



## International Connections

By Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar

### Money, Jewishness, and Terror

Or contextual integration in relational body-psychotherapy

"Without context, there is no communication."  
Gregory Bateson (1972, p.408)

**M**y first thought about integration concerned involving other professional practices. Preparing to write this column, I started to think about interesting vignettes of working alongside psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, Chinese doctors, Rabbis or Pastors. I then considered different techniques that have been integrated into body-psychotherapy from the fields of psychology, psychoanalysis, physiology, and bodywork. That would provide me with a solid opportunity to speak about relational body-psychotherapy, I thought, and its integration of attachment theory, object relations and self-psychology.

**But still,** I thought, the wider platform for integration and collaboration is about context, and since we work with people, context includes gender and sexual differences, race and age, cultural and societal factors. Often these contexts catch us by surprise, and the therapeutic encounter offers a real possibility for contextual healing and integration for clinician and client alike. But can we attain integration without going through disintegration, can repair take place without rupture?

#### Lake Naivasha, Kenya, Africa

**Fourteen years ago,** my wife and I visited Kenya for our twenty-fifth birthday, and we took a short holiday in walking safaris, bird watching and sightseeing in the beautiful African landscapes. We spent a few nights in a wonderful place by Lake Naivasha, run by an old colonialist couple. "Where are you from?" asked the woman as we entered the gate.

"Israel," we replied.

"Funny," she told my wife, "your husband does, but you don't look Jewish. Anyways, I am just doing my accounts and you can probably help me with that . . ."

We ignored her racist onslaught only to discover it kept showing up in different contexts – the way she related to her workers, to the "boys" and "girls" who worked for her, the way she talked about tourists from Germany, US, Scandinavia, about poor people and more. Perhaps it was an act of rebellion, I am not too sure today,

but my wife and I went into the kitchen and asked the workers if they would let us cook lunch for everybody that day. The act was not for the workers, but for us – we needed to reclaim their humanity and equality (and our own) because we found the racism intolerable.

#### Money and my Jewishness

**When we moved** to the UK I made a real effort to avoid dealing with anything that seemed too Jewish . . . I wanted to assimilate, to belong. I possibly feared anti-Semitism but most probably just didn't want to be labelled. But, can I engage with "typically Jewish topics" without immediately labelling myself and being labelled? Moreover, can I afford to avoid it simply in order to save myself from such labels?

**Last year,** after great deliberation and hesitation, I gave a two-day workshop in London about our relationship as psychotherapists with Money. The guilt, fear, hesitance, and apologetic aspects of the therapy-money connection have always struck me as worth exploring, but I dared not go there when I lived in the UK. I was particularly interested in shared exploration of our positioning – whether we can remain in relationship while negotiating money – and further, if we can engage with money while remaining embodied. After all, money is a transitional object – both concrete and symbolic. Even for therapists who do not work with embodied practices, money brings a body (matter) into the therapeutic dialogue.

#### Disturbance in the Field

**I was really excited** by the topic and keen to begin but not everybody has arrived, even though it was time. There is something very exciting for me about therapeutic workshops in London, more so since we moved back to live in Israel. London is such an international city, attracting highly diverse and heterogenic audience, and indeed the clinicians in the room were originally from England, Australia, Scandinavia, German, Belgium, Israel and Lebanon.

**Two of the participants** got up to look through the window. Police sirens were heard, and the street was evacuated. One person went

outside to ask the policemen what was happening and was told there was a suspected object. People were not allowed to freely move into the building. Twenty minutes later, when everybody has arrived, I was already impatient. "Let's start," I said. But only a handful of the participants were ready to begin the day. The rest were still preoccupied with what happened outside.

"Let go of what's happening out there," I requested, "there's nothing we can do about it." Some of the people got upset with me and my communication, others were generally agitated and hypervigilant. I felt calm and centred but was asked by the group to give space to what took place outside of the group and inside of the group. I had to drop my plans and come to the here-and-now, although I could genuinely not understand what all this fuss was around. "Are you upset with the bomb scare?" I asked the Lebanese therapist. "Not at all, let's start the workshop," she replied. The Israeli therapist felt similarly. But most other people were clearly anxious and one was crying.

**And then it dawned on me** – I have normalised and neutralised this situation, which was by no means ok or normal. Threat of terror felt natural, nothing to get nervous about; I dissociated. The superior positioning I had secretly occupied towards the other participants was replaced with fear – us three (the Lebanese and Israelis) felt at home in threatening places. Funny, I thought, I have extensively written about national dissociation and threat (e.g. 2009, 2010) and one of my most quoted papers is the beautiful series by Sandra Bloom (2006) about the impact of fear on individuals and societies. Still, I had lost therapeutic positioning and the multinational context ever so easily.

**As a group**, we needed to make the space safe before further engaging with money, and unlike what I believed to be the case (I felt safer, they were all neurotic), I realised that I needed more safety than most of them to bridge the dissociated state and re-embodiment. Talking about it helped. Sitting next to people who felt safe enough to be scared helped too. I could not have built those bridges on my own. Gosh, without the group, I would not have even become aware of my dissociation. During the morning of the workshop the group served as my

self-object (Kohut, 1959; 1977), holding for me (and the other two) aspects of myself I could not yet tolerate.

### **Can we be said to have a mind of our own?**

**In relational psychotherapy**, a person is no longer understood as a separate disconnected system. The mind (or, if we expand it to somatic thinking, the bodymind) is neither personal nor an object but instead a **process of potential configurations which is only realized in interpersonal exchanges** (see Mitchell, 1988, for example). Stated simply, the fantasy that we can "do something" to the other without being affected is highly criticised. As a therapist, my main therapeutic tool is me, my own bodymind, and willingness to submit it into the relationship. Susie Orbach (2003) demonstrates this in her beautiful argument: "there is no such thing as a body," meaning, there are only bodies in relationship with other bodies.

**Through the eyes** of relational body-psychotherapy, the psychotherapist does not only apply her skills, techniques, knowledge and understanding – she furthermore lends herself to a relationship, willingly surrenders to a bodymind bigger than her skin-boundaried-self. I am partially giving up my body to become a part of a relational-body (a field). When we leave an affect-laden relationship – and a therapeutic relationship is first and foremost such a relationship – we, too, are thus changed from the inside not just our client. I am, therefore, paid for my willingness to take the risk of changing myself together with my clients and students.

**Appropriately**, Douglas Flemons (1996) compared psychotherapy to jazz improvisation, encouraging "freedom within form" (p.236). Approaching the same phenomenon from a different angle, Wilhelm Reich saw the goal of therapy as attaining the capacity to fully give in to the involuntary pulsation of breath (Gilbert, 1999). To this, relational body-psychotherapy adds the freedom to move in and between selves, in and between bodyminds. Paraphrasing Reich, we are giving in to the involuntary tug of bodymind connectedness.

**When my students** in London insisted that we stayed in the here-and-now and processed the bomb-scare, they were the ones who brought us together into connection. At the time, I wasn't at all bothered by the police threat, but for them it was intolerable. And since they insisted, I was invited to recognise the very intolerable space inside of me, and I then yielded to this pain and fear, and reconnected with myself and with the group; once more it was possible to breathe. Connecting to the group connected me to myself.

**This is not** mere cognitive exercise. We are not just made of atoms but of connections, of bridges that resonate and vibrate our connection. This column was written with you in mind, and so you get to carry a piece of me with you, and I, in the knowledge of your reading, carry a piece of you. Sometimes it may be you who regulates us (and me) and at others, it will be me. Yet at all times, as long as we move from self-regulation to mutual-regulation, from willingness to submit to this embodied dance to insisting on our separate individuated self, we form the basic relational dance. This is a dance of individuation and connection, of expression and protection, of being a part of and remaining apart from; in short, we participate in the erotic dance of love.

*I hope that we can share some interests and dialogue, and I welcome your feedback, comments, questions and challenges. You can email me at [asaf@imt.co.il](mailto:asaf@imt.co.il)*

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