

Thinking space: the model

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“The disturbance of the impulse of curiosity on which all learning depends, and the denial of the mechanism by which it seeks expression, makes normal development impossible.”

W. R. Bion (1959, p. 108)

Thinking Space was set up to develop the capacity of staff and trainees at the Tavistock Clinic to think about racism and other forms of hatred towards difference in ourselves and others. Drawing on Bion’s (1962) distinction between “knowing” and “knowing about”, the latter of which can be a defence against knowing a subject in a deeper and emotionally real way, Thinking Space sought to promote curiosity, exploration, and learning about difference, by paying as much attention to how we learn (process) as to what we learn (content). The establishment and design of the forum was determined not so much by theoretical considerations, but by my many years of experience as a participant in and facilitator of “diversity” learning events. This has taught me that the subjects of race and racism tend to arouse strong feelings such as anxiety, guilt, shame, and anger. This emotional maelstrom often created numerous barriers to thinking and learning at such events. These included:

- » fear of saying what one thinks because one might be severely criticized or labelled as racist
- » saying what is politically correct to gain approval or acceptance
- » being silent because of anxiety about getting it wrong and offending someone
- » witnessing or becoming part of extremely angry exchanges between participants regarding who is right or who is wrong, or who is racist or anti-racist
- » feeling upset, guilty, and ashamed about the unedifying behaviour of oneself and or others and deciding to give such events a wide berth in future.

These experiences were a particular spur to the idea of creating the Thinking Space forum, as a space that could enable participants to engage constructively with the feelings and dynamics that tended to emerge around the subject of race and culture in a way that did not derail or stop thinking and learning. However, there were a number of other factors that led to this initiative, which I would like to mention before outlining the model of practice developed and its theoretical underpinnings.

*The lack of thinking about race, culture, and diversity
in psychotherapy*

There is growing evidence that social and economic inequality in British society is increasing and that prejudice and discrimination against people on the basis of their race, culture, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and age is still widespread. Psychoanalytic practitioners have, however, been largely silent about these hatreds, and a largely colour-, culture-, and class-blind approach continues to pervade the psychotherapy profession (Bhugra & Bhui, 1998; Gordon, 1993a, 2004; Kareem & Littlewood, 2000; Lowe, 2006b; Morgan, 1998; Thomas, 1992; Young, 1994a). Furthermore, despite increasing racial and cultural diversity in Britain, psychotherapy—particularly psychoanalytic psychotherapy—continues to be a largely white middle-class profession. This reinforces the perception, still common today, that psychotherapy, especially psychoanalytic psychotherapy, is a white middle-class “privileged” activity. There have, of course, been initiatives taken by a number

of pioneering individuals and organizations—such as Sue Holland (1992), who worked with depressed women on the White City Estate; Jafaar Kareem (1992), who created Nafsiyat to provide intercultural therapy; and Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach (1987) and the Women's Therapy Centre—which counter this perception. These individuals and organizations sought to make psychotherapy more accessible and responsive to the needs of the working class, ethnic minorities, and others in disadvantaged or oppressive circumstances. But while there is much to celebrate from these efforts, psychotherapy, in the main, continues to be largely the preserve of the better-off. There are many barriers, other than finance, to accessing psychotherapy by disadvantaged communities. These include prejudicial assumptions and attitudes towards them by psychotherapists and a lack of interest in developing psychotherapy services that are more accessible and responsive to people from adverse social and cultural circumstances (see Altman, 2010; Bhugra & Bhui, 1998).

There is also little or no attention paid in the selection and training of psychotherapists to issues of prejudice and discrimination on the basis of race, culture, religion, class, or sexuality. There is a widespread assumption that these are political issues and, as such, ones that are not within the purview of the psychoanalytic practitioner because psychoanalysis is concerned primarily with the internal world. This perspective assumes, erroneously, that there is no relationship between the external world and the internal world of the individual and that issues of race, culture, class, or sexuality are not vibrant aspects of the internal world that affect our feelings, fantasies, perceptions, identities, and relationships. This institutional attitude is, among other things, a defence against facing the reality of class and race in the profession and its implications. The unwillingness to think about the white middle-class nature of psychotherapy in terms of its membership, values, and clientele, on either an individual or an organizational basis, is a defence against guilt about an investment, probably unconsciously, in maintaining the status quo. There are a number of defences that are commonly used to prevent engagement with racism and other forms of exclusion—in particular, avoidance, denial, and turning a blind eye. Steiner (1985) helpfully says about “turning a blind eye” that “we seem to have access to reality but choose to ignore it because it proves convenient to do so. I refer to this mechanism as turning a

blind eye because I think this conveys the right degree of ambiguity as to how conscious or unconscious the knowledge is" (p. 161).

Thinking Space was set up because the psychotherapy profession turns a blind eye to its whiteness and its lack of diversity, and, when it does not, too often its approach is tokenistic. Most courses have one or two seminars on race or culture as an add-on, not as a thought-through and integral part of the training. While tokenism, or turning a blind eye, may provide some short-term relief, I believe it undermines self-confidence and competence within the profession as regards working with diversity and strengthens common underlying fears that these issues are too overwhelming to deal with. This is tremendously sad because psychoanalysis has the tools, both theoretically and clinically, to make a vital contribution to understanding and addressing these problems and their vicissitudes. Peter Fonagy wrote in his introduction to a book on taboos in psychotherapy that "Our clinical experience and our training have taught us that change requires taking the human mind places where it least wishes to be. Taking the analyst's mind to these domains is in the best interest of unencumbered work, which is obviously in the best interests of our patients" (Fonagy, 2009, p. xvi). Promoting thinking about racism and other forms of exclusion within psychotherapy is, I believe, also in the interests of good analytic work and in the best interests of patients.

The poor reputation of race equality training

Recognition of the problem of racism and other forms of discrimination in British society led to the development of anti-discrimination legislation and equal opportunity policies to ensure fair access to jobs and services. These required organizations, particularly in the public sector, to develop Race Equality Plans, as well as Inclusion Strategies supported by training programmes to enable staff to achieve better representation of excluded groups among staff and users of their services. These equal-opportunity and valuing-diversity initiatives, while well intentioned, spawned a culture of "political correctness". There was an official mantra of commitment to equalities by most organizations, but in actuality this was poorly implemented in practice and had little impact on outcomes (see Audit Commission, 2004a; Lowe, 2006a). Race equality training

was often regarded as a critical component to developing anti-discriminatory practice and achieving better race equality outcomes but was generally found unhelpful or disappointing (see Bhavnani, 2001). The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (Macpherson Report, 1999), for example, was critical of “race awareness” and “cultural diversity” trainings’ failure to tackle colour blindness, ignorance, and the denial of racism in the police force. The generally poor reputation of race equality training is due to a number of factors. These include:

1. The unrealistic expectation that such training courses will eliminate or significantly reduce racism in individuals or organizations.
2. A tokenistic, or “tick-box”, approach by organizations and their staff to such programmes, driven by the need to be seen to comply with legislation and policy. This approach has led to an increasing reduction in the length of such trainings across a number of organizations, and many are now as brief as an hour or two per year as part of a mandatory training programme for all staff.
3. Resistance to engage with such trainings because of vested interests, conflicts, and anxieties, which are sometimes unconscious, within individuals, teams, and organizations.
4. A collusion between commissioners and providers of such training to knowingly settle for a superficial training intervention into the highly complex and multifaceted problem of racism, which is highly resistant to change not only in individuals and organizations, but in society as whole.

In short, equality legislation and policy, while seemingly tackling exclusion, may have created an environment where prejudice and discrimination have become more hidden or covert and in many ways been driven even further underground. Race equality training is too often limited and superficial and, paradoxically, has unwittingly become part of a culture that resists tackling racism, while stating the opposite. A more genuine engagement with the reality of race and racism is needed, one that goes beyond the superficial surface of clarifying current legislation and policy and seeks, instead, to unpack the multiplicity of factors that are involved in racism, such as financial gain, greed, and self-interest, including its internal-world dimension.

*On not wanting to think about racism in the self:
resistance, self-illusion, and the need for critical reflection*

No person is fully aware of every aspect of him/herself. This is because part of our mind is unconscious, and as a result we are not aware at times, or sometimes ever, of some of our impulses, phantasies, thoughts, and behaviours. Freud found that there was a resistance to becoming conscious of our unconscious. Resistance or “not wanting to know” is a defence to protect the ego from anxiety, pain, and threats to its survival. People use a number of defences—most commonly, splitting, denial, and projection—as a way of not knowing about themselves, attributing to others feelings and characteristics that they find impossible to bear in themselves. It is worth pointing out that some of these views of the human mind, developed by Freud and his followers, in fact predated psychoanalysis. A number of writers, including Feuerbach (1841) and Marx (1844), have argued that human beings have an immense capacity for self-illusion and are prone unconsciously to project on to God, for example, attributes that, in actuality, belong to them.

I have learnt from experience through working with professionals in the helping professions that many do not want to think about whether they may be racist. When asked to do so, even in the gentlest way possible, most get anxious, and a few would get angry in response to what they perceive as “being terrorized”. One participant on a psychotherapy course responded to this request by saying that he was fed up with thinking about racism and that there are other issues such as class to think about. This is not an uncommon response to the invitation to think about racism. What does it mean? It can mean a number of things. Possibilities include that the individual who spoke:

- » was simply angry about the continual prioritization, in his experience, of race over other issues such as class
- » had transferred his feelings of anger from previous settings to a new setting—a seminar on race and psychotherapy—as a result of being asked to think about racism in himself
- » was expressing feelings of anger about the task, not just for himself, but unconsciously on behalf of the group or at least for some others in the group

- » was expressing his and the group's resistance to doing the task in order to avoid painful feelings such as anxiety, guilt, and shame about their racism.

It seems easier to acknowledge the existence of racism, and other forms of hatred in the abstract, in "fascist groups" or in those individuals whose words or behaviour are clearly and obviously racist than it is in oneself. It is much more difficult, it seems, to explore and think about racism when it is covert, subtle, or nuanced. Such an endeavour seems to arouse strong resistance, and a wide range of defences are usually mobilized to undermine, paralyse, or destroy such initiatives. A number of theorists (e.g., Altman, 2010; Kovel, 1988) argue that racism is a ubiquitous part of Western culture and that no individual is unaffected by it. Davids (2011) goes further and argues that internal racism is a normal part of the mind but is extremely defended against by a defensive organization in the mind. A defensive organization, he explains, protects against anxiety more effectively than do individual defences, but it exerts a stranglehold on development, in particular limiting the individual's capacity to relate, especially to the racial other (Davids, 2011, p. 40). As a result, it is quite common that there are many who deny and project their racism and are resistant to change. However, it is also possible to get to know one's own racism.

In general, people who have suffered exclusion, such as Jews and black people, seem willing to talk about racism and being discriminated against (Wilson & Francis, 1997), but those who do not suffer such experiences are generally much less willing to do so. It should, however, not be assumed that Jews or black people are exempt from resistance to thinking about racism in themselves or that they do not also experience feelings of anxiety, guilt, and shame when they attempt to undertake this task. The works of Fanon (1967), Lipsky (1987), and Alleyne (2005) highlight that black and minority ethnic people can and do internalize racist values, which can result in feelings of self-hate and rage towards themselves and other black people. If Davids (2011) is correct—and I think he is—the operation of an unconscious defensive organization undermines the black or minority ethnic person's ability to free him/herself from racism in his or her mind. As Jung (1990, p. 49) argues, it is the fear of the unconscious which impedes self-knowledge and is also the gravest obstacle to developing a wider understanding of others.

Marx's (1973) early work on freeing humans from alienation from themselves is considered by many as the birth of critical theory. Critical theory, according to Habermas (1972), does not regard the individual as always aware of the meaning of his or her actions, nor does it consider reality, as it appears to be, the truth. It espouses that what is presented as facts must be examined critically as there are usually hidden factors operating that should be uncovered and brought to awareness. Critical theory believes that the aim of any theory should be human emancipation. Psychoanalysis is regarded by Habermas (1972) as a model example of critical theory because its practice involves methodical and critical self-reflection. According to Habermas, the experience of reflection is the act that frees the individual most to become a subject. Freud puts this more specifically: he wrote that psychoanalysis aims "to strengthen the ego, to make it more independent of the super-ego, to widen its field of perception and enlarge its organization, so that it can appropriate fresh portions of the id. Where id was, there ego shall be" (1933a, p. 80). Psychoanalysis can and does help people to achieve greater self-knowledge, particularly of their previously denied and split-off aspects. As I will show later, its methods play an important role in Thinking Space to facilitate thinking about racism in the self and in others.

Lack of curiosity or interest

In my experience, there are always some people who, for various reasons, do not want to take part in any learning event that aims at thinking about racism in themselves or in others. Their reasons tend to range from not regarding such learning as personally necessary, fearing being attacked because of their experience of previous trainings, and thinking that these events are always neither helpful nor worthwhile. Underneath this attitude is a belief that race equality or diversity events are by their nature unsophisticated and aggressive and, in phantasy, are facilitated by unsophisticated others who lack understanding and are pre-occupied with dirt. These people simply do not trust "the people who are involved in such events". With this experience in mind, it seemed to me that managing low expectations and hostile projections was probably the most significant consideration in the

way in which Thinking Space was to be organized, publicized, and chaired.

The aim of Thinking Space

The aim of Thinking Space is to promote thinking and learning about issues of diversity in psychotherapy—in particular, race and culture but also class, homosexuality, gender, faith, and disability. I believed that, by creating a space to think about issues that have historically been excluded or marginalized in psychotherapy training, such a space would contribute to their exploration becoming more acceptable, manageable, and normative in the profession.

In its aim to promote thinking rather than to provide the answer, Thinking Space draws on the tradition of the Work Discussion Group at the Tavistock Clinic (Rustin & Bradley, 2008). According to Rustin (2008), “The theory of work discussion as pedagogy is that the seminar leader’s task is the creation and sustaining of an atmosphere of enquiry in the group characterized by curiosity, scepticism, fellow-feeling, debate, differences, so that the unknown can become less unwelcome and new thoughts, questions, and perceptions find fertile ground” (p. 12). To achieve this it was vital to be able to contain the anxiety that these subjects arouse in order to share knowledge and experiences in an open and non-defensive way (Lowe, 2006a).

However, given that difference (gender, race, culture, religion, sexuality, etc.) has frequently been a vehicle for human destructiveness, then the risk of repetition of destructiveness is real, even in settings that aim to do the opposite. Layton (2006b) has pointed out that living within a culture of hierarchies of class, race, gender, and so forth is wounding for all, but particularly for those at the bottom of these hierarchies, however much this may be repressed or disguised. We know that, in general, there is a tendency for those less powerful to identify with those with power and to internalize the negative attributions about them (see Dalal, 2002; Moss, 2003), although not always without conflict (Layton, 2004a). The risk of re-enactment of the destructive dynamics of racism and other forms of exclusion is perpetually present, and one that has to be contained, thought about, and used to enable participants to learn from experience rather than to repeat it.

The risk of re-enactment

A few years ago, I went with a colleague to listen to Joy DeGruy Leary, an American psychologist, speak about “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome” at a Black History Month event. Her thesis was that African slaves experienced many traumas during slavery which led them to adopt strategies to survive, many of which have had a dysfunctional impact on their psyches and behaviours. These adaptations to trauma continue to operate today, she argued, as they have been transmitted from one generation to the next, largely unconsciously. One example of this is the distrust that was encouraged between slaves by slave owners. Higher status jobs and privileges were used as rewards for loyalty, which would be withdrawn or denied to any who showed any hint of disobedience or threat. As a result, a high-status, or “house”, slave was often treated with suspicion, contempt, and even hatred because he or she was regarded as being in bed with the “oppressor”.

DeGruy Leary concluded her inspiring speech by saying to the audience that there was work that black people still needed to do in order to heal the injuries of their history. It was therefore amazing that, not long after a warm and rousing ovation, an energetic and hopeful atmosphere was suddenly brought to an end by a ferocious attack on a senior black health professional on the Discussion Panel for being a “traitor to his people”. The speaker argued that the panel member had failed to protect and support a black mental health patient in the psychiatric system and therefore should not be on this panel. He was supported by a small group around him, who heckled and shouted at the panel member. It took some time for the chairperson and others to restore order, and at one point the conference seemed to be at risk of imploding.

The speaker was clearly in the grip of an overwhelming anger that he felt he needed to express towards a black professional whom he had expected to protect and support black people in the psychiatric system. He used the conference to say what a bad black man this panel member was, and he seemed to have either assumed that his view would simply be agreed with by all at the conference or that the conference would replace its original task and become a court that heard the case for and against the panel member whom he had alleged to be a traitor to his people.

This illustrates that the aim to learn and progress can be thwarted by forces—often unconscious—that seek expression that

seem impossible to stop. In this case, the speaker and his supporters had consciously decided to attack the panel member, as they thought this was the appropriate thing to do. They clearly did not consider what impact their behaviour would have on the event, which they seemed to support. When asked by the chairperson to consider this, they were unable to do so for some time, possibly because they were so consumed by their rage towards this panel member.

I think this speaker and his supporters' behaviour was a repetition of the very past that we had gathered to remember and learn from. However, the way in which the issue of betrayal by the "house slave" was brought up seemed more like a repetition of the trauma of slavery than a way of transcending it. My colleague and I left the conference angry and despairing and wondered about the black community's capacity to heal the injuries of its history. Freud (1914g) has argued that we are prone to repeat what we do not remember and that we must find the courage to not simply see the illness within a contemptible enemy but also in ourselves. He argued that to heal, we must keep in mind our impulses rather than act them out, and to dispose of them through the work of remembering, thinking, and working through instead of action.

What is thinking?

Thinking is a broad term, referring to a mental operation, non-directed or directed, conscious or unconscious, that is involved in learning, considering, or making sense of an experience or subject. There are many types of thinking and thinking styles. Thinking Space is less concerned with abstract thinking and more with getting to know and understand oneself and one's relationship with the "different" other. Psychoanalysis—in particular, the work of Klein (1946), Bion (1962), and Bollas (1992)—seemed highly relevant to Thinking Space because the theories it provides about both thinking and its development most informed the approach we took to creating the Thinking Space environment.

Klein (1935, 1946) thought there were fundamentally two modes of thinking: the paranoid-schizoid position, which is the most primitive type of thinking and predominates in early infancy, and the depressive position, which is the more mature mode of

thinking. In the paranoid-schizoid position, the individual defends him/herself from pain by splitting feelings into good and bad and then projecting into others those feelings that she or he cannot bear. By contrast, depressive-position thinking occurs when the individual is able to integrate feelings and is thus able to see himself and the other as a whole person with good and bad aspects. This ability is described as the depressive position, because of the painful recognition by the individual that she or he has hateful and loving feelings towards the same person. Klein described these two modes of thinking as positions, not stages, because the individual, she argued, will oscillate between being depressive and paranoid-schizoid throughout life, but is more likely to be paranoid-schizoid when under stress.

Racism is a classic example of paranoid-schizoid thinking, in which the processes of splitting and projection dominate. Notions about black and white people are a product of paranoid-schizoid thinking, which we have inherited from history. In our culture, a white person, for example, might think that black people are primitive and white people are civilized, therefore believing that such people do belong to opposite categories: black = primitive (inferior) and white = civilized (superior). This person can be described as operating in the paranoid-schizoid mode, because of the clear strength of splitting and projective processes in his or her thinking. The division of people into opposites can be interpreted as a reflection of repressed feelings of inferiority which this individual cannot bear, ones that are projected on to black people, who are then looked down upon. The process of splitting and projection of unwanted parts of the self on to others is common because it gives relief from anxieties that arise from difficulties in containing our conflicting needs and feelings. Projection creates external figures that are disliked and feared, and it is hard to take back our projections because this makes us anxious and deflates our idealized image of ourselves. Additionally, it may also be difficult to differentiate between our projections and the reality about a person or group that we hate. As there is, however, a tendency among professionals, particularly helping professionals, to deny feelings of racial prejudice, these feelings are more likely to be split-off and projected on to others. This enables racist feelings to be located outside the self and for a self-image of fair-mindedness to be maintained.

In the depressive position, individuals are able to give up self-idealization and face the complex reality of their feelings about both themselves and black people, which is likely to produce feelings of anxiety, guilt, and concern. In this position, there is a real desire to make reparation for one's less-than-ideal character to work for a better understanding of oneself and one's relationship to others. Working in the depressive position also enriches the ego's belief in its good capacities and helps the individual to become more confident in the ability to contain his or her destructive aspects and to grow.

Drawing on Melanie Klein's work, the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion (1962) was particularly interested in the process of getting from the paranoid-schizoid position, the primitive form of thinking, to the depressive position, the more complex form of thinking. According to Bion, the acquisition of the capacity to think as an emotional experience of getting to know oneself or another, which he called K (Know), develops as a result of a relationship between the mother and the baby, in which the mother is able to contain the baby's projections. Bion argued that if the mother is able to contain the baby's projections, and help it to tolerate frustration and to make sense of its incomprehensible feelings, the baby will, over time, introject this capacity to think, to make sense of experiences, and to get to know itself and others. He also regarded as "minus K" the avoidance of knowing and truth. There are others who support the view that the development of thinking is dependent on the relationship with primary others. For example, the work of Fonagy and Target (1966, 1997) also argues that the reflective, or mentalizing, self develops from the exchanges with another mind in a safe, sensitive, and thoughtful relationship. In short, there is growing research evidence to show that a secure attachment facilitates the acquisition of the reflective function (Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Moran, & Higgitt, 1991).

The importance of containment and reverie

If Thinking Space were to achieve its aim, it was vital that the anxieties and passions aroused by the subjects of race, culture, and so forth were contained and could be thought about and worked with. Containment occurs by making sense of the individual's

feelings and making these feelings understandable and tolerable. To be able to do this, the person attempting to contain—that is, the container—must be receptive to the individual's feelings and have the capacity for what Bion calls "reverie"—to empathize and think about the other's feelings and state of mind, as well as to bear the pain that that individual cannot tolerate. The willingness to receive, empathize, and think about the person's communication not only helps the container to understand the person's communication but also enables the individual who is communicating to better tolerate his or her unbearable feelings. Bion argued that if a person repeatedly has the experience of being thought about (kept in mind) and understood, he will acquire through introjection and identification the capacity to think and to know psychic qualities in himself and others.

It is well known that an individual's capacity to think is very likely to diminish when he or she is highly anxious, or under great stress, or is in the grip of powerful feelings. Therefore, providing a containing environment is clearly vital if we are to help anxious or stressed participants to bear their difficult feelings in order to maintain or regain their capacity to think. I also believed that repeated experiences of containment around diversity issues at the Thinking Space forum would lead to an internalization of a thoughtful "object"¹ or an internal mental space in participants that would increase their capacity to tolerate, understand, and better deal with anxiety and pain about diversity issues, both in themselves and in others. Bion (1959) argued that thinking does not produce thoughts but that thought is born out of relationships with other minds and is intricately linked with the processing of emotional experience. Thinking Space, therefore, aimed to provide an opportunity for those who were curious enough to engage with other minds in order to contain and process difficult and unbearable experiences in relation to diversity. This process, I believed, was more likely to produce real emotionally integrated knowledge about oneself and difference that would lead to a more grounded understanding about race, culture, and diversity.

In brief, through ongoing participation in Thinking Space, we sought to develop participants' capacity to reflect on their own selves and on other selves through safe, meaningful exchanges from the heart and mind.

Developing thinking

Bion (1962) reasoned that the task of getting to know oneself and others was challenging because it requires an active relationship between the person seeking to know (x) and the person who is getting to be known (y); as result there are four key factors that affect the task of getting to know (thinking) which should be borne in mind:

1. the need to know oneself in order to differentiate oneself from the other;
2. the nature of the relationship between person x and person y ;
3. that getting to know someone is often painful;
4. the commitment of x and y to truth and their capacity to maintain contact with and affirm reality.

This process can result in K (trying to know): the individual can be seen or experienced as trying to know. Alternatively, if too anxious or unable to tolerate frustration, pain, and envy, the process will result in the avoidance of K and truth, which Bion called minus K ($-K$). These ideas about thinking, the conditions that promote it, and the hazards that can lead to $-K$ are all extremely useful to both the conceptualizing and the running of Thinking Space.

In psychoanalysis, patients are encouraged to say “whatever comes to mind”, without any censoring, even if the emerging thoughts and feelings are believed to be unacceptable. At Thinking Space events, we encourage free association because we want to engage with the entire person, not just the conscious self, in order to facilitate unconscious thinking, because we believe that it is perfection—not imperfection—that is a block to getting to know oneself and others. But more importantly, free association is a gateway to the unconscious and opens up the possibility of greater engagement of the whole personality and of deeper psychic work.

Christopher Bollas is a psychoanalyst who is particularly interested in the unconscious as a source of individual truth, self-knowledge, and creative thinking. Drawing on the work of Wilfred Bion and Donald Winnicott, Bollas (1992) argues that unconscious thinking initially requires the facilitating presence of others, and this leads to the formation of what he calls genera which results in the

development of new perspectives on self and other. He regards the dialectic between conscious and unconscious thinking as like the relationship between waking and dreaming. Unconscious thinking, he believes, is like dreaming, an oscillation between condensation and dissemination of thoughts and experiences. It is not a complex self reflecting on its experience; it is more like being lost in thought (Beck, 2002).

Bollas use the term “object” broadly to mean anything that affects the psyche, and this includes a parent, a person, a group of people, a place, works of art, and so forth. An object, argues Bollas, can be experienced as a structure, as memorable, as related to certain concepts, and as a transient container for projection. It can also evoke or be used in different ways—such as sensationally, structurally, mnemonically, conceptually, and symbolically—to stimulate unconscious thought. He distinguishes between traumatic and generative objects: the latter facilitates growth leading to individual truth and self-knowledge.

According to Beck (2002), there are six characteristics of conscious thinking that are relevant to Bollas’s ideas about the dialectic between conscious and unconscious thinking:

1. It begins with stopping, or withdrawal from, practical involvement with the world and becoming in touch with ourselves.
2. It involves a turning-away from reality, as directly perceived, and a turning-towards the mind, which includes memories, opinions, hypotheses, concepts, etc.
3. It is like a conversation between different parts of the mind.
4. It can take a number of forms, including logical, objective, or subjective thinking.
5. It is always in relation to the thoughts of others—for example, parents, friends, teachers, society. Most thinking is passive thinking—that is, thinking the thoughts of others. But some thinking is active thinking—that is, when we think for ourselves, which is more likely to lead to insight.
6. It is always connected to the concept of truth, but just as there are different types of thinking, so there are different kinds of truth.

Thinking Space sought to create an environment that promoted these characteristics of thinking—getting in touch with ourselves,

turning towards the mind, conversation and dialogue, promoting active thinking, and identifying truth. Therefore, we particularly sought to create an environment that promoted thinking by being containing and facilitative, one that was felt safe and emotionally holding and gave permission for presenters and participants to test out their thoughts and ideas with each other in order to develop insights and understanding. Thinking Space can be thought of as functioning as an evocative object, engaging the psyche intensely and stimulating unconscious thinking, which leads to psychic change and the development of new perspectives on self and other.

Bollas's (1992) idea of genera as a form of internal work that results in an important new way of seeing the world seems to describe the process that we seek to facilitate in Thinking Space. He describes genera as a process of psychic incubation of experiences of facilitative parents or others who contribute to the evolution and successful elaboration of the individual's personal idiom. This process involves emotional experiences, ideas, feelings, words, all unconsciously constellating to become the nuclei of genera, which in time will return to consciousness as acts of self-enrichment. Bollas argues that this process happens in therapy, where the psychotherapist and patient collaborate to construct psychic structures that can change the patient's view of him/herself and the world. However, he points out that the incubation of genera can be, and usually is, the work of great personal struggle and conflict, and, as with any change of one's status quo, it involves tolerating uncertainty and emotional turbulence (Bollas, 1992, p. 70).

*The model:
key values and methods to promote thinking*

Thinking Space sought to find ways to stimulate curiosity about race, culture, and diversity in psychotherapy by establishing an ongoing learning forum about these subjects and inviting emotionally truthful and thoughtful speakers who would model trying to know as well as stimulate feeling and thinking. The values and methods listed below were regarded as critical to achieving our aims.

Values

- » Thinking Space events should be as safe as possible, which means that all participants should be treated respectfully, and that the ordinary rules that operate at learning events should be adhered to.
- » To not promote a particular view at Thinking Space but to foster openness to different perspectives and encourage discussion and debate.
- » To not assume that there is one correct answer or “the truth” but to consider that there may be many truths.
- » That it is ok to explore and to make mistakes as part of the learning process.

Methods

To:

- » create a relaxed and informal atmosphere
- » encourage participants to free-associate—say anything that comes to mind in response to the presentation and in discussions
- » encourage participants to cooperate with and challenge each other in order to learn and develop
- » encourage and support the group and the individual to expand capacity to accept, tolerate, and work with anxiety, conflict, and ambivalence
- » allow and support participants to take responsibility to work things out for themselves
- » regard the pain, frustration, difficulties, and imperfections of trying to know as a critical, valuable, and normal part of the process of getting to know and learning
- » encourage participants to have a receptive mind and consider new ways of looking at things
- » tolerate strong feelings or “emotional storms” for long enough so that they can be thought about and given meaning
- » attend to thoughts and feelings at the margins
- » face the truth of one’s experience and share one’s genuine reflections
- » try to achieve and retain a “balanced outlook”.

The role of the chairperson

The chairperson ensures that each Thinking Space event keeps to its task by adhering to the above values and encourages the use of the above methods—in particular, fostering a friendly and tolerant but challenging atmosphere and ensuring that individuals and the group adhere to the boundaries that support dialogue and reflection. Following a presentation, the chairperson encourages participants to free-associate and to speak as freely as possible to the large group about their responses to the material, which can include addressing questions to the speaker or sharing feelings, thoughts, personal experiences, opinions, information, and so forth. The speaker may or may not respond to these responses at this stage. But the chairperson would always provide an opportunity for participants to discuss their response to the presentation, in pairs or small groups. She or he would also think about the group's response to the presentation as a way of understanding the subject at hand, how it can impact on those involved, and what might be helpful in addressing the situation. The chairperson would pay attention to the atmosphere in the room, non-verbal communication, the handling of the speaker's material, and significant incidents.

In many ways, the chairperson functions as a nurturing but firm parent, encouraging and enabling participants to remain in touch with their own thoughts and feelings as well as to communicate these in safety. Simultaneously, the chairperson needs to model the capacity to tolerate conflict and difference and, at the same time, to appropriately name avoidant, defensive, and other behaviours that stop/hinder the group in carrying out its task. For, as Bion (1961) has pointed out, groups can resort to basic-assumption functioning as a way of not getting on with the task—for example, taking flight from the subject at hand or getting into a fight with the organizers of the event by blaming them for the painful and upsetting feelings aroused by the material. These dynamics often create a good–bad split, with the bad often located outside the self or the group, because it is too unbearable to consider that the threat may be within the self or the group. The chairperson may offer an interpretation to help the group think about the possibility that the bad object may be a projection of something within that, it is feared, cannot be contained and thought about.

An example to illustrate

Aideen Lucey's presentation at Thinking Space in 2009, "Paradoxes and Blind Spots: Reflections on Being an Irish Woman Working in Mental Health and Organizational Consultancy in Britain", well illustrates the atmosphere and experiences in Thinking Space, as well as some of the issues that tend to emerge and how they are addressed in the group. The following is not a comprehensive or objective record of the event but a summary of what most struck me about it. I do not aim to provide details about Aideen's thoughts on the subject, as they are reproduced in the chapter that she has contributed to this book (chapter 9). My focus is on the emotional experiences that her talk aroused and some of the insights and learning that participants seemed to glean from the reflections and discussion that ensued.

Anxiety has been a constant theme in Thinking Space, for both presenters and participants. The vast majority of speakers have been extremely anxious about presenting to the forum, even those with extensive, even international, experience of lecturing and public speaking. Aideen therefore was not unusual. She was worried that she might inappropriately expose things about herself in a way that would diminish her in the eyes of colleagues. But worse than the fear of shame was guilt about possibly betraying the Irish community by talking about things ("washing dirty laundry in public" or "exposing family secrets") that should be kept private or discussed only within the Irish community. She was also anxious that, by speaking honestly about her experiences of stereotyping and discrimination in Britain, she was in some way being ungrateful to or betraying her English colleagues and the England that had, in many ways, been good to her.

After her presentation of approximately thirty minutes, there occurred a series of powerful cathartic outpourings from a number of participants. Initially this felt like an Irish "coming-out". A few people, including some whom I and others had not ever thought of as Irish, spoke about their "unspoken experiences"—experiences they had never spoken about in public or in therapy. These included being sent as a child to elocution lessons, in order, ostensibly, to get rid of any trace of Irishness. Several spoke of often being seen as a terrorist during the IRA's campaign on the British mainland in the 1980s. One person talked about not being assumed to be Irish

either in Ireland or in England because he was black. A few said that being frequently confronted by the common stereotype of the Irish in Britain had, at times, left them feeling ashamed of being Irish.

Aideen's feelings prior to her presentation of fearing inadequacy, shame, and guilt began to look less personal and could be thought of as an unconscious identification with projections received by the Irish in England. A woman born in England, whose grandparents from Poland settled in the UK during World War II, talked about her painful childhood experiences as a result of her Polish roots. She confessed that because she was born in England, she has hidden her Polish heritage for some time, but much more today than in childhood. This is due to the common stereotypes of Poles as part of an invading mass of East European migrants abusing Britain's too generous welfare state and reducing wages or taking jobs from British people as au-pairs, cleaners, and craftsmen of all descriptions.

Reclaiming split-off parts of the self

What is remarkable about these reflections is not so much the pain they describe but the fact that they have been unspoken. It seems that people of Irish descent within the psychotherapeutic, analytic, and mental health community have been fearful or ashamed of speaking about experiences in their organization, and sometimes in therapy, out of fear that it would not be handled well, that it might be experienced as an attack, or as an act of trouble-making, or as a lack of gratitude. But the discussion was not just a release of painful emotions, it was also a reclaiming of part of the self—one's cultural heritage that had become split-off and kept at the periphery.

Aideen's presentation had given permission for the "inappropriate or unacceptable" experiences to be voiced, and, in so doing, emotional conflicts—some unconscious—could be brought out into the open for thought and exploration. As Aideen pointed out, the issue of her being Irish was paradoxically both known and invisible simultaneously. However, the acknowledging of cultural heritage, denied or otherwise, was not the end. Rather, it was a beginning of further reflections about the reasons why people migrate to Britain from Ireland. It was thought that this was not simply about jobs and opportunities but included escaping something oppressive.

This led to a discussion about the domination of Ireland by the British, and then by the Catholic Church, and how both forms of colonization have had both a negative and positive impact on the Irish people, on their culture and identity.

The chairperson of this particular Thinking Space had, as is often the case, little more to do than to be a non-intrusive but facilitating presence. Prior to the event, as chairperson I supported Aideen with her anxieties about presenting by listening to her and asking her to articulate what her worst fantasies were about the approaching event. I informed her that most previous speakers had been anxious, and I suggested that it might be worth thinking about her anxieties as not just personal but that they may be part of the material that she wants to present to the group. At one point during the event, I had to point out to the group of about twenty-five participants that there seemed to be an assumption that only people of Irish descent could talk, and, if this was the case, was there a fear that talking between the English and the Irish participants might lead to a fight? This comment highlighted to the group a relative silence from the non-Irish members, but this was not taken up, and the discussion was brought to an end soon after, because of time. It was clear that we had touched upon a range of significant issues that would have benefited from much more thinking and dialogue in general, but also among Irish people living in Britain, as well as between the Irish and English.

Discussion

Thinking Space is usually an emotionally moving and thought-provoking event, and Aideen's presentation at the forum illustrates that well. The primary purpose of bringing people together is to talk and to think about difference. In this example, the fright, flight, and fight response was contained, and a silence about being Irish in Britain was broken. However, the relative silence of non-Irish participants may have reflected guilt and/or anxiety about speaking, out of fear that it might result in a fight, or even murder.

Nonetheless, the participants in this Thinking Space, especially those who were Irish, learnt about the "unspoken experiences" not only of the Irish but of other minorities who are recipients of projections, stereotyping, and discrimination and of some of the negative effects that this can have on their feelings about themselves and

their heritage. They also developed a better understanding that there are painful racial dynamics that occur below the surface, intrapsychically, interpersonally, and within mental health organizations, which are rarely brought out into the open for thought and discussion. This state of affairs invariably disadvantages minorities, as their painful experiences are not recognized and there is no space to talk about this. In other words, there is immense resistance, consciously and unconsciously, to exploring these issues as it is felt to be a threat to the status quo—the dominant power relations that exist.

Psychotherapy—in particular, the psychoanalytic tradition, especially in Britain—has always had a preponderance of practitioners from abroad, some from minority ethnic backgrounds. These include Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud, and Melanie Klein, who were Austrian Jews; Hanna Segal was from Poland; Masud Khan was from Pakistan; and Wilfred Bion, an Anglo-Indian, was born in India. Despite this, hardly anything has been written about the experience of race or ethnicity within their work, or of living in the UK. This silence dates back, I believe, to Freud himself. I think that Freud's desire for his ideas to be accepted as universal by the Christian establishment in nineteenth-century Austria, and not be dismissed as nothing more than a "Jewish science", has contributed to this paradoxical culture of silence within psychoanalysis about ethnicity, culture, and racism. However, psychoanalysis itself teaches us that we must court the unfamiliar, be curious about what is absent, and pay particular attention to what is on the margin of awareness, as these are likely to lead to the parts of the individual's internal world that are most unbearable and have become split-off and separated from the conscious self.

Conclusion

Thinking Space is an event, influenced by critical theory and psychoanalysis, that seeks to promote thinking about diversity. This is achieved by creating an environment where people can meet to listen, talk, and reflect on the thoughts and feelings aroused in them by what they have experienced and to try to interpret, make sense of, and understand what has been communicated. Communications can, of course, occur on conscious, preconscious,

and unconscious levels, often simultaneously, and participants are encouraged to pay attention to all thoughts and feelings, even the most marginal. The chairperson's task is to create and maintain a non-judgemental atmosphere that can keep the group to its task: that of being curious and receptive to different ideas; of holding seriously thoughts and feelings at the margins of awareness; and of containing difficult emotions and allowing each other to listen, talk, and think without violence or coercion.

This is not to say that Thinking Space is a paradise, that participants do not experience difficult feelings, such as frustration, anger, shame, fear, or disappointment. However, it is the ability to endure these experiences of relative disintegration that can lead to psychic change—to what Bion refers to as the PS-D (paranoid-schizoid-depressive) balance. It is the experience of feeling fear and worrying about being exposed, attacked, even annihilated by others, and then discovering, in interaction, that these fears can be contained, that you can participate and survive, that leads to discovering new knowledge and growth and, with it, the creation of new ideas and meaning. Of course, as in the example above, not every question is answered, and some things are clearly not known. But to acknowledge that one doesn't know is an important type of knowing, and to bear not knowing and be committed to getting to know is an invaluable rich capacity.

Thinking Space is not a neutral or value-free space. It is committed to understanding and learning about racism and other forms of human oppression based on difference, not in the abstract but in ourselves and others. It seeks to do this because with greater knowledge of self and others, we—not just psychotherapists and mental health professionals—are more likely to be aware of our capacity for destructiveness and, in so being, are better equipped to prevent unnecessary harm and suffering for the benefit of all, not just the immediate victims of such hatreds.

Note

1. Bollas (1992) uses the term "object" broadly to include a structure, a place, a group of people, and so forth. I believe that Thinking Space can be internalized as an object that can evoke containment and stimulate unconscious thought. More is said about Bollas's ideas later in this chapter.