The paradox of belonging

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Abstract   The paper argues that human groupings are not found but *made*. Reasons – political and psychological – are suggested to explain *why* groups are made. These are followed by a consideration of *how* groups are made, specifically, how cognitive and emotional mechanisms are mobilized to create and sustain differentiations between human groupings.
Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society (2009) **14**, 74–81. doi:10.1057/pcs.2008.47

Are You One of *Them?*

Although the question is neutral enough, there nevertheless seems to be something disparaging (to my ear, at least) implied by it. And curiously the disparagement seems absent from the converse: Are you one of *us*?

Why this disparity? Is 'them-ness' universally imbued with negativity? If so, how does that state come about?

Orthodox psychoanalytic discourse answers 'yes'. It assumes that some human groupings are 'facts of nature', that they exist naturally in and of themselves. Even the group analyst and psychoanalyst S.H. Foulkes follows this line to say that there are such things as fundamental, or root, groups: 'family, the clan, or even an entire nation' (Foulkes and Anthony, 1957, p. 31). Those root groups are contrasted with 'spontaneous', or contingent, groups – which require a reason to exist – as opposed to root groups that just 'are'. In other words, fundamental groups are *found*, and spontaneous kinds are *made*.

It is also a commonplace in psychoanalytic literature that members of 'us' groups project unwanted aspects of themselves into 'them' groups. One consequence of this act is that the 'them' come to be experienced as

embodying the negative aspects that have been projected onto and into them. That, then, is the mechanism through which varieties of 'them' come to be denigrated and so serves as an explanation for the question raised at the start of this paper.

The Argument

In contrast to that view, I argue for a Fairbairnian reversal. Fairbairn (1944) said of instinctivist psychoanalysis (specifically of the Freudian and Kleinian varieties) that they had mistaken techniques for causes. What he meant by this was that, say, libido is not the cause of attachment phenomena, but the means (the technique) through which attachment processes take place.

I also argue that, although our experience is one of 'finding' groupings, they are all nevertheless in some sense not only always 'made', but also continually in a process of being 'made'; and further, unbeknownst to ourselves, we are all unwitting participants in this ongoing process.

Finding and Making

If human groupings are not simply and naturally found in nature, then we have to enquire how they form. We know that human groupings employ notions of 'us' and 'them' in their formation – and critical to this process is the 'difference' that is the basis of the differentiation of 'us' from 'them'.

We tend to speak as though differences were absolutes. We say things like two things are as different as chalk and cheese. But chalk and cheese are not only different from each other, they are also similar to each other.

Let me begin with the obvious. Between any two individuals (or any two entities, for that matter) there will be an infinity of similarities; further, there will also be an infinity of differences between them. Thus, we can say of two individuals that they are similar on the basis of some category, and we can also say *in the same moment* that they are different on the basis of some other category. Both statements are true at the same time. So two individuals are never just different from, or similar to, each other – they are always both similar *and* different at the same time. The question then becomes: how do we come to settle on one or another difference or similarity as the deciding factor regarding whether X is 'one of us' or 'one of them'?

Clearly, things are never unproblematically different or similar. There is always a decision being made as to which aspect will be emphasized. And the curious thing is that, once one aspect comes to the fore, then the other does not even seem to exist as a possibility. The other possibility is repressed and made sufficiently unconscious so that it appears to be an impossibility.

Given the infinite number of alternative logical possibilities for drawing a line between 'us' and 'them', we have to ask, why do we end up making the cut on the continuum in one place and not another? To put it another way, how and why do we come to experience one encounter as taking place across a difference and another as within a region of similarity? What leads us to assert that the encounter taking place between Mr Smith and Mr Singh is cross-cultural or multicultural, whereas that between Mr Smith and Mr Jones is not? As we have already noted, it is possible to frame *both* encounters in terms both of similarity and of difference. There are two parts to the answer.

Politics

The first part of the answer has to do with the functions that the processes of differentiation are being required to perform. It is not the case that one simply 'finds' a difference, to which one then finds oneself responding. Rather, one finds oneself emphasizing certain differences *in order to create a differentiation*.

The sociologist Norbert Elias's (1994) great work, *The Civilizing Process*, has much to teach us on this matter. Elias draws on books of etiquette and other works written from the early Middle Ages onward, in the region that was eventually to be known as Europe. He convincingly demonstrates that the key function of the systems of etiquette utilized by the European nobility was to make and maintain a distinction between themselves and the rest.

Once a certain convention was established within the nobility, those of lower rank, in particular the emerging middle classes, inevitably emulated the behaviours of their betters and in doing so blurred the lines of distinction. The adoption of those behaviours by the middle classes then prompted refinements in the attitudes and behaviours of the privileged to re-establish the boundary around the blue-blooded. In time, these refinements, too, came to be taken up by the lower orders, and this adaptation, in turn, drove the aristocracy to embellish further the system of manners to sustain their distinction, and so on.

One of the arenas in which we can glimpse this process is that of eating habits. In the early days, people used their hands to eat from a common bowl. The injunctions at that time were to allow those of higher status to choose the choicest morsels first. In time, each person had his or her own plate to eat from; instruments were introduced to transport food from the common bowl to the individual's plate. Further instruments were introduced to transport food from the plate to the mouth. More elaboration followed. Particular instruments were to be used for particular kinds of foods; there were 'proper' ways of holding the instruments, and so on. It is important to note that this was not at all a conscious process but, rather, a movement that evolved and was given a *post hoc* rationale, for example, by aesthetics or hygiene.

Elias says that the same kinds of mechanisms that were employed to make social distinctions were later used to make distinctions between nations and, in a sense, *create* those distinctions. At a later time, these same mechanisms were also critical in the manufacture of races, which are born out of similar imperatives (Dalal, 2002a). Mary Douglas (1995) speaks to this theme, as does the work of French philosopher/sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984).

Let me recap the Eliasian thesis: the function of a difference is to make a differentiation between the 'haves' and the 'must-not-haves'. And, although the function stays unconscious, it appears that the difference itself is to blame for the antipathy between groups. So we readily talk of race riots and gender wars. Thus, we could say that groups form on the basis of having shared interests – but to do so they have to ensure that they prevent designated others from having a share of those interests or even to know that they ought to have an interest in their shares (Elias and Scotson, 1994). This is the work of ideology; the name given for these sorts of processes in group analytic language is the social unconscious (Dalal, 2002b). More recently, Lynne Layton (2002) has named these sorts of processes, 'normative unconscious processes'.

Psychology

The second part of the answer as to why groupings are made has to do with the fact that humans have a deep psychological need to belong. Foulkes and Anthony (1957) say that belonging is intrinsic to psychological health. To take this idea a little further, it is to say that one's psychological health depends enormously on the kinds of places one finds oneself belonging to. This, then, is a key aspect of the answer as to why groupings are made: so that individuals have something to belong to. All this may seem counterintuitive, because it appears to us that we have no choice in the matter and that we *naturally* and obviously belong here and not there.

To summarize, the reasons *why* groupings are made are twofold: first, we divide to create regions of belonging, and second, the places where we divide are driven by the proclivities of the field of power relations. Now for the 'how' part – how the division is made. There are two elements: cognition and emotion.

Cognition

The attributes of human beings vary on a continuum, which we mentally divide into discrete bits and pieces. How is this division accomplished?

Social psychologists have shown that we act in unconscious ways to create groupings and to make them appear more distinct and discrete than they

actually ever can be. First, having made a cut in the continuum, our minds then play a cognitive trick on us. We tend to perceive those within each of the groupings as more similar than they actually are, and we tend perceptually to exaggerate the differences between the groupings so that they seem more different than they actually are. Power relations being equal (which is never actually possible), we tend to favour 'us' groups as one of the means by which the groups are distanced from each other (Tajfel, 1981; Brown, 1995).

Interestingly, several experiments have shown that people tend to favour members of their 'own' group, even though the group is a complete fiction existing in name only! Their unconscious strategy is always in the direction of maximizing the difference between the groups, even when in absolute terms the us-group would be economically worse off (Tajfel *et al*, 1971). The interests of these groups are not just economic ones – a mistake made by unreconstructed Marxists. We should not, however, make the opposite mistake of assuming that economic interests are of only secondary importance.

Emotion

Emotions also come into play and help in the distancing process when people idealize one group and denigrate the other. The twist is this: as the notions of idealization and denigration are themselves colour-coded, one of the ways groupings are idealized and denigrated is by painting them white and black. In this way, the 'black' emotions of repugnance, disgust, hate, envy, and the like are used to keep the Other at a psychological and sociological distance.[1]

Psychoanalysis

D.W. Winnicott's (1951) developmental schema accords well with the arguments being proposed here. He said that at some point the infant experiences an 'I AM' moment. Before this moment, the infant's sense of self is indistinguishable from its environment. In this existential moment, elements of the self are gathered together. But, Winnicott tells us, this is also a paranoid moment, because the infant fears attack from the elements that the infant has effectively repudiated and excluded as not-me. Winnicott wrote (and I agree with him) that the process of group formation is similar. In the moment an 'us' is constituted, one fears those whom one has excluded, *because they have been excluded* (Dalal, 1998).

That, then, is another part of the explanation of the feelings of antipathy towards 'them'.

The Act of Naming: The Paradox of Belonging

The idea of belonging makes sense only when two conditions are fulfilled. First, for an individual to belong to one group, there must be another possibility that one does not belong to. Second, some have to be excluded from belonging. Without these two conditions, belonging would be infinite, encompass everything, and so become meaningless. Thus, the act of inclusion necessitates a simultaneous act of exclusion.

There follows a further complication. The act of categorization, of using a name, not only involves the exclusion of elements deemed not to be part of the name, but also gives a false impression of cohesion and homogeneity to those who are deemed to be part of the name.

When we look closely within the categories of, say, the Nobility or the English, we find not unity and homogeneity but conflict and diversity. Court society has always been famously driven by intrigue and factions jostling for positions of power. It creates the impression of being, and indeed is actually experienced as, a singular entity when it is confronted by (for example) revolutionary mobs in the streets. In such a moment, the internal differences within the nobility, as well as the mob, disappear from view as well as experience.

Similarly, when we look at the entity called English culture, we are faced with an array of very different ways of living and beliefs – miners, thieves, merchant bankers, nobility and serfs; high culture, drug culture, urban culture, rural culture and couch potato; Moslems, Catholics, Anglicans and Hindus; atheists, liberals, racists, communists, fascists, eco-warriors and shopaholics. And, were we to look into any one of these categories, we would find that they, too, fragment into further assorted categories.

Here is the paradox: as soon as one tries to get a hold of an identity, it disintegrates in one's hand even as one grasps it.

It is because of the impossibility of getting a hold of the essence of an 'us' that one focuses on the not-us. This focus helps sustain the illusion of substance and unity of an 'us', and in the process simultaneously renders the impression that they too 'are all the same as each other' – and usually the same in some negative way: immoral, lazy, and so on (Dalal, 2002a). Despite using the language of instincts, this is exactly what Freud (1930) was onto when he wrote:

> The advantage which a comparatively small cultural group offers of allowing this instinct an outlet in the form of hostility against intruders is not to be despised. It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness. (p. 114)

Conclusion

Constant work is required to keep the groupings distanced from each other, because it is always possible that, by privileging alternative differences, one kind of us – them will mutate into an alternative us – them. If one divided humanity according to, say, height instead of religious affiliation, then an alternative pattern of resource distribution would ensue. Thus, zealots constantly patrol the boundaries of their groupings to ensure that just one thought line is pursued by the membership. In this way of thinking, there are no in-betweens, just truth or heresy. You are either one of us (as Bush once famously said) – that is, similar – or against us – that is, different.

I am not proposing that we find a way of *not seeing* differences between people *because we are all the same (*we are ultimately all human) and that, if only we learned to see people in this way then all this nasty stuff would disappear. I am not arguing for such an oversimplification. My position is that we cannot *not divide*: cognitively, emotionally or in any other way. To paraphrase Descartes, 'I divide, therefore I am'.

Belonging to a group does not come naturally. It is generated and contested by the vicissitudes of power relations. The more powerful have a greater possibility of decreeing who belongs and who does not and on what basis. To put it another way, some have the possibility of giving themselves a group name, whereas others are named to the group. But things do not end there. The dispossessed (when they are not too beaten down) can generate alternative ways of belonging by transforming the signs of stigma into ensigns of pride, which serve as rallying points. And from there they can challenge, enter and so modify the centre, the struggles of women and blacks over the last two centuries being two contemporary examples of this process.

In sum, the argument presented here is that the emotions are not the *cause* of antipathies between groups; rather, antipathies are mobilized by differentiating processes in the service of creating and sustaining differentiations.

About the Author

Farhad Dalal is a psychotherapist and group analyst, who also works with organizations. He is a training analyst and supervisor for the Institute of Group Analysis, London, and a founding member of the South Devon Psychotherapy and Counselling Service. He is the author of *Taking the Group Seriously* (1998) and *Race, Colour and the Processes of Racialization* (2002).

Note

1 See Dalal (2002a) for a detailed semantic history of how the meanings of the terms black and white have evolved in the English language. The connotations of 'black' became increasingly negative from

the 12th century onwards. In the sixteenth century, emotions that were disapproved of started being named black for the first time.

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