colours with specific feelings relating to her predicament. I wonder if this might be an attempt to remove ambiguity by giving the work some logical purpose and that this relates to a work/play binary; the play and perceptual enjoyment in the art materials felt as 'not what they were there for'. However, I also wonder if the materiality of the work does not only signify aesthetic pleasure, but also refers to the physical abuse they had suffered. The use of the clay under the paint, paint being the usual dominant medium of the group, is perhaps like something tactile and bodily that was not overtly spoken about at this stage of the group. My focus on the materiality of the work then reverses the work/play and mind/body binary. It is important that it is put *sous rature* though as the painting might be seen completely differently in a different context, including the context of a few weeks later within the group. What is important then (for me) is not the accuracy of meaning of this painting but the discrepancy between the way that Christine described it and I experienced it.

The talk took us right away from this material in the images, but onto another important and difficult binary in which hope was becoming linked with me as the white therapist, and abuse and victimhood with the black clients. I had become associated with God without a body and them with bodies which could be used and abused. This was reversed the following week when I was clearly in a white body which could not understand their predicament as black, asylum seekers.

The art and the talk seemed to be placed in two different, consecutive sessions, which I experienced as the two not being reconcilable, like an *aporia*, shaking the certainty of meaning of both. There also seems to be two equally important subjects—firstly, something physical and bodily referred to by the covered up clay, the penetrating forms and the hand, and secondly, power differences in relation to race and status (asylum seeker, home office officials/resident, group members/therapist).

I made an interpretation about the relations between group members and myself in relation to race. However, what is in the art work—the hidden clay and so on, has other things to say which this interpretation did not, and could not, incorporate. I found it difficult, though, to bear these different issues in mind at the same time, the one seemed to obscure the other. I see in retrospect that I privileged what was held in the talking by making a painting referring to it, whereas I might have attempted to reverse this by using the clay.

The helping/abusing hand made by Elsie refers to both power relations and bodily experience, and to black people as both torturers and victims. My painting being larger than theirs could also be seen as an enactment of power. This shows the artificiality of the binary of the art holding the bodily material and the talk the material about power. This split though enacted in the two different sessions, enabled the issue of difference between my own experience of white privilege and guilt, and theirs of what appeared to be suffering, anger and being shamed, to reach expression. Perhaps it was necessary that I held both the roles of potent giver and of impotent helper and to continue to feel the discomfort.

It was important though that the women's need for me to represent hope for them was not masked by my discomfort and guilt. However, I thought that if I did not acknowledge with the group the politics of race in the situation, I was agreeing with an idea of white superiority. However, in acknowledging it, I performed superiority.

Conclusion

This article has been an exploration of Derrida's thinking about communication with the purpose of expanding understanding of contradictory experiences in clinical work. Derrida's deconstruction of the binaries with which we construct our experiences is resolved into *aporias*, contradictory statements which open up meaning, creating

some sort of movement or slippage. In this, what is often not visible is given a fleeting presence.

Staying with the tensions that arise with contradictions is difficult; however it is necessary for allowing suppressed voices expression, and through this, development through engaging with other, including the other within ourselves. Within art therapy groups this might mean resisting resolving tensions that arise through using both art and talk so that hierarchical difference itself is exposed. With this, the difference between therapist and group members becomes apparent and can then be explored.

Art therapy is frequently thought to be useful for those who have difficulty, for whatever reason, with spoken language. The intimation of this article is that such ideas privilege talking over art-making to the detriment of both talking groups and art therapy groups. Recognizing the hierarchy of mind and body embedded in our thinking and practices is important for both group analysts and art therapists.

Acknowledgements

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