

# Open Channels

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I would like to introduce this article about intercultural dialogue with a brief glance at the theatre. Dialogue between actors on stage is not only about the text spoken; in rehearsals, a scene really begins to work when the actors start to listen to one another because then the *characters* listen and they and their interaction become real.

In fact, only a very small proportion of total communication in any conversation is comprised of the words said, (some studies claim only 7%). Think of the significance of flickering or holding the eyes, facial and hand gestures, posture, shifting, tensing and relaxing the body, breathing, the vocal tone and rhythm. All these aspects communicate information about the person, their feelings and attitude. When considering intercultural dialogue it should not be forgotten that conversation and spoken dialogue always take place between individuals, whether or not they represent designated groups. We all converse both with words and by non-verbal communication. And, as in the theatre, for real dialogue to occur we must also listen.

Cultures embody different codes of conduct. In intercultural interaction mutual knowledge with reference to the other's codes enhances the likelihood that dialogue will be successful (in terms of understanding, whether or not there is agreement). So, which personal qualities propitiate the establishment of dialogue and nurture its development?

Research by Dutch, German and Australian teams has studied what personality traits prove most conducive to good intercultural interaction. Though undertaken in the context of Western subjects working in foreign countries or interacting with immigrant minorities, the researchers claim indications that the study is more widely applicable.

Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven have summarised the large number of intercultural personality characteristics to five dimensions of intercultural effectiveness. These include:

- *Cultural empathy*: the ability to empathise with the feelings, thoughts and behaviours of individuals from a different cultural background.
- *Open-mindedness*: an open and unprejudiced attitude towards different groups and towards different cultural norms and values.
- *Emotional stability*: the tendency to remain calm in stressful situations versus a tendency to show strong emotional reactions under stressful circumstances, i.e. the ability to deal with psychological stress.
- *Social initiative*: the tendency to approach social situations in an active way and to take initiatives.
- *Flexibility*: the tendency to regard new and unknown situations as a challenge and to adjust one's behaviour to the demands of new and unknown situations.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Quoted from "Intercultural Effectiveness Training in Three Western Immigrant Countries: A Cross-Cultural Evaluation of Critical Incidents", S.L. Herfst, J.P. van Oudenhoven and M.E. Timmerman, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 32, 2008, pp. 67-80.

What we are talking about here, I propose, are qualities belonging to psychologically integrated, confident and flexible human beings. The qualities are clearly relevant also to dialogue between different age-groups, social classes, etc. It could be argued that as societies become increasingly complex, it is more urgent that their citizens be given the optimum chance to develop as healthy, resourceful persons, who will thus be better able to contribute to social dialogue, creatively responsive to challenges and less likely to indulge in practices born of rancour such as the identification and rejection of scapegoats.

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Very briefly, in socio-economic and political terms this obviously means that in the first place governments need to prioritise policies that help women and families give infants an emotionally secure start in life, as well as supporting good quality public education that encourages social integration. That said, I will return to questions of psychology and arts education.

From a Western European perspective, modern mass society in many ways militates against psychologically healthy and happy development. As behaviour becomes standardised, cultural content simplified and differences increasingly stratified, possibilities for real interpersonal contact become ever more reduced, or are eliminated. Various qualities defined by Van der Zee and Van Oudernhoven require the use of the imagination. Yet a danger of excessively screen-dependent societies is the interference caused to the neural development of children's brains, damaging image-producing – and therefore imaginative – capabilities (this

also affects the capacity for hope, a keystone of emotional resilience). All of which leads me to argue that arts education is of fundamental importance both for individual and social well-being and for the development of intercultural dialogue.

Without doubt, one of the most effective ways to learn about different cultural codes, to experiment with them, observe one's reactions to them and share between cultures is by means of the collective play available through different artistic disciplines. Arts and arts education offer knowledge of the other and stimulate reflection and emotional development. The practice of an art requires self-discipline and attention, affords satisfaction as challenges are met and overcome, leads to the combination of emotion with rational thought and behaviour. Sharing training, workshops, festivals, performances, exchange of work and dialogue, can provide enjoyable and purposeful intercultural encounters.

Daniel Barenboim, international conductor and pianist, is the founder – together with the late Edward Said – of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra of young Palestinian and Israeli musicians. A passionate advocate of education in music, he said in a recent BBC World Service interview: “Music is not something divorced from the rest of life. Music is there to show us how to understand the world, how to understand ourselves and how to understand human existence. [...] Beethoven's music can be described as cosmic music. It's very important stuff, the same with Shakespeare, these are not just commodities, it's very important stuff.” One aspect Barenboim considers supremely significant about music education is that it teaches, of necessity, to combine both the emotional and the rational. The idea has particular resonance in the context of Barenboim's conviction that the key to change in the Middle East conflict is for Israelis and Palestinians to overcome ignorance about each other.



Percussion Egypt-Israel West-Eastern Divan Orchestra (Tom Fecht, Berlin/London, 2008).

## The Shadow

The consideration of dialogue or conflict between cultures calls for reflection on the psychological mechanism that causes rejection or hatred of “the other”. I refer to the projection of rejected aspects of oneself – what Carl G. Jung called the Shadow – onto another person.

The “ego” exists as an interface between the individual and the world; it provides the organising and defining idea we have of ourselves. As the child establishes modes of functioning – negotiating a balance between innate characteristics, impulses, and accepted behaviour –, the ego takes shape. So too does the unconscious, in part out of aspects of character or emotional responses that are ignored or rejected. The innate cannot be extirpated; instead, repression occurs.

To glimpse, however, that one is plural, contradictory, has conflicting urges, and interests, desires and fears can be profoundly disturbing to the ego which defines itself in terms of what it is not. The ego would so like to be perfect! The more ego rigidity there is, the greater the need to exorcise repressed material, so that from time to time a process of “psychic hygiene” is required; an expression of rejection of that which is repressed and despised. When a powerful dislike charged with strong feeling exists, it is probable that the quality abhorred in the other mirrors one’s own repressed material. The object of projection may share elements of this material, or other details may provide a hook on which to hang the projection.

When a group singles out an individual or a minority group on which to project everyone else’s shadow material, the scapegoat phenomenon is underway. The person or group singled

out is de-humanised because only negative qualities are attributed to them, and it becomes socially acceptable to mistreat them and socially *unacceptable* to attempt to argue rationally about the matter. Bullying in families, at school and work, racism, anti-Semitism and homophobia stem from the same mechanism. I consider education about this subject, given twentieth century history and present demographics, nothing less than a birthright.

Upbringing and education can avoid fomenting severe ego rigidity and rejection of the other in the first place, while increasing emotional maturity leads to the relativisation of ideals and the acceptance of one's imperfections, thus lessening the tendency to project

negative material onto others. Though no panacea for all ills, artistic practices can provide a route to a deeper understanding of self and other.

Art is not a luxury, not an activity of the privileged or the foolish. In Southern France and Northern Spain hundreds of caves shelter astonishing prehistoric art works – painting, engraving, sculpture, carving – some older than 30,000 years. Similarly in Africa and other parts of the world. What songs and stories, too, must these ancestors of ours have had? Art has been a fundamental part of homo sapiens' psyche and societies for so long, perhaps even from the very beginning. How foolish *not* to take it seriously.