"Somewhere (There's a Place for Us) . . .": A Cross-cultural Approach to Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy with Cross-cultural Couples*

Perrine Moran

Abstract

This paper considers the use and limitations of psychoanalytic psychotherapy with cross-cultural and inter-racial couples. It examines the notion of "difference", its impact on couple relationships and on the theory and practice of couple therapy. It acknowledges the need to adapt to new social circumstances while stressing the importance of preserving the essence of a psychoanalytic approach. The paper includes vignettes and a comparison between aspects of object relations and link theories.

Key words: difference, cross-cultural, inter-racial, psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy, object relations, link theory, partner choice, projective system, shared unconscious phantasies and defences, unconscious alliances, negative pact.

My aim in this paper is to think about difference, and more specifically about love and difference, as my focus is on couples and couple therapy. Difference is a topic that touches a deep chord in me, partly because of the wave of fear and hatred of difference we are witnessing in the world today, partly because it relates to my personal life experience, and partly because of my work as a couple psychotherapist. It is a topic close to my heart, which is why I chose to refer, in my title (Sondheim, 1956) to a song from one of its most beautiful and moving artistic representations, West Side Story (1957)—an American story that has lost none of its relevance.

Difference, in my opinion, is on the side of life. Our very first experience is of suddenly existing with a body that is separate and different from the one in which we came into being. When we develop, when we learn, we become different from that which we were and if difference is not embraced, growth is stunted. The ordinary expression "what's the difference?" is revealing. It implies that if there is no difference, then it does not

* This article is based on a presentation made at a conference on "Questioning Difference: cross-cultural issues in couples and couple psychotherapy" held at Tavistock Relationships, London, 12 November, 2016.

Couple and Family Psychoanalysis 7**(2)** 153–167 (2017)

matter; it is all the same; we might as well give up. Difference is precious. Yet, difference is also frightening. It triggers the anxieties attached to otherness, it provokes envy and shame. Cultural difference can be what attracts two individuals to one another. Yet, it can also be invoked to explain their disagreements and conflicts.

Couple therapists deal with couples' conflicts over difference and differentiation every day. Helping partners to find a balance between togetherness and separateness and accept the other while preserving the self, forms an essential part of the work. The specific concerns that cross-cultural couples present add a social dimension to this. Being aware of the impact of cultural differences on the couple in order to distinguish between what is intra-psychic, what is inter-personal, and what is culturally, transgenerationally transmitted, and examine how all levels are intrinsically linked and interact with one another, is crucial. Because students from a variety of cultural backgrounds wish to train, and more and more couples from backgrounds that are other than Western come for help, the need to reflect on ways of integrating the transmission of couple psychoanalytic theory with an awareness of the possible relativity of some of its tenets, and the need for openness and adaptability in the application of its concepts are paramount. Already, the development of attachment theory and the broader perspective offered by contemporary psychoanalysis on such fundamental concepts as the Oedipus complex, along with recent work relating to inter-cultural therapy and issues of difference and race (Lowe, 2014), are making psychoanalytic theory more immediately relevant in a wider set of circumstances. Concepts must evolve and change, as does society, while the essence of the approach—in the case of psychoanalysis, the belief that working with the unconscious can be mutative—must be preserved. The French analyst Jacques Lacan said that the unconscious was structured like a language. He drew a parallel between the processes it uses to manifest itself—condensation and displacement—and the stylistic figures of speech of metaphor and metonymy. Is it possible that this language, into which a white, middle class, Austrian, Jewish physician provided such extraordinary insight more than a hundred years ago, could be better understood today if its different idioms were given more consideration? What if different myths, for example, could better illustrate the workings of the unconscious in different cultures, as suggested by David Hewison in his comparison of the parent–child myths of Oedipus and the Indian god Ganesh (Hewison, 2007)? How can we be both flexible and vigilant, so that we move forward without losing what we believe to be an exceptionally rich and productive understanding of the human mind?

Thinking about difference opens up a vast area of reflection. In what follows, I would like to explore the part that cross-cultural differences play in the difficulties cross-cultural and inter-racial couples present, and the

extent to which psychoanalytic psychotherapy is able, or not, to help resolve these difficulties. The expression "cross-cultural couples" covers many possible configurations. For the purpose of this paper, I shall focus exclusively on partners who have chosen to be together despite, or perhaps because of, their difference.

Facilitating mutual comprehension and building bridges is central to our therapeutic task. In 2016, Tavistock Relationships organised a conference that considered object relations and link theory perspectives on couples and families. Link theory is a contemporary development of psychoanalytic thought that originated in South America and is well established there as well as in France. During the conference, the tension between similarity and difference in what presenters from different countries offered was tangible and stimulating. In a spirit of continued and, I hope, productive curiosity, I shall include in my thinking here a cross-cultural comparison between some of the concepts in object relations and in link theory as they are, or can be, applied to work with couples, with particular reference to the writings of René Kaës.

Before delving into this, I would like to tell a brief story about myself, as I am a product of a cross-cultural relationship. I was born and raised in Paris, France, by a French father and an English mother. At home, my parents, my brother, and I switched from one language to the other all the time. My grandparents on both sides were Polish Jews, first generation immigrants. They all originally came from the same *shtetl* (small town) in Poland and had fled the pogroms at the end of the nineteenth century. Some of the villagers had emigrated to France and some to England, and they had kept connections. Those who stayed in Poland moved to Warsaw and were all exterminated during the war. My paternal grandparents were tailors, my maternal grandfather was a barber. At some point in the very early 1930s, my father's sister, in Paris, had been sent to my mother's family in London to learn some English. In return, my mother had then been sent to France to stay with my aunt, and that is how my parents met. They fell in love, but were very young and for several years theirs was a long-distance relationship.

Eventually, they were married in France. My brother was conceived just before my father joined De Gaulle and the Free French in England, and my parents were separated again, this time by the war. By the time I was born, twelve years later, my parents had settled down and moved to a very posh area of Paris, the 16th arrondissement. They loved it there—the residential feel of it reminded my mother of England, and my father, a doctor, was understandably proud, as the first member of his family to be educated and join the middle class, to be able to keep us there. Most of our neighbours came from established and wealthy Catholic families. They owned their flats as well as homes in the country where children spent their holidays.

We rented our flat and when we went on holiday, we always stayed in hotels. This was partly because my father had zero business sense, and never thought of investing rather than spending, and partly because my mother wanted to be able to pack a suitcase and leave at a moment's notice, rather than be attached to a property, the way her relatives in Warsaw had been.

My parents seemed to feel totally at home in this aristocratic environment. They were "different", and they did not seem to care. But I did. I could not define what it was, but outside of our flat, I felt totally out of place. I felt we did not belong.

I was brought up without any reference to religion. My paternal grandparents would come over on Sunday, speak Yiddish to each other, and I would help my grandma make *kneidler* (dumplings) in the kitchen, but I had no idea what any of it meant. I did not know the difference between Polish and Yiddish. I had no idea that I was Jewish.

My mother was very overprotective and she did not hesitate to lie if she felt it was safer for me not to know the truth. She knew that being Jewish was dangerous. When I started to attend primary school, she told me that if anyone asked me what my religion was, I should say, "My mother is English and I'm a non-practising Protestant—*protestante non pratiquante*." For some reason, I did not ask any questions. I must have felt that it was best not to.

Children, who did not see me at mass on Sundays or at catechism, did ask me about my religion, and I said what my mother had told me to say. Unfortunately, what my mother did not know, was that in those days, just before the Beatles and the promotion of London to European capital of rock music and cool fashion, little French children were taught in school that the English had burnt their national heroine Jeanne d'Arc at the stake. This was a very vivid image that stuck in the imagination and my connection with England was not viewed favourably. One little girl said to me in the playground, "My mummy says that your mummy is stupid and she can't even speak properly." My mother did have a strong English accent that she kept till the day she died, and despite her efforts to protect me, I was ostracised precisely because of her. There was no escaping difference.

Being bilingual, language has always played a particularly important role in my life. I have spent, and still spend, a lot of time translating or interpreting in a wide range of circumstances. Although I can switch with ease from one language to the other, I have never found the experience of thinking in two languages particularly comfortable. In fact, it is sometimes disturbing. Lacan, who cultivated a very mannered style, stated that when you say something differently, you are actually saying something different. I would add that you sometimes feel like you are somebody different. In a recent presentation, Mary Morgan (2016) said that the polysemic nature of

words played a part in the difficulty that all couples find in understanding one another. In couples where one partner has had to learn the other partner's language, or both communicate in a third language that belongs to neither, the feeling of not being thoroughly understood, which is common to many couples, is amplified.

Language can also be an issue for cross-cultural couples if, for example, partners disagree about what language to speak with their children, or one partner refuses to learn the other's language. Other specific issues pertaining to cross-cultural couples are very real and need to be considered as such rather than interpreted exclusively as revealing of an unconscious conflict. Which country will the couple choose to live in? What if one partner gives up their country and the other does not? What if one partner cannot get a work visa and, contrary to the couple's wishes, is financially dependent on the other? What about the very real condition of homesickness and the feeling of mutilation that can come with exile? How do partners manage the demands of their families of origin? If cultural ideas on education are very different, how will they deal with conflicting wishes for their children? How do partners help their mixed-race child find his or her place in society? How do they and their therapist recognise and deal with internalised unconscious racism and xenophobia?

One issue that has to be addressed is the difference between cross-cultural and inter-racial couples. To a certain extent, the two have much in common. Partners of different races might come from different countries, with different cultural values. Looking back to their origin, they undoubtedly do. But they might also have both been born and raised in the same country, have the same nationality, speak the same language, attended the same schools and have a similar socio-economic and professional status. Yet, despite all that makes them "the same", history and the colour of their skin makes them different. The idea that some humans are superior to others has always been around. It is at the root of sexism, ageism, nationalism, anti-Semitism, racism, and all forms of genocide. Colonisation legitimised it, with devastating consequences. Taken to its extreme, it leads to the belief that there is such a thing as a pre-existing human essence and that it is not shared by all—that presenting Semitic characteristics (which are or not recognisable) or having the wrong colour skin (which is inescapable) is a sign of sub-humanity. History leaves deep external and internal traces in all of us. It contributes to the formation of unconscious beliefs. According to Ron Britton:

> *Belief* is an ego activity which confers the status of psychic reality on to existing mental productions (phantasies), thus creating *beliefs*. These beliefs may be conscious or unconscious, but cannot be relinquished without becoming conscious. Whether they are conscious or unconscious they have *psychic consequences*. (Britton, 1995, p. 20)

The sedimentation of ideas that we might, at one level, vehemently reject has to be borne in mind if it is to be overcome.

When choosing a partner from a different culture or race, there is undeniably at some level a wish to differentiate oneself from one's background. Partners may feel that they have more in common with someone who comes from a totally different background, than they do with their family of origin. This may well be the case. However, lack of familiarity with one's partner's background, preconceptions about what their cultural identity implies, and possible linguistic differences, can enable phantasies about who that partner is to get in the way of seeing who he or she really is. The risk is then that when reality sets in, the normal process of disillusionment that all couples experience may be amplified and, in some cases, become insurmountable. Or, as Nina Cohen (1992) suggests, the unconscious choice of a partner may originate in the need to define one's identity as different, because one finds it difficult to become a separate individual within one's family of origin. The potential problem with this is that the need to define oneself through one's difference from, or opposition to, another is often repeated in time within the couple, particularly when partners become parents. New and old roles and dynamics can get confused, and the new family become a threat to one's sense of self, just like the family of origin once did.

What I would like to explore, through the use of vignettes, is the efficacy and limitations of our theoretical tools in dealing with these issues. To what extent, for example, do the concepts of unconscious partner choice, shared phantasy and projective system enable us to understand and help cross-cultural couples? Is the very set up we offer—the sharing of an intimate relationship with a stranger, simply incomprehensible and unacceptable to some?

As a therapist working with patients from different cultures, one has to be particularly sensitive to the way therapy might be perceived. A Chinese patient, Wen, related how her English girlfriend had once locked herself in the bathroom because she felt nauseous. At first, Wen had not understood why she would not let her in to help. In her country, that was what you did if someone was ill. But then she realised that her partner felt it would be humiliating to be sick in front of her. Wen said she felt the same way about talking about herself in front of me. It was private and it was humiliating to do it in front of anyone.

Kim and John

Kim and John had met in the laboratory where they worked. She was Vietnamese and he was a divorced Irishman, father of two, her senior by ten years. She had agreed to follow her husband into therapy because their

arguments were getting more and more violent, but to her, the concept of talking to a therapist was baffling. In Vietnam, she said, people talked to their friends or worked things out for themselves, and had no need for this process which, like Wen, she felt to be humiliating.

Her English was poor, and a lot of the early sessions seemed to be exercises in a form of translation. He would say something to her. She would misunderstand. I would try to paraphrase and get the message across to her. She would respond and I did the same in reverse. I think I was offering this as a model in the hope that they might learn to try and understand each other rather than row and lose control. Eventually, I understood that actually, communicating verbally was the last thing they wanted. They had picked each other precisely because they could not communicate, only act and use one another. In their projective system, she held all the passivity he had suffered from in his abused childhood, he held all the rage and violence she felt compelled to keep inside. One of the difficulties in working with them was that in Kim's view everything was cultural. Whenever they disagreed about anything, she said, "In my culture, we don't see things like that". This was often true but, backed by the beliefs and values of a whole nation, she also felt that her way was the only way. Questioning this felt like an attack. Trying to get to what was "her, individually", as separate from "her, as part of a cultural entity," went totally against her way of thinking. Any attempt to look at things from John's point of view threatened her sense of identity. He, on the other hand, felt provoked by her otherness and justified in his fury.

John related how, when he was eight, his father had said something particularly cruel and humiliating to him during a family outing. For once, his mother had taken his side and told her husband to be quiet. John had felt vindicated and he was clearly moved by the memory, but Kim was shocked. In "her culture", she said, standing against a father in front of his son was totally wrong, in any circumstance. I immediately felt incensed by Kim's lack of empathy towards her partner, and intensely critical of a culture that puts rules before care and insists on showing respect to a sadistic grown man rather than protecting a vulnerable child. The inner racist in me stood in judgment, blinding me to the fact that my countertransference was reflecting, not only John's experience, but also Kim's, as a victimised child and as an adult in a set-up that felt totally alien to her. The degree of conviction in Kim's statement had triggered an equally closed minded reaction in me. I had been seduced into her "cultural theory", and lost touch with the internal processes at play. In a paper that examines the "power relationships" in the therapy of an inter-racial couple in post-Apartheid South Africa, Rika van den Berg writes that "racism may be viewed as the product of an interaction between the internal and the social world" (2007, p. 121). She illustrates the way social stereotypes

impacted on the therapy, and concludes that "[e]ffective analytic practice requires the integration of social and psychoanalytic theory and ongoing self-analysis" (p. 131).

John and Kim's shared unconscious phantasy and shared defence was that they could be together so long as they could avoid really knowing one another. Their unconscious partner choice was paradoxically dictated by the –K wish to not know or be known by their partner, and I too, on this occasion, had turned away from knowing them. My awareness of our shared avoidance, and of the intensity of the outrage I had felt, enabled me to help both partners access the frightened, enraged child in them. This seemed to get through to Kim. Despite her resistance, part of her felt relieved at having someone hear what she had to say, and an alliance developed between us. This marked a turning point and, surprisingly, when our couple work ended, she decided that she would seek individual therapy, possibly with a therapist who shared her culture.

LINK THEORY

Returning to theory, one could draw a parallel between Kim and John's resistance to understanding one another and Lacan's determination to make his audience and readers work hard to understand his ideas. As he saw it, only a cryptic style could reflect the elusive nature of the subject of his writing. Part of his legacy to contemporary French thought in general has been to encourage the use of a convoluted way of expressing ideas. In my opinion, this has at times helped to hide the absence of ideas. At others times, the complexity and richness of the concepts make fighting one's way through what, at first, feels like a forest of entangled words and sentences worth the effort, as is the case with the writing of René Kaës.

I think link theory is particularly relevant to work with cross-cultural couples because of its emphasis on the dynamic between the relationship to one's internal objects and the relationship to one's external objects. As Christopher Clulow writes:

> [in link theory] intergenerational histories and traumas, as well as current socio-political and cultural environments may be gathered into the transference and become the object of analysis . . . Unbounding the scope of factors that influence transference relationships to include a wider field of intersubjectivities, and viewing these as jointly constructed by patient and therapist, increases the complexity of analytic work. It cautions against being too confident in our understanding of clinical experiences without heeding the contexts in which that understanding occurs. (Clulow, 2016)

In his work on group analysis, Kaës distinguishes three psychic spaces: one that relates to the individual, another to the intersubjective links

between the members of a group, and a third to the group as a whole. Kaës points out that this opens the way to an extension of psychoanalysis beyond its traditional one-to-one dimension. He postulates the existence of several topologies of the unconscious, based on what happens between the three psychic spaces—how they impact on and, to use the French terminology, "interfere" with one another, rather than on how they function internally and separately (Kaës, 2016). This, to me, resonates with the way we conceive couple psychoanalytic work, in which we constantly navigate between issues relating to the partners' individual histories and psychological make-up, issues relating to the dynamic partners have established between one another and between them and the therapist, and issues relating to the couple that the partners may or not succeed in creating; all three realms being in constant interaction with each other and with the social and historic reality that surrounds them.

Applying the concept of "interference" to clinical practice with couples, the Argentinian link therapist Isidoro Berenstein suggests that as well as transference, one should work with "interference". He writes:

> Interference is not about working through, as in the transference, but about making room for the other as a different subject. It is about the couple members' ability to produce something new and different, instead of *reproducing* what each carries from childhood and what he or she has brought to the couple. This, too, is a therapeutic tool. (Berenstein, 2012, p. 576)

The concept of "interference" offers an enriching perspective and possibly innovative techniques in couple therapy. Once again, it resonates for me with what has been written about the need to be separate and accept the other's otherness in order to be in a relationship and find the means to form what Mary Morgan (2005) calls "a creative couple".

Ndeye and Youssouf

Ndeye and Youssouf were a black, French-speaking, African couple with whom I worked in Paris. Ndeye came from Senegal, and Youssouf from Mali, and they had emigrated as children. They were now in their early twenties and the issue they presented was that cultural differences between their two countries of origin were making them unable to agree on anything.

Their relationship had, at first, been very happily fusional: it was him and her against the world. To use Janet Mattinson and Ian Sinclair's terminology, they had been "babes in the woods" together (Mattinson & Sinclair, 1979). However, since the birth of their child, now aged one, everything had changed. Youssouf felt his parents should be in charge of their son's education while he and his wife continued to prioritise each

other. But Ndeye had become a mother intent on not repeating the bad parenting she felt she had received, and Youssouf had lost his place at the centre of her life. Suddenly, his parents could do no wrong and Ndeye could do no right. She thought this was a result of family pressure and different cultural views on parenting. Unfortunately, I was not able to explore this with both partners together as Youssouf never returned after the first session. Like many other African couples, Ndeye and Youssouf regularly attended large, extended family advisory meetings, in which the couple's intimate life was discussed, and this was as far as Youssouf was willing to go. There was something too deeply alien in the set-up I offered (the three of us in a fairly sterile consulting room, with me, a white, middle-class woman who sat and listened rather than advise them on what to do) for him to fathom how the process could possibly help. While I totally understood, I found this very frustrating. However, something about this set-up—perhaps the very fact that it was "different"—appealed to Ndeye and she and I continued to work together.

Ndeye was left with the difficult task of negotiating how to live within three cultures: that of her family of origin, that of her husband, and that of the country in which she lived. Much of our work together had to do with helping her to accept otherness without losing herself. She stopped punishing herself for not being the person others expected her to be. She became more able to state her views clearly and consequently to elicit an understanding response from her husband. Ndeye and I also had to learn to accept each other's otherness. I frequently had to remind myself to put aside my views and principles, help Ndeye formulate her own, and to swallow hard not to suggest she ask her mother-in-law, aunts, uncles, and her own mother to stop telling her to obey and please her husband, and just walk out the door. I think that possibly she sensed this, and that the fact that I could think what I thought yet respect where she was coming from was important to her. What I had to offer as a psychoanalytic couple psychotherapist could not reach Youssouf. However, it did speak to Ndeye, and working with one partner ultimately helped the couple.

SHARED UNCONSCIOUS PHANTASIES AND UNCONSCIOUS ALLIANCES

Other concepts appear with variations in object relations and link theories, for example, shared unconscious phantasies and defences on one hand, and unconscious alliances on the other. Comparing such complex concepts would in itself warrant a separate study. What follows presents an initial overview.

Shared unconscious phantasies have to do with the meaning that being in a relationship has for each partner and with the image partners have of

what constitutes an ideal couple relationship (Hewison, 2014). These images are coloured by each partner's early relationships, particularly in the dyadic and oedipal phases, which provide models for later adult relationships. According to Helen Tarsh and Elaine Bollinghaus, "the unconscious hope of most couples as they look to the future is that this new partnership can rework their past emotional experiences more favourably" (Tarsh & Bollinghaus, 1999, p. 125). In a healthy relationship, this shared hope unites the couple whose projective system ensures that their unconscious goal is sustained. Defence mechanisms such as splitting and projective identification, which are present to a variable extent in all couple relationships, are put to good use to maintain a balance within the couple. An unconscious agreement might, for example, enable one partner to project their own feared competitiveness on to their ambitious partner, who might invest in them the part of themselves that wants to be looked after. In this instance, the projective system, on which rests the unconscious trust in the couple's ability to repair the past, can be compared with what Kaës refers to as an "unconscious alliance":

> I call unconscious alliance a trans-subjective psychic formation constructed by the subjects of a link in order to strengthen in each of them certain processes, certain functions or certain structures from which they derive such benefit that the link which connects them has a decisive value for their psychic life. (Kaës, 1994, p. 369)

For Kaës, unconscious alliances exist intra-psychically, between internal objects (Kaës, 2009) as well as intersubjectively. In society, the subjects of a link—such as the partners in a couple—have to form alliances in order to strengthen and preserve the relationship they need to fulfil their desires. Alliances provide agreement and are constructive. However, even in the case of predominantly productive alliances, difference and disagreements have to be ignored or cast aside in order to avoid conflict and discord. According to Kaës, "alliances unite and exclude" (Kaës, 2009, p. 2, translated for this issue). Intra-psychically, this entails the repression of thoughts and representations. Intersubjectively, alliances can be based on denial and a shared unconscious "negative pact".

In the couples who present for therapy, the wish to repair past dysfunctional relationships is often blocked by a shared unconscious phantasy that all couple relationships are ultimately disastrous and that intimacy is dangerous. In this case, the conscious wish to sustain a relationship is accompanied by the unconscious fear that its fulfilment would be catastrophic. The projective system then becomes a shared means of defending against the conscious wish to be a couple, and against recognising the negative unconscious phantasy. According to Douglas Woodhouse, the shared defence is an "unconscious agreement between the partners to maintain

mutual misperceptions as a defence against the recognition of their underlying problems" (Woodhouse, 1965, p. 5). Francis Grier illustrates this process in an extract from a case study of a couple who "relied on an unconscious agreement, almost a contract, that each would let the other down just when it mattered most, so proving the point for each of them that their closest objects were absolutely not to be depended on, or, more accurately, could be trusted to betray them." (Grier, 2011, p. 25). The idea of an unconscious agreement to maintain a status quo, which might at a manifest level be dysfunctional, is close to the concept of the particular type of unconscious alliance that Kaës refers to as "the negative pact":

> By this I mean that which, in any trans-subjective set, is fated, in an unconscious agreement, to being repressed or negated, denied, disavowed, rejected, encapsulated: the function of the pact is for a link to be organised and maintained between the complementary vested interests of those who are linked by it . . . This cost of the link is the very thing which must be kept quiet between those who are linked by it, in mutual vested interest, in order to satisfy the double interrelated economy of the individuals and of the chain to which they belong." (Kaës, 1994, p. 368)

A negative pact might apply to a country, a class, an institution. In its determination to reject reality, it can lead to such phenomena as historical negationism (Kaës, 2009, p. 7). In relation to couples, it is close to the concept of "shared unconscious beliefs" (Morgan, 2010). The "negative pact"—such as the one struck by Kim and John—is what we try to unpick in the therapeutic process, both from our outside third position, and from the inside, as we struggle repeatedly to extricate ourselves from it.

Unconscious alliances refer to the systems put in place to ensure the maintenance of a shared interest. "Shared phantasy is based on the projective and introjective systems of each of the couple. The spouses are doing something to each other" (Hewison, 2014, p.28). While shared unconscious phantasies belong to the couple, unconscious alliances pertain to a wider realm. From this perspective, object relations and link theories can be seen as complementary. An object relations approach relates the pact that exists within the couple's psychic formation to the negotiation of former stages of development (mother–infant and oedipal in particular) and the partners' consequent ability or inability to produce a containing and creative couple. Link theory helps to remind us of our own participation in the pact that we establish with patients, and of the social context in which couples form and therapeutic work takes place.

Bashirah and Michael

Bashirah and Michael were an inter-racial couple in their late thirties, who came for help because Bashirah would not commit to a long-term

relationship even though she wanted to have a baby, and this was making Michael feel insecure and unsettled. Michael, a secondary school teacher, came from a white, middle-class, English background. His childhood had been uneventful, but he had an older sister compared with whom he felt he had always paled into insignificance. Bashirah, an artist who specialised in Batik, had come from Ghana with her parents when she was a few months old. Her parents' relationship had been volatile and they had struggled financially. When she was a teenager, her father left and she became very rebellious, joined a gang, got into drugs, and into a lot of trouble. Eventually, she pulled herself together, finished school, and got a degree. She agreed that she and Michael should live together for a few years if they had a child, but she was adamant that the relationship would not last and that one day she would leave and they could then have joint custody of the child.

Bashirah felt very guilty for "selling out" and betraying her class and her race by choosing a white partner. The feeling of alienation and of not being truly understood by one's partner, which is not uncommon in couples who come from different social classes, is frequently amplified in cross-cultural and inter-racial couples. For some, the attraction and attachment are strong enough to overcome the feeling. For others, help is needed to understand the partner choice that was made. Bashirah was presenting the social, cultural, and racial difference between them as an unsurmountable obstacle to the relationship. And indeed, it was an obstacle. Some work was done on both partners' rescue and revenge phantasies, which were connected to their racial difference. In addition, Bashirah, whose internalised parental model was poor, had been repeatedly let down by those to whom she had made attachments. She was therefore understandably averse to letting herself become emotionally dependent on anyone. I believe that one of the unconscious factors—not the only one—that had made her choose a white partner, was that in her mind this would ultimately bring the relationship to an end. It gave her an escape route. By choosing a partner with whom she felt it was wrong to stay, she was protecting herself against dependence and commitment. This, of course, is only part of a much more complex picture that cannot be adequately related here, and which involves not only Bashirah's, but also Michael's, conflict over dependence, and the negative pact they had established to keep this shared conflict "quiet". Naming their fear of dependence eventually helped both partners to get in touch with something they shared, and to recognise other more positive and creative elements of the partner choice. In the case of Bashirah and Michael, who had both grown up and been educated in this country, the model of therapy offered was easily accepted and ultimately productive. On one hand, the specific cultural element that Bashirah put forth as a reason for the relationship to be

doomed had to be considered at face value and addressed; on the other, it was also helpful to view it as the form in which a latent fear of dependence was manifesting itself.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have explored the use and limitations of couple psychoanalytic psychotherapy with cross-cultural and inter-racial couples. The integration of aspects of link theory to an object relations approach has offered a different perspective, the aim of this addition being to encourage a creative intercourse between concepts that originate in different cultures.

All couples dream of building something together, and perhaps that dream is strongest in cross-cultural couples who are not repeating models, but trying to invent between them a new space in which the desire to be together is stronger than the differences that stand in their way. Confronting opposing external, as well as internal, forces is a struggle. Awareness of the former is crucial to our ability, as psychoanalytic couple psychotherapists, to help our couples with the latter. In *West Side Story*, a beautiful Puerto Rican woman, Maria, and a white, New York, gang member, Tony, fall in love and are defeated by the forces opposing their cross-cultural union. But the song I refer to in my title remains, and so does the hope for all cross-cultural couples who embrace the challenge of making their alliance stronger than any internal or external opponent, that "somewhere" *they* will find a time and place that is right for them, and for us, that perhaps we can help them on their way.

REFERENCES

Berenstein, I. (2012). *Vinculo* as a relationship between others. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, *81*: 565–577.

Britton, R. (1995). Psychic reality and unconscious belief. *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, *76*: 19–23.

Cohen, N. (1992). Same or different? A problem of identity in cross-cultural marriages. *Journal of Family Therapy*, *1*: 177–199.

Clulow, C. (2016). Unpublished presentation at the "Journée Scientifique d'Apsylien", Lyon, France, 19th November, 2016.

Grier, F. (2011). Psychotic and depressive processes in couple functioning. *fort da*, *17*(1): 11–29.

Hewison, D. (2007). The power of our attachment to theory—or Oedipus meets Ganesh. In: M. Ludlam & V. Nyberg (Eds.), *Couple Attachments. Theoretical and Clinical Studies* (pp. 171–188). London: Karnac.

Hewison, D. (2014). Shared unconscious phantasy in couples. In: D. E. Scharff & J. S. Scharff (Eds.), *Psychoanalytic Couple Therapy. Foundations of Theory and Practice* (pp. 25–34). London: Karnac.

Kaës, R. (1994). Psychic work and unconscious alliances in therapeutic institutions. *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, *10*(3): 361–371.

Kaës, R. (2009). *Les Alliances Inconscientes*. Paris: Dunod. [Reprinted Paris: Dunod, 2014].

Kaës, R. (2016). Link and transference within three interfering spaces. *Couple and Family Psychoanalysis*, *6*(2): 181–193.

Lowe, F. (Ed.) (2014). *Thinking Space. Promoting Thinking about Race, Culture, and Diversity in Psychotherapy and Beyond*. London: Karnac.

Mattinson, J., & Sinclair, I. (1979). *Mate and Stalemate*. London: Tavistock Institute of Marital Studies.

Morgan, M. (2005). On being able to be a couple: the importance of a "creative couple" in psychic life. In: F. Grier (Ed.), *Oedipus and the Couple* (pp. 9–30). London: Karnac.

Morgan, M. (2010). Unconscious beliefs about being a couple. *fort da*, *16*(1): 36–55.

Morgan, M. (2016). Unpublished presentation at British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy conference on Private Practice. 24th September, 2016.

Sondheim, S. (1956). *Somewhere* (*There's a Place for Us*). New York: Leonard Bernstein Music Publishing.

Tarsh, H. & Bollinghaus, E. (1999). Shared unconscious phantasy: reality or illusion? *Sexual and Marital Therapy*, *14*(2): 123–136.

Van den Berg, R. (2007). An impasse in power relationships: an intersubjective view in a South African socio-cultural context. In: M. Ludlam & V. Nyberg (Eds.), *Couple Attachments. Theoretical and Clinical Studies* (pp. 121–132). London: Karnac.

West Side Story (1957). Musical. Lyrics by S. Sondheim, music by L. Bernstein. First staged at 1681, Broadway, New York.

Woodhouse, D. (1965). Introduction. In: K. Bannister & L. Pincus (Eds.), *Shared Phantasy in Marital Problems*: *Therapy in a Four-person Relationship* (pp. 5–7). London: Tavistock Institute of Marital Studies.