

***Paré, D.A. (2001). Crossing the Divide: The Therapeutic use of internalized other interviewing. Journal of Activities in Psychotherapy Practice 1(4), pp. 21-28.***

A useful way to make sense of what we do as therapists is to draw on the metaphor of *culture*. We speak with others, invariably across a cultural divide. Using the word broadly, *cultures* can be differentiated by the varied ways that people make meaning in the world, and the different rituals that accompany this meaning-making (Paré, 1995, 1996). In this sense of the word, “culture” doesn’t refer to ethnicity, but rather to traditions of meaning making. We all “inhabit” a range of cultures: therapists and clients alike.

As a members of the ‘culture’ of parents, for instance, a father may fret about schoolyard bullying and attend parent/teacher council meetings—concerns and activities not usually in the repertoire of the ‘culture’ of childless adults. But this is just one small aspect of who that father is. He is a members of many cultures, including perhaps the cultures of psychologists and educators, of men, of acoustic guitar players and lovers of spicy food.

The culture metaphor is helpful because it reminds us that, ultimately, all of us make sense of our worlds from within a variety of interpretive traditions, and no two of us is positioned identically. In therapy, this leads us to stay curious about what makes a client’s meanings different from our own. It encourages clinicians to avoid prematurely assuming they “understand”. The culture metaphor also reminds practitioners not to slip into a sort of moribund notion of what is “true”, as though all cultures make sense of the world in the identical way. This mindfulness about multiple meanings is often a helpful orientation to share with clients and is particularly highlighted via a conversational practice called *internalized other interviewing*.

Internalized other interviewing shifts conversational conventions and invites persons to experience what it’s like to make meaning in another “culture” as it were: to temporarily inhabit someone else’s skin, to walk a mile in someone else’s moccasins. Karl Tomm, a prominent Canadian family therapist, introduced this conversational practice and uses it, among other ways, with couples having difficulty appreciating their partner’s meanings around experiences they both share (Tomm, 1997). Tomm also uses Internalized other interviewing with families; however, it is helpful in a wide variety of therapeutic contexts.

### *Crossing the Cultural Divide*

Couples frequently fall into pitched battles over the true or correct way of viewing things. Michael White (1993) calls these “institutionalized practices of relationship”. They’re like a kind of cultural intolerance: my version of the world is right, and yours is wrong. Besides obscuring the loving feelings between partners, they cast therapists in the unhelpful role of adjudicators (Epston, 1993), presiding like supreme courts justices and dispensing judgment. This can be a recipe for a sort of righteousness orientation to clients, in that the clinician presumes to occupy the higher moral ground, as it were. Worse still, it leads to pathologizing: if the person whose view is “wrong” is not immoral, then they must have some deficit that accounts for their distorted view of reality.

The practice of elevating one point of view to the exclusion of alternatives also tends to obscure the experience—including the suffering—of others. Internalized other interviewing can be a helpful practice when working with someone who has hurt another, but is struggling to appreciate the impact of their behavior because they can’t imagine what it feels like to be that other. These are but two applications of internalized other interviewing. Later in this article other possibilities will be suggested; as you read further you may think of your own.

Before introducing an illustrative vignette of internalized other interviewing in practice, it would be helpful to describe in more detail how an internalized other interviewing conversation unfolds. As stated earlier, internalized other interviewing involves asking a client about someone *else’s* experience. But it involves more than simply asking Mark, for instance, “How do you think Linda sees that?”. A question like that invites Mark to view Linda’s “culture” from a distance, but doesn’t call on him to “inhabit” it: to *experience* her experience.

As we walk through an introduction to internalized other interviewing, the names Mark and Linda will continue to be used to illustrate the process. The points below pertain whether you're working with Mark alone, and inviting him to experience his (absent) partner's experience, or if you're working with the couple, and inviting Mark to do this while Linda witnesses. If you're doing the latter, you'll also repeat the process with Linda afterwards. The steps and language outlined here are drawn from the author's use of internalized other interviewing, and reflect an inclination to give clients ample opportunity to reject suggestions if they feel they don't fit for them. Ultimately you will adapt the practice in a way that fits your own style.

#### INSTRUCTIONS:

##### *The Conversational Process*

1. Establish whether Mark feels it might be helpful to get a better understanding of Linda's experience because of difficulties related to a misunderstanding between the two of them.

*Mark, it seems to me that part of the challenge you're dealing with right now is how to get a grasp of what's going on for Linda—because without knowing her point of view better, it's difficult for you to know how to respond to make things better. How would you feel about trying something that would help us explore Linda's experience in more detail without actually having to ask her what's going on for her?*

2. If Mark is interested in proceeding, offer him the opportunity to do this in a unique kind of way.

*Mark, I have a suggestion for doing this that's a little different, and could use some describing. How about if I explain how it works, and if it sounds okay, we'll give it a try?*

*I'll ask you to pretend that you're Linda for a few minutes, and I'll interview you **as though** you are Linda—even to the point of calling you Linda while I speak to you. Then I'll debrief with you later and see how it was for you. (if Linda is in the room, add "We can also check with Linda to see what it was like for her.") I've found this way of talking is usually quite helpful to people...but it can also be uncomfortable, because it means leaving your point of view behind for a while. How do you feel about giving it a try?*

3. If it still sounds okay, let Mark know he can discontinue the process at any time if he feels uncomfortable at all, but also request that he try to stay in role until the debrief.

*If for some reason you're feeling uncomfortable, just let me know and we can quit. But if it's going okay, I'll ask you to stay in "role" until we're done, even if you're tempted to step out of role to make a comment-(which sometimes happens. I find it's difficult tuning in to someone else's experience if you jump in and out. All right? Don't worry if it takes you a while to come up with answers—take the time you need to connect with Linda's experience.*

4. If he's interested in continuing, help Mark get started by saying enough to get him into role.

*(to Mark) Hello, Linda. Thanks for agreeing to this. Mark tells me you're an accountant; I wonder if things are busy at this time of year? (Slipping into internalized other interviewing is a bit like entering a culture where the meanings and rituals are somewhat different from your own; making a little small talk about Linda's life outside of her relationship with Mark helps Mark to leave his point of view behind and cross over to her experience.) As you know, I've been meeting with Mark for a while. He there's stuff going on at home that he isn't happy about, and I wanted to check with you to get your account of what's going on. What are your concerns about what's happening at home? (The interview can go many directions from here. The issues at hand, and Mark-as-Linda's responses will help inform you about how to proceed.)*

5. Invite Mark to switch out of role in order to leave time for a debrief. This form of conversation is typically dense with information, and demanding for participants. Once you've given Mark a chance to orient to being himself again, join him (and Linda, if she's present) in debriefing.

*(To Mark) What was that like for you? Did anything stand out for you? What surprised you? Were there also ways the process reaffirmed what you felt you already knew about Linda's experience? (To*

Linda) *How close do you feel Mark got to your experience? What might he have missed? Were there ways you were reassured that he knows what's going on for you better than you'd have predicted?*

If Linda is present, repeated the process with her assuming the role of Mark. The debriefing stage is very important, because it provides the opportunity to focus on new learnings and make meaning around them.

When I conduct an internalized other interview with two clients in the room, I suggest they sit with some distance between them. For the person being interviewed, this makes it easier to concentrate without feeling under the gaze of their partner. For the witnessing partner, it gives them a chance to observe and evaluate without feeling too drawn in to the action.

#### VIGNETTE:

##### *Brad's Story: A Clinical Vignette*

Brad came to see me after being told he must either quit or be fired from his job as a clerk in a major corporation after being charged with sexual harassment. He seemed quite baffled by the whole turn of events, and was struggling to make sense of what had happened.

From my conversations with Brad emerged a picture of a workplace where practical joking and sexual innuendo were rampant. There was tickling at the copy machine; at coffee time, male employees might make suggestive remarks over bathing-suited pin-ups within earshot of female workmates.

Among Brad's workmates was Brenda, a woman with whom he occasionally confided over coffee in the company cafeteria. He shared his concerns about job security; she disclosed that she'd been sexually assaulted many years previously. Brad said he was aware Brenda was engaged to another man, and that he saw her as a friend, not a potential lover. Brad and Brenda exchanged e-mail at work, most of it short and pragmatic. Over time, however, Brad began to use the e-mails to tell Brenda of his physical attraction to her. As time went on, the messages became more explicit—from telling her he liked the way she dressed to, finally, saying he "drooled" over thoughts of her in a bathing suit. Brenda told her boss about the messages. The investigation ensued. Several weeks later, Brad was out of a job.

By the time I met Brad, it had begun to sink in for him that he had done something hurtful to Brenda. But this had not be evident to him at the time, and even now he was struggling to get a handle on how she might have received his messages. I invited him to engage in internalized other interviewing in much the same manner as outlined above. He said he was willing to give it a try.

I reminded Brad that I'd be calling him "Brenda" for the next few minutes and acknowledged it sometimes takes a moment to slip into this unusual way of conversing. We made a moment's small talk: I asked "Brenda" about her job, and about the unfortunate turn of events with Brad. Brad struggled at first to digest the questions and I assured him it was fine if he pondered them before answering. I asked "Brenda" about her response to their shared workplace, and Brad concentrated on making sense of the environment in Brenda's cultural terms. My own questions were guided by my hunches about Brenda's experience. I asked Brenda, through Brad, about her experience of men's physical strength advantage over her, and the relationship between her personal boundaries and feelings of safety.

Through his efforts to walk in Brenda's shoes, Brad tapped into an experience of sexual vulnerability and objectification. He also revised his view of what he'd previously taken to be the symmetry between men and women--understanding how a man's physical advantage can render his sexual advances threatening. In the area of boundaries in particular, Brad (through Brenda) made a range of fine distinctions. He talked about how tickling someone in response to their tickling might be a way of erecting a boundary, rather than issuing an invitation.

Internalized other interviewing promotes a sense of "otherness" that may be somewhat dormant, but it does more than that. It also calls on a person to identify with another. The word *identify* comes from the Latin *identicus*, which means "the same". When Brad begins to name Brenda's experience, he also taps into his own. Internalized other questioning is also about self-discovery; it's about connecting with what we share as human beings.

After about twenty minutes, I felt Brad had done some hard work and was beginning to falter in his concentration. I invited him to become "himself" again. When we debriefed, Brad said the internalized other interviewing process had tuned him into new dimensions of Brenda's experience. This provided useful material for the remainder of that session, but also had longer term implications. As our work proceeded, we were able to hold these as reference points, helping to keep our conversations about Brad's

behavior grounded in the experience of women in general, and more particularly the experience of a person who had suffered its consequences.

#### CONTRAINDICATIONS FOR USE:

Because it invites persons to venture out of their normal consciousness, internalized other interviewing is not recommended for clients who have a strong tendency to dissociate, or those with psychotic or delusional tendencies.

#### CLOSING REFLECTIONS:

Many of our therapeutic traditions invite us to identify communication deficits or developmental lags when persons fail to identify with those around them. This leads to “treatment” to correct purported dysfunctions. If we assume that sensitivity to others’ experience is beyond the scope of the client, we will adopt a finger-wagging orientation that fails to promote responsible or empathetic behavior.

An alternate perspective is to view compassion as a way of knowing, and one potentially accessible by all. Internalized other interviewing promotes a compassionate way of knowing by inviting someone into another’s experience, and drawing forth knowledges that are available to them, but not previously accessed. It presents a wide range of possibilities beyond those described above. For instance, it may be useful as a way of helping a parent develop a more empathic identification with a child. Alternately, it may help to invite an adult into sympathizing more deeply with the plight of a parent faltering with age. Or it may help an adolescent caught in conflict with a friend to achieve a less sharp-edged and ultimately demoralizing view of the situation. You may have other ideas upon reading this article. There are many contexts in which it’s helpful for clients to cross the cultural divide, to experience what it’s like to inhabit another’s skin, and to discover more about themselves in the process.

#### PROFESSIONAL READINGS AND RESOURCES:

Epston, D, (1993). Internalized Other Questioning with couples: The New Zealand version. In S. Gilligan & R. Price, Therapeutic Conversations. New York, NY: Norton, pp. 183-189.

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