

Psychotherapy in Modernity
A discussion paper for UKCP Member's Forum

By
Siobhán McGee and Jonny White

At a UKCP Members Forum in June 2023. Professor and Psychotherapist Divine Charura, introduced a discussion on what psychotherapy for our times might address.

Following those discussions Maura Sills, Convenor of Members Forum, distilled some of the themes explored in dialogue as 'belonging and understandings of embodiment and consciousness' (Sills, 2023) and invited some of us to share our thinking in writing.

We are co-directors of Karuna Institute, which is an organisational member of the Humanistic and Integrative College within UKCP. Our Institute offers an accredited training in Mindfulness Based Core Process Psychotherapy.

What follows come from our thoughts, reflections and lived experience, primarily as clinicians and not as academics or experts. We cannot pretend to offer solutions or any answers to what in many aspects are unanswerable or unfixable situations and complex global problems. Our intention is to continue to grapple with and explore these territories for ourselves and with colleagues. Our words here are offered in a spirit of enquiry to open up dialogue and discussion within our profession.

We would like to begin by taking some time here to locate ourselves in the work.

Siobhán McGee

I am a white Irish woman (She/Her) in my 50's. I am a psychotherapist, teacher, and supervisor. I was the first person in my family to go into higher education, get a degree and later obtain a Masters.

I was born in the Island of Ireland and all my ancestry on both sides comes from rural Ireland. I am one of the Diaspora, those who scattered like seeds across the globe. My family were one of many who emigrated and settled in the Irish community in West London in the 1950s. I have grown up an Irish woman with an English accent, unable to speak the language of my mother tongue. The last people in my family to speak Gaelic fluently were my great, great grandparents.

I hold a heart longing for my birth home and the culture of my ancestors. I carry it in my bones and have a deep somatic relationship with the land of my birth. I have come to understand that this longing comes from a psychology of embodiment and place, which is so easily infantilised when located within certain other psychologies, theories or paradigms of thought.

Throughout my ancestry there has been poverty, trauma and of course the links back to 'An Gorta Mor' – the great hunger. If we go beyond and way beyond that, I come from an ancient culture that was violently disconnected from its deep roots to land and language. To my ancient ancestors, people were seen as the kin of trees. Their mythology was one of place, where particular beings were linked to local mountains, land or lakes and celebrated in these revered places. The present was seen as inextricably intertwined in a triple cord with the sacredness of nature and the reality of the Otherworld.

Over the last five years my research both personal and professional has focused on what Brazilian writer Suely Rolnik (2015) calls the 'Colonial Unconscious', as she explores the Western colonial mindset.

I have worked at depth to process the grief, healing and reconnection with these colonised and coloniser territories in myself. This inner work has been vital in my training and practice as a psychotherapist.

I am interested in a holistic approach to a psychotherapy for the World, not just the individual. My history and awareness of inherited trauma and healing is I believe, what led me to becoming a Psychotherapist. It was therefore, a deeply intentional act for me to choose a psychospiritual psychotherapy, informed by Buddhist psychology, which holds the interconnected nature of reality as a great web to which we are all threaded. In this approach there is a recognition of the reality of a deeply sacred interwoven consciousness.

Jonny White:

I am a half English half Australian man (He/Him) born in Scotland. For most of my life I fought hard against the English half of my roots. I rebelled, lived in squats and caves and various rooms all around the world. I approached power by trying not to look at it, trying to pretend it was not there. I fiercely rejected the heritage of my English ancestors who had indeed gone out and colonised the world.

At some point, both as therapist and as trainer, I realised that I was trying to bypass the position that I held as white male person of power in these roles. I realised that this meant that not only did I not confront my past, but that I did not understand how deeply I was a product of that past. I could also see that I was avoiding owning who I might be felt to be by the other and what learning there could be in allowing that representation to be known and explored.

At another point in the ongoing journey of thinking about the effects of colonialism and inter-generational trauma, I realised that my father's ancestors would have colonised my mother's ancestors, who were from Scotland and Ireland. I then realised that my mother's ancestors went to Australia where they too colonised the land and knowingly or not, destroyed the indigenous culture.

As we seek to evolve the curriculum of the Karuna Institute I let all of this affect me. I understand that my ancestors colonised the ancestors of my co-director and we try to make ourselves aware of ways in which this plays out in our relationship today. I try to see how my relationship to the practice of Buddhism might try to bypass all of this trans-generational and systemic material, and see if I can instead turn towards and let myself become informed. I see if I can allow a kind of deconstruction to occur. And as we head into the deep waters of the climate emergency, I wonder how we are going to find our way to change and how we are going to reconnect to values and meanings that rest in the truly open and sustainable.

‘It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society’
J. Krishnamurti (1960)

‘We’ve had 100 years of psychotherapy and the World is getting worse’
James Hillman & Michael Ventura (1992)

As tutors on a psychotherapy training, we often find ourselves referring to one of the above quotes.

An essential premise of our training, which is informed by the wisdom tradition of the Buddha’s teachings on mindfulness and the nature of reality, is that everything is fundamentally interconnected. We cannot separate the individual from the World.

Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, expresses this Buddhist philosophy of inter-relatedness beautifully through an analogy of wave and water:

“A wave is a wave. It has a beginning and an end. It might be high or low, more or less beautiful than other waves. But a wave is, at the same time, water. Water is the ground of being of the wave. It is important that a wave knows that she is water, and not just a wave” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1998)

As co-directors and colleagues, we are curious and deeply involved in an inquiry around how the waves of our individual, gendered, cultural and ancestral streams of consciousness, which have included processes of colonisation, violence, intergenerational and personal trauma, shapes who and how we are today. This work is not always an easy or serene process, it requires us to open up to the contractions of ancestral shadows and to explore how we bring all of this into relationship. It calls us to co-enquire into the nature of intergenerational & cultural trauma and is work that has to be done in real-time relationship and with respect for historical processes and different narratives.

Dr Aileen Allen (2021), Professor Judy Atkinson (2006), and Peter Levine (2007) all highlight the price society pays for ignoring intergenerational trauma. They each

reference Merida Blanco's unpublished model on 'Intergenerational Trauma' which arose from her work as a cultural anthropologist. Her model shows how trauma is recycled over at least five lifetimes.

In addition Rachel Yehuda's (et al, 2018), research on epigenetic inherited trauma, clearly demonstrates that transgenerational trauma manifests down ancestral, somatic and cultural lines. Transgenerational trauma then, becomes embedded somatically through the ancestral body across layers of generations and inevitably shows up in various forms of psychological or physical brutality and cycles of addiction. This is how epistemic somatised trauma works, it is a spiralling circle of conditioned experience and patterns of re-enactment.

Resmaa Menakem, trauma therapist and founder of an approach called 'Somatic Abolitionism' highlights the power of systematic perceptions and labels around transgenerational and systemic trauma when it is decontextualised. This feels particularly important for mental health professionals to take note of:

"Trauma decontextualized in a person looks like personality. Trauma decontextualized in a family looks like family traits. Trauma decontextualised in a people looks like culture." (Menakem 2021)

We are curious to discuss the theme around the 'longing' of 'belonging' particularly where certain structures of thought and political systems actively and unconsciously work to traumatise and disconnect people from the reciprocity of 'knowing' a more holistic interconnected relationship to self, other, land and planet.

Resting also as we do into the 'deep time' of Buddhist philosophy and its roots in the colonising waves of Indo-Aryan culture, we can see that this struggle to find 'belonging' in the face of the rise of modernity was also familiar to our ancestors. Buddhism took root in the face of the emergence of city states and technological warfare on the Gangetic plain. Its teachings point to our tendency towards identification with personal and collective patterns of activity which is felt to 'come down' through time – in the cultural language of the day, via past lives and the mechanism of Karma. This feels like another way to describe our contemporary ideas of trans-generational trauma. As Thomas Hubl says:

"Unresolved past is destiny; it repeats." (Hubl 2020)

In our current climate emergency, it feels important to note that the way of grappling with this tendency to 'take shape as' and re-enact inherited patterns of suffering, often involved walking out into the forest and slowing down. It is there, sitting surrounded by nature, that we arrive in a present moment relationship with the more than human and an encounter with the fleeting and temporary nature of our individual selves.

It is also interesting to note that for all its talk of liberation, Buddhism was also unable to escape its causally generated systemic relationship to ideas of hierarchy, for

example, its relationship to gender. It went so far as to suggest that women would have to be reborn in a male body before being able to achieve enlightenment. Buddhism can be accused too of a turning away from the world and therefore locating liberation within the individual awakening. Here it shares something with modern Psychotherapy which has traditionally located the psyche in the individual, whilst ignoring and actively excluding the micro and macro political sphere from the therapy room.

Traditionally, psychotherapy has not taken into account the wider, collective and systemic roots within which an individual takes shape and which often results in disconnection and marginalisation. By de-contextualising from a wider systemic story, psychotherapy trainings have the potential to enact retraumatising dynamics for certain marginalised groups in society.

When thinking about Psychotherapy for the current times, we are using the phrase “Psychotherapy in Modernity”. In her book ‘Hospicing Modernity’, Vanessa Machado De Oliveira, describes the conditioning nature of modernity in the following way:

“Modernity is a single story of progress, development, human evolution, and civilization that is omnipresent. Modernity is full of paradoxes: of war and humanitarian support, of ongoing colonialism and reconciliation, of imperialism and education, of poverty creation and alleviation, of exponential growth and sustainability. Whether you and I identify with or are critical of it, it still conditions what and how we think, feel, desire, relate, hope, and imagine. Although modernity always sees itself and behaves as if “young,” it has grown old and is facing its end.” (Machado De Oliveira, 2021)

We ourselves, benefit hugely and are grateful for so much of modernity. We know we would struggle without our washing machines, cars, computers etc. We know too that our level of wealth and privilege has been created by the recent colonial past of Great Britain.

We also know, that modernity has made addicts of us all in the form of consumerism and its model of unsustainable growth, which always benefits one privileged group at the expense of another. As individual therapists we work with the effects of modernity which seem to include high levels of anxiety, loneliness, and a sense of alienation. We recognise we are all identified with and contributing to the climate emergency and the potential collapse of our global civilisation. We all know we cannot continue in an economic system based upon exponential growth whilst living on a finite planet. Quite simply, this is not a sustainable model for life itself.

De Oliveira and her work with the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF) Collective (2021), describes symptoms of harmful habits where the unconscious has been colonised around what they call the ‘four denials’ of the global challenges:

1. The denial of systemic violence and complicity in harm, the fact that our comforts, securities and enjoyments are subsidized by expropriate and exploitation (they exist at the other’s expense).
2. The denial of the limits of the planet; the fact that the planet cannot sustain exponential growth and consumption

3. The denial of entanglement: our insistence in seeing ourselves as separate from each other and the land, rather than 'entangled' within a living wider metabolism that is bio-intelligent.
4. The denial of the magnitude and complexity of the problem: the tendencies to 1) look for 'hope' in simplistic solutions that make us feel and look good and 2) turn away from difficult work e.g. using future forecasting / projective hope as an escape mechanism from the difficulties of the present

We know that in the face of overwhelming conditions such as these, humans tend to either react with hyper-activation, or a frozen response that appears to be numb and indifferent. We know that these trauma responses are true both individually and collectively.

As tutors on a psychotherapy training largely informed by Buddhist psychology, we resonate with this struggle that we all share, to find enough internal space to be able to turn towards the overwhelm. We know how hard it is for us to make relationship with the dispossessed and denied aspects of ourselves as individuals. We know how much harder it is to hear overwhelm that is held collectively. We recognise how much conscious steadying is required so that the un-heard can make itself known to our awareness. Nowhere is this more true, than when the stories asking to be heard are voiced by those who lie outside our version of consensual reality.

This central importance of turning towards suffering sits at the heart of Buddhism, as true 2.500 years ago as it is now. In our psychotherapy training we are interested in the tendency we all share as a species to re-create historical, cultural, systemic, and ancestral processes and reconstitute them in personal and collective re-enactments. We are interested in making space for new forms of restorative justice and the possibility for a resolution of collective and ancestral colonial dominations. We are also interested in our capacity for creating the internal and collective relational space required to do this work.

This capacity to create contemplative and reflective relational space, in which we can be informed by un-heard and denied experience, is the beginning of an Allowing. An allowing, both of a willingness to receive the content of that suffering, and the possibility of a creative co-emergence of change and flow that can arise through being willing to take that suffering in. This means being intimate with, and affected by, the suffering of others. This is hard enough between us as individuals in our roles as directors of a training institute; harder still in the groups we work with; and maybe hardest of all, in opening towards the experiences of the world that we have denied, both human and more than human.

As noted by De Oliveira above, it is the 'magnitude and complexity' of the problem with which we are truly struggling. We are, as it were, at the stage of collective therapy where we are becoming aware of the scale of our struggle and yet unable to find our way out of it. Nowhere is this truer than the collective awareness that we are all participating in economic and social systems which are driving our own destruction and the ravaging of our home. This is the perfect and painful example of human identification with what the Buddha called 'Samskaric' patterning – the re-enactment of past conditioning. Again, to quote, Thomas Hubl:

“We find ourselves at a profound moment in history, standing together at an inscrutable edge. Whether that edge is the brink of destruction or the cusp of unprecedented change is up to us. One thing is clear: We can’t convince ourselves into necessary transformation based purely on the facts. We must feel the deeper reality of our time in order to know the crucible it presents and thereby empower ourselves to change it, to make real a new future. To truly feel is to embody, to become integrated and whole. Transfiguration arrives through presence.” (Hubl, 2020)

We believe all species on our planet are living through what Suely Rolnik calls a ‘Convulsive period’. She says:

“Convulsive periods are always the hardest to live through, but they are also the moments when life screams loudest. These screams are a kind of alarm call that life sets off to awaken us and to call us into action for the purpose of bringing balance back to it. This same alarm call, though, can also bring about the opposite effect, causing us to respond reactively.” (Rolnik, 2023)

As psychotherapists, we know that crisis is a moment of deep potential and creativity and that in these moments in the relational enactment, deep healing can emerge if we hold our nerve and turn towards and explore the process with heart, compassion and creativity. It is also at these very times of crisis, that we need radical and creative approaches which embody holistic consciousness that goes to the inherent root and depth of things - to the heart of the matter. At these times, as the Buddha taught, the temptation is to stay asleep because it is so easy to slip into the safety and bypass of the four denials.

In our minds, a psychotherapy which doesn’t actively critically analyse where it is in this project of global modernity; or reflect on where the individual psyche sits within the conditioning of the economic and ecologically destructive systemic structures of capitalism, colonialism and ecocide, is perhaps in need of ‘hospicing’.

Psychotherapy, informed by the structure of capitalism, has privileged the identity of individualism, as the locus and location of all meaning. It does not look to drop away from individualism towards a non-hierarchical possibility, and the potential for a profound interconnection with the planet. This holistic networked world view, seems to inform all ancient wisdom traditions.

These traditions located the individual within a wider culture which held meaning, and which in turn located itself within the non-human systems which supported it. In ancient China, Taoism pointed us towards the energies of balance and harmony, surely essential qualities needed in our modern crisis, which is so out of balance.

To quote Jeremy Lent:

“The sense of separateness that our culture foists on us is, in Einstein’s words, ‘a kind of optical delusion of consciousness ... a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us’. This delusion of consciousness is not, however, our only available option. ‘Our task,’ he continues, ‘must be to free ourselves from this

prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.” (Lent, 2020):

As psychotherapists in modernity, are we all working under a set of outdated assumptions shaped by normative and normalising structures, underpinned by unconscious colonial thinking that privileges the individual and sets up ideals about what health is, who is healthy, and who has the power to declare psychological health.

Have we unconsciously re-created a form of systematic oppression by standardising and setting labels that categorise the very people who have so often been systemically disconnected from their own culture, instincts and knowing.

A psychotherapy for these ‘convulsive’ times would surely seek to be radical, to disrupt, and uproot some of these assumptions and denials. In our training institutes, it feels vital that we address our historical inheritance in our curricula and find ways to enquire into and disrupt assumed cultural understandings of what it means to be a human being.

As psychotherapists we are primarily involved in exploring with our clients their somatic, psychological, emotional and spiritual stories. And that the environment, culture and systems within which they live, are part of their stories.

Of story, De Oliveira says:

“Stories that expire can no longer dance with you. They are lethargic or stuck, they can’t move things in generative ways anymore, but we often feel we cannot let them go. Many of these expired stories give us a sense of security, purpose, and direction—precisely because they seem stable and solid” “ (Machado De Oliveira, 2021)

We feel the need to explore and question the stories and theories of psychotherapy, most of which come out of a particular Western/Eurocentric narrative and which privilege particular individuals above a more communal, reciprocal and interconnected worldview.

To quote De Oliveira again:

“Since modernity sees itself as the apex of civilization, it places modern subjectivities (modern humans) as the apex of human social evolution. This affects everything: psychology, neurobiology, medicine, science, education.... These disciplines and related institutions assume that those who are functional and well adapted to producing value in modernity’s economies are “normal,” well-adjusted, and in a position to judge and to “help” those who are not, to “catch up” with modernity’s program.”

Instead of this obsession with individualistic growth, we can find our way towards forms of psychotherapy that are grounded in the relational journey of a deepening into awareness. By cultivating a fuller awareness of our interconnectedness with all things, we find ourselves on a path to reconnection.

Joanna Macy says:

“It is hard to believe we feel pain for the world if we assume we’re separate from it. The individualistic bias of Western culture supports that assumption. Feelings of fear, anger or despair about the world tend to be interpreted in terms of personal pathology. Our distress over the state of the world is seen as stemming from some neurosis, rooted perhaps in early trauma or unresolved issues with a parental figure that we’re projecting on society at large. Thus we are tempted to discredit feelings that arise from solidarity with our fellow-beings.” (Macy, 2014)

It is important for Psychotherapy to acknowledge ancient wisdom traditions which talk of balance and do not privilege humans at the centre of the universe at the expense of the planet and the non-human. Modern culture contributes to a sense of internal alienation, a tendency towards dissociation and a collective disconnection in the face of inherited traumas. Ancient wisdom cultures offer us pathways that help us work in an embodied relational way with trauma. The body is also the location for the possibility of resting in a wider present time relational awareness. Contemplative practices point us towards the body and breath as the place for us to enquire into, not just our suffering, but the possibility of a wider sense of health.

We believe it is vital for psychotherapy to explore ideas of embodied belonging. We need to orient to a richer creative story that resonates with a holistic interconnected worldview. We acknowledge that it is important for psychotherapy to attend to the individual, their familial and cultural environment. However we would go further and say that psychotherapy as a practice needs to facilitate us to also drop below this, so as to reconnect with the sacred as something real, this is not to spiritually bypass but rather allows us to respect and see all of life, including the non-human, as sentient, alive and conscious in a reciprocal dance of recognition.

This is no easy task as the systems which have evolved into modernity are deeply ingrained and entrenched patterns which keep us stuck in our conditioning. It will involve a process of deconstruction of all that we think we have known.

De Oliveira suggests we need a non-Western mode of psychotherapy and depth education which is able to face reality with compassion. So what might this all mean for a psychotherapy of our times?

Buddhism and ancient wisdom traditions point us towards our capacity to go beyond or get underneath our ‘selves’. There is much work to be done in the self to help us to work with our individual trauma and pain. We need to find ways to develop capacity and resilience to be with the times in which we live. However, ancient traditions also offer us a path which point beyond the self. Contemplative practices encourage us to drop away from the focus on the self and open to the wider inter-connection that underlies the insubstantial nature of the individual persona.

We heal the self not just in order to fulfil its needs, but to be of service to the ‘wider than the self.’ In Buddhism this is expressed in the teachings of the Mahayana in which the dedication is to come into relationship with, and directly help the suffering

of, all beings, human and non-human. This is seen as the compassionate response to the cries of the world.

We can all see as individual therapists, that as we learn to come into relationship with our wounding, and as we emerge from our contracted identification with the selves that have arisen as a result, the energy of openness, freedom and intimacy naturally begins to emerge. We become able to relate to life and to reality with a greater tenderness. This does not mean we stop relating to suffering, but instead grow a capacity to open to all experience and to 'the suffering of the world.' We can become more available, open, and make space for what we don't understand or know. We begin to want to respond with compassion and a greater generosity. We can allow that which we have denied to be known. We can let this inform and change who we are.

As we allow ourselves to expand in relational awareness, we can connect to our deeper transpersonal and collective spiritual potentiality. As Maura Sills (2023), founder of Core Process Psychotherapy says: "Awareness of awareness being the vehicle for a much larger sense of wholeness that includes the spiritual." Wholeness is the open, inclusive, radical, free and emergent dimension of our collective and creative potential.

As a psychotherapy of our time, we need to cultivate embodied and somatic practices of awareness that will enable us to steadfastly sit, reconnect and turn towards the deep challenges of our time. We need to find ways to face anxiety, to be with grief and to meet all of this and each other with compassion so as not to go into denial, or reactive re-enactments. We also need to develop the capacity to engage when enactments occur and to hear and be with the rage of our times.

Can we find ways to directly face this historical moment and the crisis of modernity? Can we find ways to de-position, listen and make space? Can we contemplate and create the space to enquire? We need to be a part of the movement to address historical injustice and the effects of war, colonisation and ecocide. Above all we need to be part of the movement to reconnect to the sacred and sustainable health of our true well-being.

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