

# Watch Out for the Big Other!

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*(Bolstered by Soren Kirkegaard's lament that "ours is a paltry age because it lacks passion," Dr. Alan Karbelnig writes this regular column to provoke thoughtful reaction from his SGVPA colleagues. He has been a member of SGVPA since 1988, and served as its president in the early 1990s; he has chaired the SGVPA Ethics Committee for 14 years. Alan is a Training and Supervising psychoanalyst at the New Center for Psychoanalysis and the Newport Psychoanalytic Institute. He practices psychoanalytic psychotherapy and forensic psychology in South Pasadena.)*

As if finding true individuality weren't difficult enough, Derrida, Foucault, and other post-modernists make discovery of the "real you" near-impossible. They suggest that individuality cannot exist free from the influence of the "other." The search for individuality, however intense, requires an equally passionate understanding of what French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan terms the "Big Other" – a subtle set of rules, encoded in language, encoded in the culture, that influences how we view self and other. The Big Other manifests like an over-riding internal object, similar to the Freudian superego, but bigger, more diffuse, more subtle, and more a function of culture.

In the world of object relations, the concept of a "dynamic structure" speaks to the same phenomenon, but on a smaller scale. W.R.D. Fairbairn, the Scottish psychoanalyst who proposed this unique idea, believed that representations of self are always linked with representations of other. If we feel proud of our work after a particular psychotherapy session, "internal objects" applaud while parts of our "egos" or selves experience a feeling of success. The concept of the dynamic structure was a key development in the history of psychoanalysis, but does not go far enough because it ignores culture.

The Big Other incorporates culture, or even God, and affects us in any number of positive or negative ways. For example, the Big Other beckons unknowingly when someone reaches out to shake our hand, and we reach out ours in return. The Big Other lies behind any number of ethical behaviors, from making coffee for our suitemates to calling them when patients appear in the waiting room at the wrong time. Derrida considers God to be the "transcendent signifier" or the ultimate "Big Other." If we resist our impulse to murder our suitemate, we are likely responding to an injunction, as Derrida would say, from the Big Other.

Now the Big Other also influences behavior in less positive ways. It motivates us to purchase unneeded items because of a shared cultural belief that we'll feel more fulfilled after doing so. It may cause us to feel irresistibly drawn to eat at a new restaurant, or see a particular movie, just because we've heard "critics" or friends rave about them. (Critics themselves, who are nothing more than other individuals, serve a powerful if absurd Big Other function).

But the presence of the Big Other may be way more subtle and unpredictable. At a recent holiday open-house, a colleague whom I'll call Jonah found himself talking to a female of easy wit and sparkle. Despite his staunch commitment to marital rectitude – he is, as some would say, very married – he was irresistibly, passionately, dangerously drawn to this enchanting woman who was not his wife. But

suddenly Jonah crashed to earth. Not because he recovered his sense of propriety or moral equilibrium. No. The encounter terminated when the future love of the rest of his life announced that she was building a second home in Boston – a city Jonah despises with mythic, pathological loathing. He clings to this deranged repugnance for a city that's no more or less hateful than any other city or town. Here the Big Other manifests as Boston, and in an immense way. Reeling with alienation, Jonah abandoned his ex-future-wife and headed for the wine table (which promised yet another Big Other experience).

The Big Other will always exist, in one form or another, and will always play a major role in our behavior. Individuality can only be found nested within it. But interior "Bostons" can also be stifling (even though, ironically, Jonah's Boston may have saved his marriage!). Such versions of Big Others inhibit us, create anxiety, confusion, ambivalence. They block the path towards authenticity; they prevent us from heeding the Greek poet Pindar's injunction to "be who we are." We must keep searching for individuality anyway. After all, no one from the ancient Greeks to those French postmodern guys ever said this crazy search for self was for the faint of heart.