

# Difference, Ambivalence and the Art of Staying Connected

## A Systemic–Psychodynamic Framework for *Intercultural and Interracial Couple Work*

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### Making the Unspoken Visible Why This matters:

This work is grounded in clinical and research practice with intercultural couples (Kalaydjian et al., 2024; Luigi et al., 2023). It is also shaped by the workbook: *Seeing Me, Hearing Us*.

When aspects of identity such as race remain unspoken or invisible, they create distance and reinforce inequality. **Silence is not neutral**

### Holding the Social and the Psychic

Difference unfolds within:

- Race
- Culture
- Power
- Recognition

Killian (2002); Generalising the particular - Particularising the general

### From Theory to Practice

*Seeing Me, Hearing Us* helps couples:

- slow down when race, identity and difference feel tender
- listen without rushing to fix or defend
- pause without abandoning the conversation
- name what feels unseen or hard to say
- move from guilt toward accountability and repair

**Difference becomes speakable**

### Difference Is Not the Problem

Difference evokes:

- Fear of separateness
- Fear of disconnection
- Longing for merger
- Pull toward certainty

The difficulty lies in what difference awakens, not in difference itself.

### The Unconscious Couple Fit

Under pressure, familiar positions can emerge:

Closeness ↔ Space

Reassurance ↔ Pressure

Certainty ↔ Ambivalence

The fit can become: repetition or development when made thinkable.

Difference can become a **defence against difference** when it is abstracted rather than emotionally encountered.

### AMBIVALENCE is Central

Two truths can coexist:

“I love you” and “I feel hurt”

“I feel defensive” and “I want to stay”

**Understanding is not the same as agreeing**

Curiosity allows difference to be explored

Kindness allows connection to be maintained.

### A Psychodynamic Understanding

**Difference as Developmental Intimacy** begins in merger  
Development requires recognising: “You are not me”.

Separateness can feel like loss before it becomes connection

Morgan (2019): The couple state of mind: Holding my mind and yours at the same time

### A Clinical Shift From:

“I didn’t mean it like that” to “I see that hurt you. I want to understand”

**Impact before intent**  
**Recognition before explanation**

### Shifts in the Relationship:

From Defence to Reflection

- Certainty → curiosity
- Blame → pattern
- Defence → reflection
- Rupture → repair

**Difference is not the threat. Unthinkable difference is.**