Borderline: A Diagnostic Straitjacket?

Marilyn Charles: Paper presented at: *Borderline States of Mind: A Diagnosis for our Times?*, at The Institute of Group Analysis, London, UK, May 5, 2017.

Abstract:

We live in an era in which we are bombarded by information, which requires greater and greater reflective capacity to mindfully organize and integrate it. Opposing that need is the trend towards simplistic 'solutions' to complex dilemmas that threatens to further entrench the intransigence of social problems. Truth, as an inherent value guiding civilized societies, is itself under fire. In such an era, the psychoanalytic lens affords an invaluable tool for the type of understanding needed for creative, respectful engagement with problems in living.

I pose the dilemma in that way so as to take a stand against the language of diagnosis that obscures social problems and makes them even more intransigent. In this presentation, I will discuss some of the ways in which social injustice invites readings of distress and disorder in ways that affirm the social order and undermine individual development. I will also point to ways in which current societal pressures oppose the development of precisely the reflective capacities we need in order to work towards more effective and human solutions to our social problems. I will suggest ways in which the psychoanalytic lens can be usefully applied in our efforts towards alleviating human suffering, using brief clinical material for illustration.

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Lacan talks about this paradox that *"you never look at me from the place I see you"* (1978, p. 91). Beyond the problem of transference, as originally conceived, lies the more fundamental question regarding "the relation between appearance and being" (p. 94) that Lacan discusses through his metaphors of the *sinthome* and the *oblique angle*, the view from the side. I find these notions intriguing because of the inherent mystery entailed in seeing beyond our limits, and also because they recognize the complexity of meaning itself and the crucial relationship between meaning and power.

Psychoanalysis invites a confrontation in which, in the act of seeking assistance, the possibility of one's becoming is subverted *precisely because* of the encounter with the subject who is supposed to know. It is that paradox that must be wrestled with, an encounter that is particularly complicated for marginalized groups, who have been placed as the object of a gaze that is not their own, always in relation to a standard they cannot meet. From that position, it is difficult to advocate for oneself directly without becoming caught in the glare of a light that distorts and distends one's very being, as one is spoken *for* rather than spoken *to*.

We recognize the direction of the gaze that meets or deflects our own. We learn who we are from how we are treated, in line with the values shaping meanings within the culture. To the extent that we can respectfully find ourselves within that discourse, we are left relatively free to flourish but, for those who do not fit, there is a terrible tension between becoming oneself and feeling valued. I find it crucial to face this dilemma head on because of the ease with which our perceptions can become skewed so that we lose sight of precisely that which we had been holding on to, such that we can become further oppressed by our very oppression.

Inundated by information overload, and heightened national and international tensions, we are caught between *increasing* pressures and *decreasing* opportunities for reflection. We seem to have even lost sight of the fact that democracy depends on not just an *informed* citizenry but rather *a citizenry* with the capacity *to think through* the various facts at their disposal, including a recognition of ways in which data – and our understanding of it – is increasingly *managed*. Truth, as an inherent value guiding civilized societies, is *itself* under fire, inviting us to revisit, once again, the work of Hannah Arendt (2003), who reminds us of the perils posed as ideological forces drive behavior over reason, highlighting our dependence on our collective capacities to make use of reflective functions.

At precisely such a moment, we need the lens of psychoanalysis, which marks reflective function as likely the singular most important achievement in human development. Reflective capacities are built on the early relationships with caregivers through which identity is built, along with the capacity to actively make and interchange meanings with others. Klein's work with children deficient in those capacities illustrates the type of primitive defenses often employed by those we call 'borderline'. We can see in her work ways in which such symptoms mark *developmental* failures.

Winnicott (1971), too, invites us to take a developmental view, marking the price of sustaining an idealized illusion at the price of growth. His delineation of the *capacity to use an object* helps us more actively recognize the importance of the *coming into being* of a thinking subject and, concomitantly, the price of *imposing information* rather than providing an environment in which l*earning* might occur.

Bion's attempt to stand aside so that his patients did not get caught in his shadow; Lacan's recognition of the problem of the Authority who is supposed to know; all of these metaphors highlight the urgency of providing spaces in which one might become more firmly oneself amongst

others who may be similar *and* different in important ways, so that limits can be encountered and learning can proceed.

Ironically, in spite of the close tracking of human being and meaning that has informed psychoanalytic theory, hard on the heels has been a shadow that has been both glaring and almost imperceptible because of the devaluing of women and of emotionality that are also part of the heritage of this socially-constructed practice. Freud's valorization of reason through his overt attention to words in some ways belied the very truths he was trying to get to, that were marked in the expressive symptoms of his patients and also in his own dream imagery. We now recognize that there are many truths that are more accessible through the nonverbal channels, particularly those that relate to early experience and to trauma.

We also recognize increasingly that one voice cannot speak for another; that when oppressed groups are spoken for (Kristeva, 1982), abjection is further entrenched. Prejudice, intolerance, and stigma can be relatively invisible. When obscured by social convention, they become what LaCapra (1999) terms *structural traumas*, that are experienced as shameful internal deficits, thereby impeding resolution and inviting, rather, either a false self-construction or a masochistic surrender to an abased identity that *can* be claimed.

In North American culture, the *illusion* of gender equality masks real differences of development, expectations, and societal practice between men and women, casting knowledge, itself, as objective and rational. Failing to recognize ways in which patriarchy imposes itself increases the divide between reason and feeling, and between conscious and less conscious ways of knowing. The gendering of these functions, each so crucial to adaptive capacity and ongoing development, invites disrespect for the more primary ways of knowing associated with the feminine. This

internalized disrespect threatens to leave us disenfranchised from sensory aspects of awareness, including the affective signals so crucial to social development.

The denial of the power of *structural trauma* can exacerbate the impact by personalizing socially constructed oppression, leaving us further entangled. For example, in a seminar in which we were reading a chapter by Shoshana Felman (1993)*,* I was relieved by her struggles to speak - not to a *male* authority - but to her *own* authority. I was impressed by her attempt to offer an opposing view that did not seek to drown out the other, but rather to hold both perspectives in mind and value each as part of a greater whole. Pivotal in her argument was the *affirmation* of *difference between* men and women such that the woman as subject inevitably adds something to the conversation in a way that cannot be superceded by the male voice. The title of the book under discussion – *What Does a Woman Want?* – made the reinsertion of the omitted woman's voice into the conversation particularly noteworthy.

And yet, in striking contrast to my own experience, a young female colleague had a very different reaction, saying,   "It seems to me that this book need not have been written by a woman; It could just as easily have been written by a man." Her position was then affirmed by a senior male voice. I sensed a move towards the elision of difference that made me uneasy.

"No," I insisted, "this could not have been written by a man. Even if a man could have known all of the things Felman is saying, he could not speak as a subject in the same way. It is her position as the subject of the inquiry that gives her voice its authority and its authenticity."

I imagine that my stridency was a bit off-putting, because it was not spoken to but rather disappeared silently, as though participants were politely ignoring a social gaffe. That moment stayed in my mind, however, as an illustration of the difficulty of opening up and speaking to *inconvenient truths* (Charles 2011).

It is always easier to analyze others than to face ourselves, and it can be very difficult to speak from one's own authority, particularly when voices of Authority are in the room, a problem confounded for young women, who at times seem to have a relative blindness to aspects of oppression that still exist. One young colleague who had reliably seen me as tilting at windmills recently acknowledged, with a smile: "I get it now," during a moment when she was faced with her *own* participation in *devaluing herself* to ensure the comfort of a male peer.

The line between accommodation and self-abnegation can be massively unclear. Perhaps, when times are good we can afford to let things slip, but current times demand our best thinking and our active efforts to speak our own truths and to listen to one another, to try to hear what we might be missing.

For me, that moment in the seminar was a pivotal one, helping me to find my way in systems in which there is the voice of Authority and the voice of the Other, and the ostensible Authority can carry such conviction that potentially useful information from others can be trivialized and discarded without reflection or consideration.

This Voice of Authority easily becomes a conjectured projection that cannot be located *or* disconfirmed in actual discourse (Bion, 1961). These projective processes not only impede our ability to hear voices from the margin, but also flatten and hollow out the discourse of those in authority, making it difficult to speak *with* another rather than speaking *for* the other.

Bion (1977) notes the essential relationship between the Establishment and the new idea; how dependent we are upon one another to ensure both stability and growth, and yet, we inevitably struggle against the destabilization that comes with change.

The female voice has *always* been the voice of change in psychoanalysis; the object of a study that includes, occludes, and excludes her. The female voice has become in many ways *the problem* in

psychoanalysis*,* and yet it is also a potential solution, as the language of emotionality and primary experience gain respect and articulation.

Human experience being so much more complex than we can truly comprehend, we develop myths, metaphors, and models; ways of trying to hold the complexity and *also* understand the parts and the ways they fit together. There is always a tension between whatever models we develop, and the need to break into those models so that *inconvenient facts* can be integrated into them.   I would contend that the woman, as Other, often represents the fact that has become inconvenient, the conjecture in the discourse that is broken *because* she is not invited to speak for herself with equal weight to whomever is posing the questions from the outside.

Recognizing this inevitable tension between order and change *problematizes* the conversation that is otherwise difficult to break into precisely *because it makes sense.* The psychoanalyst, then, must *disrupt* the sense in order to invite further exploration. This tension, between whatever is established and the need to break into it so that development can occur, keeps us always off balance, precisely the place where a new perspective might be taken and creativity might emerge.

We can see in current times how a lack of accountability and a lack of shame can carry even the most bald-faced lie forward in ways that are hard to grab hold of. Power *does* tend to corrupt to the extent that there is no accountability, making the ethics of the analyst our most crucial function, as we peer through the layers of our own deceits.

Those we call borderline help us out in that enterprise; they seem to have an uncanny sense for tension or error, instantly drawn to the places where we hide or obfuscate. The sense of transparency thus invited, along with *their* own reactivity, easily strains the clinician. I can well relate to that sense of strain and recognize my own reactivity, my desire to push back against it.

Psychoanalysis gives us useful metaphors for this type of process, so that we can better recognize the press of chaotic and unformulated emotion coming at us, and find ways to think about the feelings thus engendered, so that we might regain an empathic connection with the individual thus tormented. Although projective identification is sometimes spoken of as though something was unjustly being done to *us*, it is also a way of recognizing that we are offered, through the transference/countertransference matrix, an experience-near sense of what it might be like to live in the *other* person's skin. And *we* get to leave at the end of the hour.

Even those with psychoanalytic tools, however, can turn to *diagnosis* as a *barrier* to engagement rather than a means for furthering it. There is always our *own* desire to contend with (Wilson, 2013). I worked with one young woman, for example, during my early years of training, who was profoundly lost in relation to herself but seemed to have great creative potential. Her role in the family was to be used by her parents and brothers as an emotional outlet and sexual object, a pattern she then played out in later relationships as well. My supervisor saw her as 'borderline' in a way that evoked such disparagement and disregard from him that I soon found it difficult to keep her in mind as a whole human being. Fortunately for her, it was clear to me quite quickly that I could not present this case to that supervisor without losing sight of the woman seeking my assistance.

This dilemma haunted her. Like many women, each time she sought refuge in a psychiatric institution, she was rediagnosed with what seemed to be the 'flavour of the month'; borderline, bipolar, histrionic; the diagnoses seemed to cohere more largely as a chronicle of evolving conceptions of the disparagement of bright, creative, struggling young women than affording any useful assistance to the patient. To the contrary, at a certain point, when she had been diagnosed with the then popular Multiple Personality Disorder and put into a group of MPD patients, she

conformed to the expectation and began to organize her understanding of herself along the lines offered. She looked like a bag lady. And she was only 24.

At that point, *I* drew a line. If she wanted to continue our work together, she could no longer check herself into the hospital when she was desperately longing for home. She had to recognize that this 'home' afforded greater destruction than comfort. I think that she needed someone to stand up for her and say "This is not all you are. You are more than this. Please stop torturing yourself in this way and let's try to find respite during difficult times that does not leave you further depleted, fragmented, and estranged from yourself."

Kate had originally introduced herself at the clinic where I worked as a creative person. That characterization was met with more disdain than respect. And yet, it was true. Unfortunately, her early life had left her making *use* of her creativity in ways that undermined her development rather than furthering it, *showing* the troubles she was unable to more fully articulate. Part of this difficulty was that the story she had been offered was so centred on others' needs and feelings rather than her own, that she felt illicit and inauthentic in trying to meet, or advocate for, her own needs or desires. It took many years of hard work for us to make room for Kate to begin to re-discover her potency and potential (see Charles, 2001, for further details of this case). As it turned out, she *was* a creative person, something she was able to bring into fruition in ways that eventually brought her enjoyment, satisfaction, and recognition.

As I think back on those difficult years of our work together, I am most aware of the determination in me that helped me to tolerate what needed to be tolerated in order for Kate to begin to get her bearings and find her way. That is what I try to impart to young people, that our crazy faith in another's potential is often the only bedrock on which a life can be built. Often, that faith requires our ability to face and come to terms with the borderline qualities in ourselves.

The invitation to override and repudiate our own emotionality is countered in the psychoanalytic canon by Bion's (1977) crucial (albeit ambivalent) recognition of *passion* as a marker of importance, so that our reactivity can invite our *interest* rather than merely being suppressed or overridden. In my own family, my passion, my inherent emotionality, was read as a sign of a somewhat despicable vulnerability; at best a concerning lack of the manners that, for me, marked a constraining and inhibiting conventionality. There was always a 'too much' to me that invited censure in ways that made it hard for me to advocate for what I valued, over time inviting self-disrespect for my cowardice and making it hard to know what was even true about me, or how I might take a stand that could, indeed, stand.

I sense that difficulty in many of those we would term borderline: there is at times a lack of a sense of authenticity that can make it difficult to register the legitimacy of any fact or feeling. I recall one young woman who came to me because she had been raped and I knew she had, indeed, been raped but I never believed her when she told me about it. Such moments are critical in reminding us of our uneasy relationships with facts and with feelings, making the psychoanalytic lens, with its relative comfort with the kaleidoscopic nature of psychic reality, a welcome resting place.

I also encounter that difficulty with colleagues who, at times, wonder whether I 'care too much' about my patients and at times turn away from my questions about the integrity of our work, subverting questions of ethical behavior into loyalty issues. This troubling turn away from ethics towards ideology can obscure ways in which even our analytic sensibilities can be turned towards self-protection rather than the pursuit of knowledge. Such a stance also invites us to meet the individualistic, rational standards of patriarchy at the expense of more relational, communal values, through which lens emotions are seen as legitimate aspects of human interaction rather than a mark of failure.

We are all capable of turning on others who are lost and vulnerable as a way of distancing ourselves from their distress. Such distancing is particularly complicated with marginalized social groups, in relation to whose suffering one might otherwise feel oneself implicated. Along with the demonization of women and feelings, there is a splitting at the level of culture that invites us to not-see ways in which we are implicated in ongoing abjecting processes. The legacies of slavery in the US, or of the destruction of indigenous cultures, or current demonization of immigrants, are just a few instances of ways in which cultural blind spots can allow atrocities to occur, and then also invite us to fail to recognize the sequelae. These failures have in common an elision of the ways in which abjection becomes embodied and therefore cannot be repaired without attention to the logic of embodied meanings (Fanon, 1952/2008; Hook, 2012)

Because of my own difficulties in speaking or even knowing my own mind under pressure, I am sensitive to the plight of marginalized groups whose truths are countered by the majority culture. Such marginalization invites abjection at the group level, which is experienced as shame by the individual, impeding the ability to speak or to advocate effectively for oneself. We then call those with no power to speak directly 'manipulative' and delegitimize their efforts to be heard. Such entrenched systems of oppression can be relentless, inhibiting development and even driving people mad (Charles, in press). The borderline resolution, from one perspective, can be seen as a stand against madness, in that the splitting enables some relationship with the nascent potential self.

In many ways, 'borderline' can be seen as the modern-day equivalent of 'hysteria'; a deprecating devaluing of subverted truths that speak both of women's suffering and also of the ways in which they have become silenced. Current culture, with its less finely-drawn gender lines, lets us see that hysteria and borderline were never so much about women but rather about a devalued place afforded to feelings in the social structure. When I got married, the one promise I wanted from

my husband was that he never allow me to be locked up. Such was the uncertainty in the early 70's

as to whether a woman might or might not be in charge of her own being and meaning.

Times have changed; I have become one of the 'doctors' who can make such decisions, and I

work in a psychoanalytic psychiatric hospital, where there is profound appreciation for the

complexities of human experience. And yet, the term 'borderline' is still often uttered in a way that

marks, not just the reciprocal difficulty of trying to work with someone so waylaid in their

development, but also that subtler underbelly, a lack of respect for the sufferer, herself.

On my treatment team, I work very hard, as do others, to reposition the story when it has

gone awry, to remind ourselves of the developmental difficulties of whoever is most exasperating us.

Otherwise, the 'truth' of *our* experience can belie that of the other. The power imbalance in such

situations makes it *imperative* to be able to be *most* interested in the messages that are *hardest* for

us to hear, particularly as we move towards increasingly simplistic ideas of diagnosis and 'cure' that

threaten to make human experience irrelevant.

In this era of increasingly constricting 'standards,' it is easy for those standards to become

loosed from their moorings, making them, paradoxically, harder and harder to attain because the

foundations have fallen into disuse or gone missing. We are at such a crossroads in western culture,

where the pressures and values driving us have pushed parents away from providing the basic,

moment by moment interactions with their young children through which a secure identity might be

built. More and more, our institutions are moving towards demanding standards of *accomplishment*

rather than making sure that our children are able to learn, building the reflective functions so crucial

to well-being and constructive action. Sleight of hand is everywhere.

It is in those early interactions that the capacities for self-regulation are built, the very

capacities that, when underdeveloped, result in diagnoses such as 'borderline'. We seem to be

moving towards systems of diagnosis and treatment that bypass any in-depth understanding of human development, rather treating people as though disorder and disease must be integral to the individual's physiology. Locating deficiency in the wrong place makes it very difficult to work with, resulting in more and more extreme efforts at so-called 'solutions'. At the extreme, individuals who are diagnosed as borderline, and fail to respond to traditional treatments, are given ECT, even though such treatment is explicitly countermanded in medical texts, and therefore become, in effect, a punishment for failing to benefit from what has been offered, continuing a terrible trend in psychiatric treatment that threatens to become invisible in each generation because of whatever we fail to see.

Psychoanalysis reminds us that we *all* are, inevitably, ambivalent, driven by both conscious and unconscious forces. That lens invites us to look more closely at *ourselves*, rather than locating problems in others, and to try to catch ourselves in a moment of impulsive action so that we might, then, *think* about what is motivating us, including the social forces and other group pressures that can drive group behavior invisibly and virulently.

Those we call borderline have had their development thwarted and subverted such that their power erupts indirectly in ways that invite intense reactivity. The developmental need to assert oneself as the proper subject of the conversation is thus opposed and the tension mounts. That was certainly the case with Val, who found herself recurrently at the border of what she and the hospital could manage. If you think about child development, and the need for the child to be able to come up against the edges and feel safe but also recognized, then it is hardly surprising that Val would have tested us at every turn. What staff saw as efforts to safeguard her well-being, Val saw as outrageous intrusions into her privacy. Her terror, which *we read* as contempt, made it difficult to have conversations in which two sides could be heard and reflected on.

Although there was always truth in her perspective, that truth was so embedded in her own needs and limits, without sufficient recognition of whatever might also be true from another perspective, that attempts at conversation often ended in massive failures. Inevitably, we found ourselves reenacting the family drama in which the parents were unable to register her distress, empathically reflect on it, and ease it. In retrospect, I see many of the crises that occurred as somewhat blind attempts to hold Val to standards *she was not yet capable of meeting*, rather than meeting *her* more empathically, *from the place where she was actually functioning*, and acknowledging the gaps.

To open up that potential space with those for whom hope has been an unrelenting trap, and home a place of dangerously empty eyes, I find it useful to think of transference in relation to the greater complexity of Lacan's (1974-5) Borromean knot, the ways in which experience, mind, and culture have conditioned meanings for *that* individual.

In the face of this multiplicity, we work to cohere a usable sense of agency and identity, and offer the world a view of ourselves that is in line with how we would like to be seen. We then stumble over the gaps between what we offer and the other perspective that is inevitably not one's own. Although she finds it difficult to have me know something she does not yet know, Val suspects that my perspective can *open up* her own, if only she can tolerate it. She reaches for it, to hold it side by side with whatever is already known. In putting the fragments together, there is the possibility of growth.

Bion (1977) locates the Oedipal dilemma in the desire to turn a blind eye, directing our attention towards that essential choice between growth and evasion that is always in play. Although I am often frightened of inviting her contempt and reactivity, Val is also delighted to find someone who can see her, even though she might wince at times or even become overwhelmed by dysphoric

emotion at what has been revealed. The desire for connection is so strong, however, that she works to tolerate the dysregulation that accompanies greater self-knowledge.

I think we need be very cautious in this medicalized and increasingly rigid, constricting, and dichotomizing world, in which we might cut off precisely the nascent creativity that might, ultimately, save us from ourselves, if we can set our fear to the side and try to stand on the side of hope and possibility, and listen to the voices that are hardest for us to hear.

I remember one stunning moment with Val. She had been intently trying to communicate to me the abhorrent illegitimacy of another young person who blasted her with invective attacks whenever she entered the room. It was as though if I understood the illegitimacy of his behaviour and the harm it caused, I would, of course, stop it.

Suddenly, though, she realized that I *did* get it and I would *not* stop it, though I might call him on it when I could, just as she had done. That moment marked her passage into a new position in the world, one in which her judgements could stand to the extent that *she* could stand *by* them. From that position, she could think about how to proceed in a world in which others might or might not agree with her, even when reason was on her side.

Even more recently, Val told me she had been jarred by a remark I had made the previous day. That it made her angry but was probably good for her. I had trouble understanding what she was alluding to, and as we tried to meet one another, the intensity of the affect raised. There is something about how careful I am with her, to not get too far ahead, that left me, in this particular moment, too far behind. She was speaking both of and across the splits in herself, both wanting to hide and also assuming I would see. She was trying to communicate how inside-out it can feel to even communicate openly. Speaking about herself from that place feels like the wrong thing to do because the brave thing has always been to be alone. When I had told her the previous day that I

thought she was being brave in investigating territory that had been off-limits in her family, she had been angry because it felt like I was discounting how she *always* tries to do the brave thing. In that moment, there was no way to bridge her *own* discontinuity.

In retrospect, I can see how I get caught between the imposing adult and the child. I talk to the adult and she finds me hopelessly abstract, which then makes me more tense, which only compounds the problem. Fortunately, knowing we have weathered these storms before helps us survive it, but the enormity of the split she is grappling with is, in such moments, stunningly apparent. I could see her recognition of the ways in which everything is inside out, such that what she has most relied on has been what most denies her. But she returns, and we are back into the dance in which we continue to integrate her reality with mine, in her continual efforts to assert her own truth, and her need to be able to put that truth into context so that she can live in a world with people who have varying capacities and viewpoints.

I think of these moments as movements into a more mature adulthood, where we are faced, once again, as we were in childhood, with the problem and the promise of other people's minds. From this perspective, the borderline we are traversing is one that marks, not psychopathology, but rather our progress on a developmental journey, a journey that marks our common humanity and our interdependence upon one another.

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