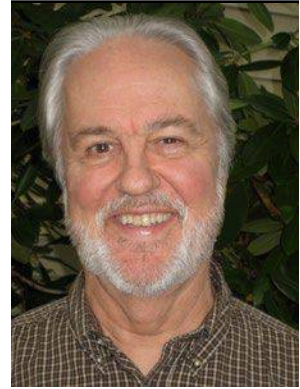


Reprinted from *Voices: The Art and Science of Psychotherapy*, Vol 57, No 2, 2021, pages 33-39.

John Rhead



## Malignant Othering Syndrome: Causes, Consequences, Treatment, and Prevention

### Introduction

IN THE MOST GENERAL SENSE, THE TERM “OTHERING” REFERS TO THE SIMPLE ACT OF PERCEIVING ONESELF AS DIFFERENT FROM ANOTHER PERSON OR GROUP. Othering becomes malignant when that perceived difference is taken as evidence of one’s being inherently superior in some emotionally significant way to the other individual or group. It is considered malignant because of the harm it can cause to the person who is othering, to the group or individual being othered, and to society in general. Because of these various effects it can be considered a syndrome, and the afflicted person can be described as suffering from what I am terming *malignant othering syndrome* (MOS).

The three most common underlying dimensions of difference on which MOS manifests are intelligence, morality, and courage. While perceiving oneself as superior to others on one of these dimensions (or a derivative dimension based on one of them) might simply be an accurate perception of reality and therefore an example of non-malignant othering, it becomes MOS when the perceived difference is interpreted as an indication of one’s inherent superiority.

It is also possible to combine dimensions to increase one’s presumed superiority. White supremacy could become White/Christian/nationalist supremacy and produce churches in the United States whose members are all White U.S. citizens. They could then perceive themselves to be superior to all others who do not meet all three of these criteria.

JOHN RHEAD is both a psychologist and a spiritual explorer, apparently by natural inclination. He has formal training in psychology but not in spiritual exploration and discovered in the third decade of his life that these two predilections could be combined through his involvement with psychotherapy—as a researcher, client, and practitioner. He found that this combination is particularly powerful and synergistic when psychotherapy is combined with the use of psychedelic substances.

[jrheadpbd@gmail.com](mailto:jrheadpbd@gmail.com)

The cause of MOS is a combination of psychological and spiritual dynamics, which in turn seem to be a result of a variety of experiences that lead people to see themselves as defective or inherently inferior to others. Such experiences can arise from very early experiences in the family and also in the culture into which a person is born and grows up.

## **Psychological Dynamics**

The core belief of the person suffering from MOS is that they are inherently inadequate or defective in some significant way. This belief is usually instilled quite early in the course of psychological development by significant others in the family or the culture of the individual afflicted with MOS. In more benign cases there is a perceived inadequacy along some particular dimension, such as intelligence, attractiveness, or athletic ability. This allows one to at least imagine how one might be different in order to feel adequate. In more severe cases the person feels inherently defective in a very generic way, so that there is no way even to imagine how one might be different in order to repair this defectiveness.

Regardless of the source or severity of the underlying belief system, the core psychological dynamics of MOS are denial and compensatory projection. In order to relieve the pain of the underlying belief in one's inherent inadequacy or defectiveness, the first line of defense is an attempt to deny that it exists. Complementing this denial is the projection of one's perceived inadequacy or defectiveness onto others.

## **Spiritual Dynamics**

Many religious and spiritual belief systems offer support for the belief in one's personal inadequacy or defectiveness. Concepts such as "original sin" and "chosen people" are manifestations of this support. It is hard to imagine a better concept than original sin to validate the belief that one is inherently and generically defective. Similarly, when someone else is perceived to be uniquely chosen by God, it seems only logical to assume that they are in some way more adequate in the eyes of God than is oneself, thus reinforcing the belief in one's own inadequacy in a very powerful way.

On the other hand, some religious and spiritual belief systems assert that the perception of oneself as separate from all other humans, or even all other life forms, is itself delusional. If one accepts such an assertion, then it becomes impossible to perceive oneself as inadequate relative to anyone else since there really is nobody else. When the accepted truth is that we are all one, then there is nobody to whom one can compare oneself. The near universality in world religions of some version of the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," may reflect the implication "because they actually are you!"

## **Social Dynamics and Consequences**

All MOS is harmful both to the person afflicted with the condition and to the others upon whom they project inferiority. Those who are the object of this projection can be

harmed by anything from humiliation to social/economic injustice and murder.<sup>1</sup> The one who is afflicted with MOS is harmed in two major ways. First, in untreated MOS, the underlying feelings of inferiority remain unconscious and can cause great discomfort and even depression. Second, the harm done to others because of MOS generates guilt in the person afflicted with MOS, albeit unconscious, that further reinforces the original feelings of inadequacy that are the underlying cause of the condition.

Not only is MOS dangerous to the person afflicted and those upon whom that person projects inferiority, but it is also harmful to society in general because it is contagious. Once projections of inferiority are directed powerfully and repeatedly at people, often over generations, those people may not be able to completely reject these projections and therefore may respond with reactive MOS. This reactivity seeks to compensate for the extent to which the projections of inferiority have been introjected by those who are the object of these projections. Being the object of racism may induce responses based on the perception that one is superior to the racist person because of their racism, thereby othering the racist in turn.

In the absence of a belief in the unity of all of humanity, a variety of powerful social dynamics emerge from MOS, especially since the condition is highly prevalent. In non-malignant othering, the perception that others are different may simply make them more interesting to get to know and generate a desire to interact with them. However, when the othering becomes malignant, it can lead to anything from social anxiety in the presence of the other to mass murder.

When the person afflicted with MOS becomes strongly invested in perceiving the other as inferior to themselves the person or group thus being othered is usually powerfully affected. The intensity of this effect is partly related to the overtness of the expression of the perception of inferiority being projected and partly to the significance to the other of the particular type of inferiority being projected onto them. The social dynamics can become quite complex when the person or group being othered has their own belief in their inferiority. This can lead to intergroup MOS, again with consequences anywhere from social anxiety to mass murder.<sup>2</sup> It is particularly difficult for members of a group to escape from feelings of inferiority when many of the members of the group share a belief in their inferiority. Such a belief is likely to be primarily unconscious and communicated between group members quite covertly.

## Examples

Racism is probably the most prevalent manifestation of MOS, followed by ethnocentrism and religious intolerance.

The increasingly extreme dichotomization of political parties, especially in the

---

1 The coronavirus pandemic has brought to public awareness the longstanding disparities in the United States between the general health of White people when compared to African Americans and Native Americans. These disparities are usually attributed to shocking inequities in terms of access to healthcare. However, a more subtle factor may also be part of the picture when one considers MOS. The negative projections directed at these minorities by those who are trying to find a way to see them as inferior may actually impact physical and mental health.

2 Mass killings in the United States, usually by a single person with an automatic weapon who kills a group of people of a particular ethnicity or religious, are becoming more common. These are particularly horrifying when they occur in a house of worship.

United States, is an example of MOS based almost exclusively on perceived differences in belief systems. This political phenomenon qualifies as MOS because the perceived differences are taken to be an indication that one's beliefs as a member of a particular political party are evidence that one is superior to members of other parties, usually in terms of intelligence, morality, or courage. Increasingly there are examples of ardent supporters of a given political party who cannot articulate any specific beliefs associated with their party, but are certain of their superiority to members of other parties.

Such political MOS is exacerbated by two factors. First, the politicians who represent a particular party exploit the dynamics of perceived superiority to gain loyalty and support from the members of their party. Second, the complexity of the issues a person living in a democracy must examine in order to decide how to vote can be overwhelming, thereby making it attractive to simplify matters by deciding that the leaders of one's political party are always correct in their approach to any issues. The desire to simplify very complex issues can be attractive to politicians as well as the voters who elect them.

MOS within the political arena sometimes includes conspiracy theories about clandestine groups to which harmful intentions and negative traits, such as pedophilia, are attributed. Such theories are often seen as paranoid in nature. Interestingly enough, the two fundamental features of paranoia are delusions of grandeur and delusions of persecution. These two features are very easily related to the tendency of MOS to involve inflating one's self-image while seeing the other as morally inferior because they are perpetuating the persecution of one's innocent self.

It has been theorized that the current surge in anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States is a function of the rhetoric of the former president, Donald Trump. His ongoing malignant othering of people from other countries, combined with his blaming the coronavirus on an Asian country, certainly are consistent with this theory. However, the hate crimes, including mass murder, currently being directed at Asians in the United States may have deeper roots from half a century ago.<sup>3</sup> The Vietnam War led many young American men (and a few women) to participate in the genocide of large numbers of innocent non-combatant Asians in Vietnam, Laos, and especially Cambodia, where the term "carpet bombing" was coined. This atrocity continues to manifest itself today in the birth defects still being caused by Agent Orange. The impact on the American soldiers who participated in the war was made obvious by the enormous number of them whose guilt caused them to commit suicide shortly after the war.<sup>4</sup> While suicide may have relieved the guilt of those soldiers the rest of American society, literally and figuratively the children and grandchildren of those soldiers, is still grappling with it as a collective. One way to repress agonizing guilt is to distract oneself with the malignant othering of Asians.

Some conspiracy theories sometimes attribute evil, or at least ill intentions, to those who are wealthy. It is interesting to note, however, that wealth can cut both ways. One can feel superior to those who are wealthier by attributing snobbery and superficiality to them. One can also feel superior to those who are less wealthy by assuming that their

---

3 Perhaps three quarters of a century, if one considers Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even longer, considering treatment of the Chinese builders of the transcontinental railroad, mid-19th century.

4 I have always appreciated Edward Tick's (2014) suggestion that PTSD might stand for Post Traumatic Soul Disorder.

relative poverty is a result of laziness or other character flaws.

Particularly toxic examples of MOS can occur when religion is invoked. An example is the doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) held until 1978 that Black people were the descendants of Cain and that they were being punished by God for Cain's murder of his brother. This doctrine relieved Mormons of feelings of guilt about racial injustice, including slavery, that Black people were experiencing in society. It also justified their great restrictions of Black people's participation in the Mormon church, thereby causing Mormons to actively participate in racism.

Very toxic MOS can also occur on a much smaller scale when a bitter divorce occurs between two people who have children together. A very intense version of what is known as "alienation of affection" can be triggered when each parent tries to convince their children that the divorce was entirely the fault of the other parent, often escalating to extreme characterizations of the other parent as defective, if not outright evil. The most toxic case of such MOS in a divorced couple was reported to me by a client who was one of the couple's two daughters. The marriage had some tension from the very beginning because the parents came from two different ethnic groups that had a long history of bitter antagonism and mutual malignant othering, leading their families to be very resistant to accepting a new in-law from the other group. After a bitter divorce the two young children lived with the mother, who grew increasingly disparaging of their father's ethnic background. This pattern became even more malignant as her daughters matured and ultimately led to the mother harshly demeaning her daughters for being children of a person of their father's ethnicity. My client's presenting complaint was a pervasive feeling of inadequacy in spite of being intelligent, attractive, successful in her profession, and the mother of a child who was flourishing in every way.

Ongoing feuds across generations of the members of two groups, whether at the level of two families (e.g., the Hatfields and McCoys), two ethnic groups, or two nations, offer an example of an interesting and powerful combination of psychological and spiritual dynamics. At the psychological level the usual dynamic of seeing one's own group as superior to the other group is present. A more subtle spiritual dynamic can be seen in the way in which one feels deeply joined with the members of one's own group, including past generations. This deep sense of connection is a very attenuated version of the universally desired spiritual experience of unity with all of humanity. Although it is only a sliver of the satisfaction one might feel in a complete experience of unity, it is still very compelling for those who have never had the complete experience, or who have repressed any memories they have of such experiences. The ongoing feud provides the only satisfaction of the desire to experience even partial unity while simultaneously reinforcing the sense of a lack of unity with the members of the group that is being othered in the feud. This malignant othering of a group of people makes it all the more difficult to ever open oneself to complete experience of unity.

In some cases the assignment of a psychiatric diagnosis can be an example of MOS. A dramatic historical example is the Canton South Dakota Indian Asylum, where over 400 Native Americans from all over the United States were involuntarily committed between 1902 and 1934 (Burch, 2021). In some cases the precipitating event was a contentious encounter with a representative of the Bureau of Indian Affairs or simply appearing in public while under the influence of alcohol. A wide variety of psychiatric diagnoses, some quite bizarre, were used to justify incarcerating these people for the

remainder of their lives.

A more current example sometimes shows up in modern psychiatric hospital adolescent units. An adolescent who reports despair and anxiety is referred by their parents to a psychiatrist, who deems these symptoms to be severe enough to warrant a formal diagnosis of a psychiatric disorder that is based on complaints of depression or anxiety. The severity of this diagnosis then is used as a rationale for medication and hospitalization, sometimes involuntarily. It is interesting that the presenting complaints of depression and anxiety are often found to be entirely based on the adolescent's reflecting on their future as they learn about the possibly catastrophic results of climate change before they are 25, deaths of children from starvation as a result of endless proxy wars in poor countries, mass killings based on racism, the pattern of rising dictatorships that brutally suppress those who champion anything like democracy, and a pandemic that threatens all of humanity. One could argue that those who do not feel anxious and depressed are the ones worthy of a psychiatric diagnosis. In this situation one might argue that the psychiatric MOS of depressed and anxious adolescents who despair about their future could be a way that their parents and psychiatrists sustain their own denial.

## Treatments

Treatments of MOS fall into two basic categories, based on the psychological and spiritual dynamics noted above.

Traditional psychological treatment involves psychodynamic treatment to bring into conscious awareness the underlying inferiority complex and then finding ways to resolve it without resorting to malignant othering. It may then extend into group, family, or couples therapy to repair damage done to others by the previously untreated MOS.

A more modern form of psychospiritual treatment may also be employed, either alone or as an adjunct to psychodynamic treatment. Such psychospiritual treatment focuses on the pursuit of spiritual or transpersonal experiences that involve two elements: (a) the experience of unity or union, in which one knows through direct experience of the essential unity of all humans, and even all of nature,<sup>5</sup> and (b) an undeniable affirmation of one's intrinsic worth, often associated with a deep sense of purpose or meaning in one's life that is directed toward the healing of humankind through love. Many spiritual and religious groups have for centuries offered rituals and practices to facilitate such spiritual or transpersonal experiences, and some of these (like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) have been validated by psychological science. Modern psychological research has also produced a plethora of support in recent years for psychedelic psychotherapy, in which compounds like LSD and psilocybin have been used in the context of

---

5 The experience of unity with all humans is usually associated with blissfulness and rapture. However, it should be noted that the dissolution of ego boundaries in order to experience one's essential unity with humankind is not always entirely blissful. It can also involve direct experiences of overwhelming anguish as one experiences the suffering of large groups of people who have been the objects of massive torture and genocide in recent history, as well as ancient history. These experiences can be particularly painful when the victims are children. A much smaller version of this phenomenon might occur when a White supremacist in the United States experiences the agonies of African Americans over the last 400 years. In such situations part of the treatment can be the suggestion of saying daily prayers on behalf of those who have been harmed.

intensive psychotherapy to facilitate the experience of spiritual or transpersonal experiences.

## Prevention

Clearly the primary requirement in the prevention of MOS is the preemption of the development of feelings of inferiority. This starts with child-rearing practices that affirm intrinsic worth. These practices need to take place in the family, in schools, in religious organizations, and in the community at large.

Inoculation is also a possibility. While psychedelics can be used as an adjunct to transpersonal types of psychotherapy for MOS, they can also be used to facilitate transpersonal experiences outside of psychotherapy that can help prevent the development of MOS. As laws restricting the use of psychedelics are being loosened in many areas, the opportunities for their use in this preventative way are increasing. Government agencies, spiritual and religious communities, and private companies might all come to offer such opportunities to develop immunity to MOS. If herd immunity can be achieved then the social consequences could be enormous and might include the elimination of war, hatred, and injustice.

When two groups have come to relate to each other with mutual malignant othering, such as the above example of feuding, there is always the possibility that some members of each group might be willing to meet with some members of the other group for the purpose of improving relationships between the two groups. The intention of such meetings is sometimes described as reconciliation or depolarization. The basic mechanism of action in these groups is the direct experience of the common humanity of the members of the other group. This direct experience could also be described as an antidote to mutual malignant othering between the two groups. It is reasonable to expect that such direct experience of common humanity might also generalize to other groups not included in the original feud. A friend and colleague has been a member of such a group for a number of years. Consisting of Israelis and Palestinians, the group meets once a month to explore their common humanity. One of the factors that appear to contribute to the healing process in this group is the way in which members have come to appreciate the courage and commitment manifested by all members as they continue to reveal themselves more deeply to each other. It is a factor that is present in a general psychotherapy group but is all the more significant and powerful in a group that is so inherently divided from the beginning.

Any reduction in the prevalence of MOS can be expected to reduce suffering in those who have been afflicted by it. It can also be expected to increase the probability that war and other destructive human behaviors will be reduced at a global level. ▼

## References

- Burch, S. (2021). *Committed: Remembering native kinship in and beyond institutions*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Tick, E. (2014). *Warrior's return: Restoring the soul after war*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True.