Living in the Middle of a Binary:

Claiming Identity in a World of Extremes

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Introduction

      We live in a world of opposites where we are constantly pressured to place ourselves on one side of any number of socially constructed spectrums. Binaries run rampant in understanding our world, placing mind against body, spiritual existence against physical existence, and science against religion. Additionally, each of these essentialist dualisms leads to more dualisms. The mind can be seen as conscious or unconscious, the body as beautiful or ugly. A person can spiritually exist in darkness or light and can physically exist as black or white. Science is split into natural science and social science and religion is often split by eastern and western tradition. In this binary thinking, theories have been created and tested, making those living in and experiencing the middle areas confused and marginalized.

      Psychology as a discipline is itself living in the middle of a binary of natural and social science, and more specifically critical psychology finds itself between the West and the East as it tries to pave a way for new thought that can help explain all worlds and understandings. Then enter religion, science's complete opposite, which has been recently teaching the necessity of essential harmony science and religion, whether taking a north, south, east, or west perspective. When looking in particular at the Coloured community in South Africa, once again we find a group of people living in the middle, "previously not white enough and now not black enough," a statement I have read and heard more times than I care to remember. It is particularly the fact that there is such a common phrase in general discourse that shows how uncompromising society has been in creating a place for peoples, thoughts, and ideas that live in the middle of binaries.

      The focus of this paper is threefold. First, I will argue that the societal black-white dualism has alienated coloured communities as theorized by Fanon, pushing them through and between Bulhan's three major forms of identity development to the current always fluctuating group identity coloured communities have today. Secondly, I will show that the individual-society binary has created a rift in individuals being able to also construct their own identity. Although social groups created out of shared experiences and oppositions have given marginalized peoples an 'in' group, as well as a place and power unachievable without the support and existence of a synthesized group, individuals are still struggling to find their personal identity. Lastly, I will show how the science-religion binary holds the key to uniting the world, as explained through the Bahá'í Faith and the positive notion that the world

is ever-advancing and will eventually become a place where all people will be synthesized. This should bring you to the understanding that by working in the middle of binaries or with the binary extremes in harmony, there is much knowledge to be gained, allowing a place for everyone.

Alienation to Radicalisation

Zimitri Erasmus is quick to comment on the social construction of race in her book, *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town*, and accents the fact that terms such as 'mixed descent' or 'race mixture' are simply using terms of habit that justified oppression under the once-popular 'race science' (Erasmus 12). 'Race science,' popular worldwide around the middle of the 19th century, consisted of a number of tests and measurements that 'scientifically showed black people to be less intelligent as whites. Prior to the rise of 'race science' many Europeans arriving in South Africa simply subjectively characterized those they found living there (Hottentots and Bushmen) as animal-like, and shipped them around the world for display purposes, offensively reporting:

> In appearance they are little above the monkey tribe, and scarcely better than the mere brutes of the field. They are continually, crouching, warming themselves by the fire, chattering or growling, smoking, &c. They are sullen, silent, and savage—mere animals in propensity, and worse than animals in appearance (Dubow 24).

It is no doubt, then, why it is not so desirable for Coloureds to 'talk about the *other* side of the family.' The white side of the family becomes hugely desired, and since there was no comfortable middle ground to claim, it was set up to be the white side versus the black, the *other*, less-desired side. Additionally, being coloured often ties a person back to slavery, which is another thing people are hesitant to claim in their ancestry. However, many people carry conflicting views, some saying "We can't trace our background and we need to move from here," and others saying, "If you don't know where you came from, you won't know where you're going" (Cape Town: Tales of a Coloured City).

In this way, people have become alienated from themselves, as Frantz Fanon expounds upon in his Marxist-based theory of alienation. Marx was particular concerned about the economic/material situation of workers being alienated from the end product of their labor, whereas Fanon took it another step further and included the psychological/cultural realm of alienation, when people become estranged from who they are as a person individually or socially due to imposed distancing from

"values, products, meanings and self-understandings" (Hook 93-95). Fanon goes on to say that it is through the violence of the colonizers and the oppressive views they hold of the natives that further oppresses the minds of the natives (Zahar 13). When one begins to know themselves in the oppressor's terms, there is an ever-present "risk of using racist formulations as a way of understanding self—of unintentionally objectifying oneself in terms of these racist values" (Hook 97). It becomes easy, now, to understand the connection between Fanon's theories and those of Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness movement, whose common phrase became, "The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed." However, Biko was sure that weapon could be reclaimed (Hook 106).

One way H.A. Bulhan says the weapon is being reclaimed is through a psychological defense called 'revitalization,' in which people reject the dominant culture and defensively shift toward finding power in 'the other side of the family.' But before people are able to go through a rejection stage, they first go through 'capitulation,' mentioned earlier without said label, which is essentially becoming alienated from oneself and assimilating into the dominant culture with a particular denunciation of ones own culture, otherwise known as the 'mark of oppression' (Foster 137). Though it does not seem coloured communities were ever fully assimilated, they did adopt a fair amount of Afrikaaner culture, most notably the use of the language Afrikaans, which is still the dominant language of coloured communities.

The third and last form of psychological defense that Bulhan mentions is that of 'radicalization,' or the synthesis of a group of people with "unambiguous commitment to radical change" (Foster 137). These three forms of psychological defense are also forms of identity development that groups of people can go through, but will play out differently depending on group dynamics and goals. As stages, they can occur in individuals or in generations of people or both (Hook 587). Put simply, individuals and groups can find themselves in psychological patterns of capitulation, revitalization or radicalization—read: damage, pride, or synthesis.

The coloured community in South Africa and Cape Town in particular has experienced these stages in a number of combinations and continues to pass through and between the three psychological defenses. Capitulation still plays out a great deal regarding standards of beauty, with many girls trying to 'relate more to the white side of the family,' most manipulated in hair. Erasmus writes that with curling or

straightening your hair comes shame and humiliation in the coloured community because it places you in the 'other' side, which under capitulation is being rejected (Erasmus 13). Additionally many people find themselves co-existing between capitulation and revitalization, being forced to choose an extreme on the black-white binary, ultimately having to reject a part of themselves and their identity. She writes, "Being coloured means being the privileged black and the 'not quite white' person. It means a distinction between being 'sleek' or *kroes* haired…about living an identity that is clouded in [stereotypes]" (Erasmus 14).

The biggest move into radicalization as a group past the simple pride of revitalization came with the evacuation of 60,000 people from District Six between 1966 and the early 1980s under apartheid. It now sits as a wasteland, but is a stark reminder of injustice as well as resistance and hope for tomorrow (Kester xi). It was "where the new layers of immigrants came, where the free slaves came, where all this hybridity took place, and [which] symbolizes a tenacity in mankind [*sic*] to resist imposed identities and imposed social structures" (Soudien 124). Most people who grew up in District Six seem to have created a group synthesis, which is the unification that results from the coming together of different ideas and influences—hybridity of all sorts. But what happens when the group splits apart and individuals find themselves without that foundation and support of other people in a similar situation as themselves?

Group Syntheses to Individual Identities

There is a southern African proverb I have heard in both Xhosa and Zulu that says, "A person is a person through other persons," poignantly expressing the culture of community and importance of others, differing from the Western value of individualism. I realize I am running a slippery cultural slope here, however I am convinced that without also having a sense of individual identity, which may or may not fit into the social groupings around, a person will have a hard time placing themselves in the world in which they find themselves. I think individual identity becomes especially important for children who may look 'racially' ambiguous, and perhaps do not, like a cookie cutter, fit into an ethnic category. Due to the nature of adolescents as well as adults, there will be many times where they will have a much harder time without self-confidence and a way to identify. Put in a South African context, Leonard Bloom writes, "Apartheid was deeply hostile to individuality,"

imposing a deprived group identity that blocked a personal sense of self from developing, and he stresses that "children only develop a healthy sense of self where society encourages individuality" (Bloom 150-151). This clearly shows that in the individual-societal binary, the society was completely dominating. In individual identity formation, though, we now run into two problems:

1) Identity is perhaps one of the most highly-contested and theoretically-complex concepts to understand when seeking to fuse the conceptual with the lived experiences of people. Identity cannot be described, explained, or categorized" (Gilbert 65).
2) Identity formation relies not only on societies expectation and recognition of the individual; it also depends on the individuals expectations and recognition of society" (Thom and Coetzee 183).

Identity is already complex, and if you add a loss of 'in' group support from a dispersed community and the presence of a rich culturally-mixed background, the individual will struggle. This view is expressed by David Gilbert in his article, "Interrogating Mixed-Race: A Crisis of Ambiguity?" noting that people of 'mixed-race' can be more susceptible to inner conflict and hate due to the ambiguity they find themselves in. This seems to be in conjunction with the first psychological defense stage of capitulation; four models of identifying have been theorized that help people living in the middle of the binary move to the second and third phase, which are choosing to live in one cultural identity, shifting between identities according to the situation, living in the middle with a border identity or opting out of racialized identity altogether (Gilbert 63).

For some people in the Coloured community, these four models become rather useless, because there is not a sense of two distinct cultures to choose from if both parents are coloured and their parents' parents were coloured. In "South Africa's Stepchildren: A Study of Miscegenation," published in 1948, it is made very clear that 'race-mixing' has been happening since day one, to the point now where there is no way to know what exactly a person is 'made of.' It also goes on to say that once a hybrid group forms a significant portion of the population, there is a tendency to push away from the parents' 'races' and start a new group, which is how it says Coloureds came about (Sonnabend 13-14). That being said, however, Erasmus comments more recently on the fact that "coloured identity has never been seen as an identity 'in its own right,' [always being] negatively defined in terms of 'lack'…or excess" (Erasmus 17).

For children of more recent 'mixed-unions,' there would seem to a greater utilization of the four models, however, they may find themselves in a strange

'trinary' where they are not white or black *or* coloured, but may be seen as the last, although their history, culture, and understanding of the world would be as different from a coloured person as from a Mongolian, for example. Wong mentions in her paper entitled, "Exploring Racial Identity in Interracial Relationships," that research shows children of such unions have been growing up more well-adjusted as originally thought, with a stable and healthy sense of their personal 'racial identity' (Wong 6).

Wong delves into how couples construct a new 'couple identity,' especially around race discourse and she found it was the man who was least focused on being 'color blind,' and rather on being 'color aware' or cognizant who seemed to be the most well-adjusted (Wong 24). Although race is a social construction, it has real effects and if the important role race plays in one's life can be acknowledged, there is so much more to gain. The most well-adjusted man said, "you can be very proud of where you come from and your cultural roots, but it doesn't mean that you devalue others" (Wong 24).

Personally if I am living in a world where racial discourse dominates, I also like to see the world as color-full as opposed to color-blind, but there is something to be said to about moving forward from where is person is instead of always feeling a pressure to "find your roots." Diran Adebayo comments on this perfectly, ending this section, "…roots? …I swear, if I had a puff for every time black folks drone on about 'roots this' and 'roots that.' I'm more worried about my branches, you know. It's the branches that bear the fruit and tilt for the sky (Adebayo).

Disunity to Harmony: "For the earth is but one country…"

One of the most important principles in the Bahá'í Faith is the oneness of humanity, shown in the quote, "For the earth is but one country, and humankind its citizens." The theme is written about over and over again, emphasizing the importance of world unity in order for us to advance as a civilization. Along the same lines as the quote by Adebayo, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (pronounced Abdul Baha), the perfect exemplar in the Faith writes,

> "Consider the world of created beings, how varied and diverse they are in species, yet with one sole origin. All the differences that appear are those of outward form and colour. This diversity of type is apparent throughout the whole of nature. Behold a beautiful garden full of flowers, shrubs, and trees. Each flower has a different charm, a peculiar beauty, its own delicious perfume and beautiful colour. The trees too, how varied are they in size, in growth, in foliage—and what different fruits they bear! Yet all these flowers, shrubs and trees spring from the self-same earth, the same sun shines upon them and the same clouds give them rain. So it is with humanity" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 44).

Each of us brings something unique to the world and due to the simple fact that we are different positively affects the quality of both the soil and the experience of those walking through the garden. In that same way, being able to interact and flourish in a diverse environment adds to the betterment of the world.

The Bahá'í Faith was started around 150 years ago when a man named Bahá'u'lláh from Persia became the newest Manifestation of God. His Son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was given the authority to expand on Bahá'u'lláhs words following his death, who I have drawn much information from. The three main Bahá'í principles are Oneness of God, Oneness of Religion, and Oneness of Humanity, and also have a number of other principles, such as equality of men and women, elimination of prejudice of all kind, and essential harmony of science and religion, among others. It is the last one I will be further expounding upon. The science-religion binary has expressed itself as one of the strongest dualisms of the modern age, with the church being pushed back in authority around the early 1800s and science moving in, hailing the age of reason. This gradual shift occurred half a century earlier than Bahá'u'lláh began revealing the messages of God, but when He did, He stressed the absolute need for religion to be in harmony with science, but note that there is a definite difference between the church and religion. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes again,

> There is no contradiction between true religion and science. When a religion is opposed to science it becomes mere superstition; that which is contrary to knowledge is ignorance…All religions teach that we must do good, that we must be generous, sincere, truthful, law-abiding, and faithful; all this is reasonable, and logically the only way in which humanity can progress.

He goes on to say,

> Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's [*sic*] intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism.

And finally,

> Much of the discord and disunion of the world is created by these man-made oppositions and contradictions. If religion were in harmony with science and they walked together, much of the hatred and bitterness now bringing misery to the human race would be at an end ('Abdu'l-Bahá 146-158).

If taking these messages to be true, it would seem we are in a momentous time with the rise of critical psychology and the intense questioning of mainstream psychology where science is discrediting racism and acknowledging human similarities across 'racial' and 'ethnic' lines, and essentially becoming in sync with the religious writings of the Bahá'í Faith. Fanon writes, "We must turn over a new

leaf, develop a new way of thinking, try to create a new Man [*sic*]" (Lebdau 233). A quarter of a century later, Bloom reports that,

> The social boundaries, however, are now beginning to dissolve and to become ambiguous—the Third and Western Worlds. On a cultural level, the Western World is being influenced by the Third World. Technologically, economically and politically, the Third World is more and more tightly integrated within the Western World (Bloom 30).

Progress is being made in both an economic/material sphere as well as a psychological/spiritual sphere. A new "Man" is being created. Ideas and knowledge are being shared, and people are benefiting from one another's diversity. Wong writes that, "interracial families have become important and complex sites for the creation and re-creation of new and hybrid forms of racial, gender, social class, and cultural identities—which blur the boundaries between these social constructs" (Wong 10). The middle of the binaries is crucial in progression.

Conclusion

  In this paper, we have explored Fanon's concept of alienation, tying in Bulhan's three psychological defences or identity developments using the Coloured community as an example of a group that has and continues to be moving in and out of the three defences. The experience of the Coloured community becomes especially interesting because of its unique position between the black-white binary, often discredited as not having an identity at all. Kester, a Coloured man, ties together the section well, emphasizing the need for group synthesis and claiming a voice and presence in the middle of the binary by saying,

> Coloured South Africans must learn to look to the future, to develop their own proud past. They must rise from the evil and ashes of apartheid. Saying that the new South Africa is non-racial is beside the point. It does not mean that coloured people no longer exist. They *do*. We have developed our own unique cultural institutions and ideas over centuries—values which have been unquestionably shaped by our rich African past—which will carry us into liberation and a prosperous future so that the next generation may carry on. Coloured citizens, as citizens of Africa, must begin the 21st century, not from a position of powerlessness, fear or abandonment, but optimism and immense achievement. We must learn to shrug off our colonized past, both internal and external' (Kester xiii).

  We have also investigated the importance of establishing ones own individual identity, even in cultures that diminish the role of the individual in favor of the society. Also identity formation of children of 'racially-mixed' backgrounds was looked at, including the proposition of four models of identifying. Coloured children born to coloured parents are in some racial discourses said to be of a new race, not qualifying the children as 'racially-mixed,' and thus making the four models of identifying rather inapplicable, though for children of two culturally or racially

different parents it makes sense. Identity becomes a sensitive topic that can manifest itself in myriad ways, but is often forced into only a handful of labels. Living in the middle of the individual-society binary, Erasmus writes of coloured identity,

> Coloured identities are distinguished not merely by the fact of borrowing *per se*, but by cultural borrowing and creation under the very specific conditions of creolization. I here use creolization to refer to cultural creativity under conditions of marginality. … Coloured identities are not simply Apartheid labels imposed by whites. They are made and re-made by coloured people themselves in their attempts to give meaning to their everyday lives (Erasmus 16).

Lastly, we looked at the science-religion binary, using the writings of the Bahá'í Faith, which necessitate a harmony of science and religion in understanding the world we live in. The scientific breakdown of race was mentioned along with the rise of critical psychology as bringing science into sync with religion. The coming together of diverse groups of people allows for a better understanding of living in the middle of the binary and creates a new space for people to form an identity. We have much to learn from each other and much to share. We are slowly but surely moving out of a racialized world and paying heed to the message of unity in diversity. I end with the quote, "So powerful is the light of unity that it can illumine the whole earth (Bahá'u'lláh 14).

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