

Review of the Documentary Series "In Therapy – Celebrities Laid Bare"

By Steph Riddle

A new television series, "In Therapy", which aired on Channel 5 in June/July 2016, provides a rare 'inside view' of the world of psychotherapy and counselling. Each episode focuses on a different celebrity client (Daniella Westbrook, Gemma Collins, Katie Price), working with therapists Mandy Saligari and Claudia Bernat. The programme breaks new ground because, while there have been some brilliant portrayals of therapy on film and television ("A Dangerous Method", "The Sopranos", "In Treatment"), these have normally been fictional. It is very rare to see examples of real psychotherapy on screen.

So, I was excited to discover this series, but also a little nervous and uneasy, too. Psychotherapy usually takes place in conditions of strict privacy and confidentiality. We know that the therapist is trained not to 'judge', or at least to judge in a compassionate and thoughtful way. Clients in therapy can sometimes feel safe enough to bare their innermost thoughts and feelings, knowing that these will never be passed on to anyone else. They can expect therapists to be non-judgemental, empathic and compassionate, however unacceptable their thoughts and feelings may seem to be. This is one of the big differences between talking to a friend and talking to a therapist - that therapists have spent considerable time in their training becoming aware of and reflecting on their own tendencies for judgement and reactivity. In person-centred counselling, for example, following Carl Rogers, therapists try to provide the core conditions of empathy, acceptance and congruence. All therapists of whatever orientation try to provide such a safe space through a non-judgemental presence, although, of course, the reality between two humans is always more complex. But usually that safe space depends upon privacy and non-exposure. So, hearing that these celebrities (human beings, after all) had agreed to have their therapy sessions shown on television, made me feel protective and concerned for them. I feared that they would be over-exposed, 'laid bare', exploited. I wondered: Can therapy without privacy ever be therapeutic?

Part of the answer to this question lies in the obvious fact that public exposure is nothing new to 'celebrities' – in fact, it defines their relationship to the world around them. They are constantly watched, judged and commented on, through the mainstream and social media. Also, the way that they are seen is very objectifying and polarised (extreme). They are idealised/ demonised, admired/ denigrated, put on a pedestal/ shamed. At the same time, the real person underneath is hidden and unseen. It may, in fact, feel like the real person underneath is getting no attention at all. So, by choosing to do therapy 'in public', I believe that these women are

expressing a need to be really seen, understood and accepted as themselves – as the complex, unique and contradictory mix that we all ultimately are.

Criticism and Judgment

The issue of public criticism and judgment was really at the forefront in the Daniella Westbrook sessions with therapist Mandy Saligari. It started well, with Saligari talking about her own personal history of addiction and recovery, which was effective in creating a sense of equality and trust between herself and Daniella. However, things took an about turn when Daniella was late for her second session and Saligari was quite persistent in challenging her about her lateness and its psychological causes. She used a lot of psychotherapy jargon such as “shame-based personality”, which seemed to make Daniella feel criticised and patronised. The tension built between them, with Saligari using more and more jargon and Daniella using increasingly hostile language and expletives. At the height of the tension, Daniella said:

“You are talking down to me and I don’t really appreciate it...you are taking the piss out of me...Do you want to just sit here and pull me apart? Do you want to take a ticket and join the queue with the rest of the country, cause I don’t give two f**ks...”

So now the issue of public denigration was really on the table. What was happening in the therapy was reproducing Daniella’s experience of being criticised and shamed by an unforgiving public and media. At this point in the programme, I was also anxious for the therapist. Had she forgotten to listen, getting bogged down in therapy jargon? Or perhaps she was being deliberately provocative, in order to bring Daniella’s anger to the surface? Either way, it seemed to be a tense moment for client, therapist, and audience alike.

Rupture and Repair

What happened next was that Daniella walked out of the session in tears. Rather than this being the end of therapy, however, this proved to be the crucial turning point. Sometime later, she decided to return to talk things through. Then, something wonderful and genuinely healing happened. In therapeutic terms, this is called ‘rupture and repair’, and it is a fundamental aspect of effective therapy. It means that if conflict ‘erupts’ in therapy and you manage to resolve it, this becomes part of the healing process. You are actually better off than if the argument, conflict or problem had never happened. This is because the conflicts we have with our

therapist tend to re-enact or 'mirror' the relationship problems we have in the rest of our life. So, in healing our relationship with our therapist, we are healing ourselves and our other relationships as well.

The Healing Moment

In repairing her rupture with Daniella, I think Mandy Saligari made one brilliant comment which, more than anything else, helped to turn the therapy around. She likened Daniella to a cobra, which rises very suddenly to the slightest provocation:

"That's what cobras do... (they are) ready to attack, because that's their defence. Because if they don't do that, they'll get eaten."

Somehow, this reached Daniella. She recognised herself. She had a lightbulb moment. You could hear the drop of recognition in her voice, as she said slowly:

"Yeah, that's me."

She was then able to identify where her cobra-like behaviour comes from. She spoke about how, as a child in the entertainment industry, she had been sexually abused – by multiple people, multiple times. Never safe, she had created an aggressive, extraverted, party-girl persona, and used drugs to numb the pain.

The atmosphere in the therapy had now changed to something completely new. Hostility was replaced by thoughtfulness, seriousness, and a very palpable sadness. Daniella began to talk about what she was like before she was famous. She described herself as,

"That child that I've put away, adventurous—fun—happy—excited—excitable person that's loving and trusting."

In this way, in her completely non-confidential, televised, public therapy, Daniella was able to tell the world something about her real self. And while some people might be sceptical, thinking that because this was on TV it was all for show, my gut instinct told me that it was real.

A new start

When we start to speak the truth in therapy, what's in our hearts, it can open us up to a new beginning. Daniella put it like this:

"It feels really raw to me but at the same time I can see a whole life that I could have. You have changed my life."

When we open ourselves to being vulnerable there is, of course, the possibility of being attacked. However, there is also a chance of being understood and, from my experience with this programme, I can see that, for 'celebrities' doing therapy on TV, there is a chance of being humanised. When we can be known for the complex person we really are, who is not good or bad, strong or weak, admirable or pitiful but a constantly shifting mix-up of shades-of-grey humanness, then we are on the path to greater closeness with others, and self-acceptance.

The In Therapy series has really challenged my thinking around confidentiality and privacy in psychotherapy. It provides a model of how, under certain circumstances, there could be benefits to bringing therapeutic processes into a more public setting - especially where the client's woundedness partially concerns their relationship to the world at large. And yet, it is for good reason that confidentiality is so fundamental to the training of psychotherapists and counsellors, and to the codes of ethics we practise under. For many clients, the assurance of confidentiality is essential to their willingness to trust and participate in the process. So, can therapy without privacy every be therapeutic....? My cautious answer to this question would be "Yes, sometimes!"

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