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ARTICLE



Plural selves, queer, and comics

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how comics and other graphic formats constitute a useful means for people to explore and articulate experiences of plurality. First the literature on plural selves is presented, drawing from therapeutic and self-help work around exploring and embracing one's inner parts (children, critics, parents, alter egos, etc). This is linked with mad pride movements to reclaim pathologising psychiatric diagnosis like Dissociative Identity Disorder (previously Multiple Personality Disorder). This is then linked to queer theoretical and activist perspectives by considering how depathologising plurality follows similar endeavours in relation to (homo)sexuality, kink, and (trans)gender. Plurality of self is related to the wider queer endeavour of challenging stable, fixed identities and critiquing neoliberal capitalist individualistic ways of comprehending the self. Finally, comics and graphic formats are reflected upon as one key potential way for people to explore their own plurality and to articulate their plural experiences to close others and wider audiences. Examples are provided of the author's own comics and zines in this area.

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The idea that people may experience themselves as plural rather than singular has a long history in psychology, psychiatry, and psychotherapy (Rowan and Cooper 1998; Butt 2003; Schwartz and Sweezy 2019). Mainstream psychiatric approaches have historically pathologized plural experience under diagnostic labels like Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD) and Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), and have developed 'treatments' often with the aim of moving people towards a singular norm, or integration as unified self. At the same time, approaches such as Personal Construct Psychology and Transpersonal Psychotherapy have proposed that most – if not all – people experience themselves as plural to some extent, and that exploring this plurality, rather than ignoring or resisting it, could be a valuable therapeutic, spiritual, and/or political endeavour.

These radically different approaches to plural experience can be seen as analogous to the historical treatment of homosexuality and transgender experience. On the one hand, mainstream medicine regards gay and trans people as having minority, abnormal identities that should be treated in order to bring them in line with the cultural (hetero)norm. On the other hand, researchers, activists, and therapists over the same time period point out that human sexuality and gender are diverse not binary, with all of us residing somewhere on a spectrum (or multiple spectrums) of sexual attraction and

gender experience (Barker and Iantaffi 2019). Such writers also suggest that embracing this diversity, and exploring our sexualities and genders in an open way, is useful personally and politically (see Iantaffi and Barker 2017). As with gay rights, trans rights – and the wider mad pride and mental health survivor movements – there is a current movement towards gaining rights, recognition, and pride for those who experience themselves as plural (see Spandler and Barker 2016). Plural activists call for less stigmatising media representations, greater public awareness, and non-pathologization of those who experience themselves as systems, for example (Plural Positivity 2019; The Redwoods 2019). In this essay, I introduce the idea of plurality in more detail, including its relationship to mental health and to queerness, gender, and sexuality. I then outline how comics are a useful medium to articulate these ideas to others, and explore plurality in therapeutic ways through personal experience.

What is plurality?

Plurality is an umbrella term for any way in which people experience themselves as different selves, parts, or states at different times. Some may use the word multiplicity to capture the same idea. One version of this that has become part of common understanding is the idea that we have an ‘inner critic’ side who tells us we’re not good enough and should do better. Another popularly understood version of plurality is the idea of an ‘inner child’ and/or ‘inner parent’ (Peyton 2017).

People often find it easiest to recognise plurality in themselves when they reflect on how they behave in different relationships or situations. Trevor Butt’s (2003) research found that most people experience and express quite different character traits with different people in their lives, despite retaining a sense that they were ‘being themselves’ in all those relationships. For example, a person might be mostly serious, quiet, and intellectual with one friend or family member, and mostly humorous, outgoing, and emotionally open with another. We might also reflect on the sides of us who emerge when working, socialising, in conflict, in crisis, or going to bed at night (see Barker 2018a).

How does plurality relate to mental health?

Popular media depictions of plural experience are typically seen in the context of mental health. Films like *Sybil*; *Fight Club*; *Me, Myself and Irene*; *Identity*; and *Split*, as well as TV shows like *United States of Tara*, represent people with plural experience purely in a mental health context. Such characters are depicted as mad – and often also as bad – with one or more alter-egos who are violent and/or evil. It goes without saying that this is part of broader tropes which pathologize non-normative experiences of all kinds as ‘mad’ (Vossler et al. 2017) and view disabled people of all kinds as responsible for their disabilities. This common practice ascribes to the moral model of disability (Clare 2001).

The American Psychiatric Association (2013) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5* (DSM-5) now uses the term Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) for plural experience rather than Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD). DID is diagnosed if a person has two or more distinct identities or personality states, each with its own relatively enduring pattern of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the world and the self. To be

diagnosed, the person must also experience dissociation – or forgetting – when in different states, and the experience must impact them adversely. It's estimated that around 1–3% of people are diagnosable with DID. DID is theorised to be rooted in childhood trauma where people split off parts of themselves in order to survive; these parts hold the trauma in order to protect the whole (Howell 2011).

An alternative approach to plurality can be found in the work of therapists and authors such as Hal and Sidra Stone in the US (Stone 2011; Stone and Stone 2011), and John Rowan and Mick Cooper in the UK (Rowan 2013; Rowan and Cooper 1998). They propose that we're all plural rather than singular, and put forward therapeutic techniques for engaging with the different sides of ourselves such as voice dialogue – bringing different selves into conversation through talking – or journaling. In such work, the goal is not integration or becoming a singular self; rather it's improving communication between the different selves. The aim is that these selves can come to understand each other and work better as part of a team or constellation. This is similar to how systemic therapy works with a family system.

It may be more useful to view the various elements of plurality as on a number of spectrums, rather than as a binary between those (assumed majority) who have 'normal' singular experience and those (assumed minority) who have 'abnormal' DID. For example, we may all locate ourselves on spectrums of:

- How coherent/unified to diverse/plural we experience ourselves to be
- How muted to vivid our experience of our different selves, alters, or subpersonalities is
- How separate to overlapping these different parts are
- How much we do, or don't, experience dissociation, or forgetting, between the times when different parts of us are brought to the fore (fronting)
- To what extent our plurality is rooted in traumatic experience, and/or the extent of the trauma that we've experienced

On this latter point, both pathologizing and affirmative approaches are united in seeing a key role of trauma in our experiences of plurality. The therapist-authors mentioned previously all suggest that plurality occurs because we disown parts of ourselves when we find that they are disapproved of – or punished by – the world around us. However, more affirmative approaches propose that this is something that we all do as a response to linked personal and/or cultural trauma. For example, parental messages and school bullying give children a clear sense of what is acceptable or not, often reproducing wider cultural messages about what is currently considered appropriate behaviour for someone of a certain gender, race, or class. As Barker and Iantaffi (2019) suggest, this can be regarded as a form of intergenerational trauma whereby damaging cultural norms and ideals are passed on from adults to children. Trauma-based understandings – located as they are in the body – also help explain how plurality can be felt so viscerally with different selves having quite different embodiments: posture, gait, speech, facial expression, and so on (Van der Kolk 2015).

Plural selves theory suggests that rather than disappearing, the parts of ourselves that we disown remain present under the surface, and that the useful thing to do is to reclaim them, embrace them, and communicate between them. This can be a challenging process,

however, given that they are often the vulnerable/hurt or unacceptable/frightening parts of ourselves that we have repressed in order to survive and gain approval from others.

How does plurality relate to queer gender and/or sexuality?

Another way into plurality – in addition to the pathologizing psychiatric approach and the more affirming humanistic/psychodynamic therapeutic approach – can be found in queer theory and queer activism. Queer approaches challenge the straight/gay and man/woman hierarchical binaries that structure our current sexuality and gender understandings, interrogating the power dynamics underlying such binaries and who these serve (Barker and Scheele 2016). Queer approaches run counter to ‘identity politics’ understandings and approaches to sexuality and gender, which strive to explain the existence of people with ‘minority’ sexualities and genders, and help them gain legal recognition, human rights, and access to institutions that the ‘majority’ have access to. Queer approaches challenge the idea that there *is* any gender or sexuality ‘norm,’ and question whether current cultural ideas of what it is to have a normal life are anything to aspire to anyway.

Queer thinkers question the whole notion that we have a fixed identity when it comes to sexuality or gender, and the accompanying sense that this is an important feature of who we are. They point out that this way of seeing things only came into being in the 19th century and that – prior to then – sexuality and gender were far more things we *did* than people we *were* or identities we *had*. Many take the queer critique of identity further, arguing that the whole sense of a person as having a fixed, stable identity is a recent invention related to urbanisation and capitalism (Rose 1990). So, the very idea that people are plural rather than singular and ever-changing and fluid rather than fixed could be regarded as a particularly queer way of understanding the self. From a queer perspective, singularity and fixedness would be the stories of the self that we might challenge as problematic, rooted as they are in a pathological wider cultural worldview that requires us to categorise people as distinct individual units in order to justify valuing some lives and bodies more highly than others.

Plurality also relates to gender and sexuality in some more explicit ways. First, there are overlaps between plural and trans/non-binary experience. Many (but not all) plural people have selves of different genders, and often ages too. Many (but not all) non-binary trans people, particularly those who experience themselves as bigender, pangender, or gender fluid, experience themselves as having different genders at different times (Richards, Bouman, and Barker 2017). Similarly, in relation to sexuality, some (but not all) bisexual, polyamorous, and kinky people recognise different sides of themselves in relationship with people of different genders, with different partners, or in different kinds of play (submissive and dominant, for example).

The erotic can also be one avenue into recognising and working/playing with our plurality. It seems that when we split off or disown parts of ourselves, they often remain in the realms of fantasy, imagination, and dreams. An obvious example is a child having an imaginary friend, who may well represent aspects of themselves that they’ve been taught they shouldn’t express. One key root into exploring my plurality came when I recognised that a familiar cast of characters showed up in my fantasies over the years. Later, when I applied the idea from dream analysis that all things in our dreams represent

aspects of ourselves, I recognised that these fantasy characters mapped onto my own plural selves. I have since used erotic fantasy and fiction as one key way to better understand and discover these selves and to bring them into communication with each of the others. This approach applies the psychodynamic therapeutic view that all aspects of dreams represent parts of ourselves to erotic fantasy (Barker and Hancock 2017). It suggests that fantasy figures may represent and foreground disowned parts of ourselves, given the links many have drawn between erotic fantasy and experiences of trauma and shame (Morin 1995; Kahr 2006). Potentially, the parts we imagine ‘being’ represented are more foregrounded selves, and the parts we imagine ‘having’ more disowned selves.

Using comics to articulate and explore plurality

In addition to erotic fiction and memoir, the ongoing creative project that I have used to explore plurality is the creation of comics and zines. Broadly speaking, you could divide this work into two forms:

- That which is about articulating plural understandings to an audience of people who might find it useful to work with themselves, or to gain a better understanding of the plural people in their lives.
- That which is about exploring my own experience of plurality in a way that’s personally therapeutic, helping me to get to know – and to communicate between – my selves better.

However, there is overlap between these two forms. The former is often personally helpful because it’s a way of affirming my experience as valid, and connecting with other people through it. The latter form is also a way of articulating plural experience to others in ways that may resonate with them, help them to understand it better, or suggest ways that they might also do this kind of work/play themselves.

In addition to producing published graphic non-fiction like *Queer: A Graphic History* (Barker and Scheele 2016) and *Gender: A Graphic Guide* (Barker and Scheele 2019), I enjoy creating my own free zines on various concepts and practices which can be personally and politically useful. My *Plural Selves* zine is an example of a project articulating plural ideas to a general audience (Barker 2017). The illustrated zine format of pictures and few words per page hopefully makes these ideas accessible to those who would struggle to read a whole book – or even a long written blog post (Barker 2019) – on the subject, whether due to disability, neurodiversity, or discomfort with such mediums. All the zines are also made freely available through my website, making them financially accessible.

Plural Selves takes the reader through the concept of plurality, explaining key ideas and practices. Figures 1 and 2 are two pages from the zine that illustrate the importance of plural selves working together.

These pages take Miller Mair’s (1977) classic metaphor of the community of self as the crew of the ship and illustrate what such a crew/ship might look like if it was functioning more or less well. Playful reference to maritime movies in the form of the cutaway sailing ship image and a quote from the well-known film *Master and Commander* help to locate the reader in something familiar, and (hopefully) engage them with some humour.



Figure 1. Plural selves zine – crew working together.

Hopefully, the intriguing visuals then prompt the reader to consider whether they may have given certain sides of themselves too much power, or hidden or overly punished other selves (as in Figure 1). The images also encourage them to reflect on what the more open forms of communication between these sides, depicted in Figure 2, might involve for them.

Characters based on two of my own selves narrate the zine, in order to normalise this approach for the reader. If I am comfortable talking from my separate selves hopefully, then they might be as well. A playful back-and-forth between these characters through the pages draws the reader through the zine as their relationship unfolds. Later, these



Figure 2. Plural selves zine – crew not working together.

pages are picked up when the characters illustrate – on themselves – a number of practices that the reader could use to identify their own plural selves, and bring them into better communication – or greater co-consciousness – working together as a team.

I have also used comics to explore and work with my own plurality in a number of ways over the years. Early on – before I had such a vivid sense of my own selves – I explored the idea of time-travel comics where we can bring past, present, and/or future selves into dialogue. For example, the comic in [Figures 3](#) and [4](#) makes connections between childhood and adult emotional experiences, and enables the adult to care for the child in a way that did not happen at the time. This kind of time-travelling is akin to many forms of trauma therapy which involve revisiting situations in your past with a gentle witnessing part of yourself to communicate with the traumatised past self (Penley 1997).



Figure 3. Time travel comic part 1.



Figure 4. Time travel comic part 2.

More recently, I've been working on a series of comics that explores where each of my selves gets stuck: the situations that they find difficult and the survival strategies that they learnt to deal with these. In a sense, this is also a form of time-travel as it is about returning to the traumatic experiences that led to each self being disowned, or foregrounded, in the first place. Where the first half of each of these comics explains the place this particular self became stuck, the second part imagines how the other selves could intervene to help them become unstuck, or to shift the patterns that are now causing them pain. For example, the image below is from the first of these comics, 'Chalk Board,' (Barker, 2018c) where the warrior-protector self comes in to help a vulnerable child self out of the place where he has become stuck. In this case, the stuck place is visualised as a huge room full of chalkboards where this child has been imprisoned. He has written equations on all of the boards in an attempt to figure out how to please others when the rules for how to do this become increasingly complex and contradictory. As with the sailing ship earlier, the chalkboard full of complex equations is a familiar visual image that helps readers locate the character and hopefully relate to him.

Of course, comics are not the only creative medium for this kind of work. The plural selves zine explores many alternative ways in which people can explore their selves, including musical playlists, Pinterest boards, physical activity, and more. However, comics are a particularly valuable medium when it comes to exploring and explaining mental health (Barker, de Lappe, and Walters 2015) and this certainly applies in the area of plurality. Many systems use artwork and comics to depict themselves and their experiences (e.g. MacCormack, nd; Riesman 2019). Visually depicting our selves enables us to tune into our embodied sense when one side of us feels particularly present, and then to draw how that self appears: the way they hold themselves, facial expression, physique, clothing, etc. Once we have an image of them, it is often easier to imagine them in fantasy or visualisation, and to embody them when we feel their presence. This more vivid sense of each self and capacity to embody them is useful for improving communication between the selves (Figures 1 and 2), time-travelling (Figures 3 and 4), and finding ways of supporting each other (Figure 5). We may do

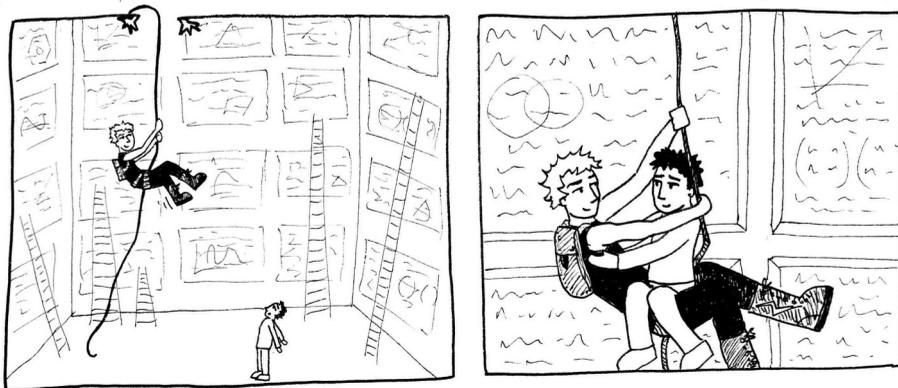


Figure 5. Chalkboard comic.

these things in visualisation, by talking directly between ourselves, in journal dialogue, or by drawing further comics (Barker 2019). Comics enable systems to bring their selves into contact with each other in ways that aren't possible in reality given that they share a body, like the warrior holding the vulnerable self in Figure 5. The sequential nature of comics enables us to depict the relationship between selves as unfolding over time, both in terms of verbal and non-verbal communication. Personally, I also find it enjoyable to play with the standard comic format by breaking the frame – as in Figures 4 and 5 – to enable a present self to visit a past self, or one side to rescue another from the comic where he has become stuck.

Conclusion

Exploring plural selves in this way is not just therapeutic in the sense of healing from past trauma, making sense of difficult experiences, or shifting stuck habits. It can also take us to places of what might be called spiritual growth, optimal experience, or simply fun, playfulness, and joy. Experiencing oneself as a team or family, and being able to draw on the talents and skills of all team members, rather than keeping many of those hidden or unavailable, can feel at times like having some kind of superpower unlocked: perhaps that of being a shapeshifter (Barker 2015, 2018b). It can help to enable the experience and expression of a broader range of feelings, and to facilitate self-love and self-care as different selves support each other through difficult times. It can certainly enhance relationships with others as we have more to offer, and other people often connect with the idea of plurality and find it useful to apply to their own lives.

The medium of comics facilitates our capacity to visualise – and experience – our separate selves, and to communicate what their character and appearance is like to others, including important features like gender and sexuality. This enables others to better understand us and to reflect back our experience of ourselves accurately, a process that has been repeatedly found to be beneficial for mental health (Iacoboni 2009). It also enables us to depict verbal and non-verbal communication between our selves as unfolding over time, hopefully taking us to a place of greater mental health given the therapeutic value of open communication between selves (Rowan 2013; Stone 2011).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Meg-John Barker is the author of a number of popular books on sex, gender, and relationships, including *Queer: A Graphic History*, *Gender: A Graphic Guide*, *How To Understand Your Gender*, *Life Isn't Binary*, *Enjoy Sex (How, When, and IF You Want To)*, *Rewriting the Rules*, *The Psychology of Sex*, and *The Secrets of Enduring Love*. They have also written a number of books for scholars and counsellors on these topics, drawing on their own research and therapeutic practice. Websites: rewriting-the-rules.com, megjohnandjustin.com. Twitter: @megjohnbarker, Instagram: @meg_john_barker.

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