

Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics
 Number 70, June 2017 ISSN: 2047-0622
 URL: <http://www.freeassociations.org.uk/>



**GOK WAN 'ON THE COUCH':
 PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVES ON PROGRAMME STRATEGIES AND
 PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN *HOW TO LOOK GOOD NAKED***

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Abstract: *How to Look Good Naked* positions Gok Wan as a highly empathetic media figure in popular media. Having a first-hand experience in dealing with body-image discontent and low body-confidence, Wan's highly empathetic approach towards his subjects' body-image concerns derives from his own earlier personal experience in dealing with weight struggles and eating disorders. This paper explores how the processes of emotional development depicted in *How To Look Good Naked* bring to the surface Gok Wan's own unresolved experience with his body-related struggles. The crucial role of the show's emphasis on the 'mirror sequence' in enabling this reading is examined in detail. This article makes use of the work of Donald Woods Winnicott, and also Melanie Klein's object relations theory, applying their ideas to selected episodes of *How to Look Good Naked* in order to raise the question of what is at stake emotionally for the makeover expert in his work on the programme. The article also discusses the themes that recur in media narratives created by Gok Wan around his persona, exploring how his personal experience is echoed in the television strategies and formats popularised in the show.

Gok Wan, is an exuberant, enthusiastic and well-recognised figure in British makeover culture. His name has been associated in popular media with terms like 'body confidence', 'self-esteem' and 'feel good'. Initially working as a fashion stylist on celebrity magazines, Gok Wan is now best known for his innovative makeover series *How To Look Good Naked* (Channel4, 2006-2010; hereafter *HTLGN*)¹, a show that has vividly revolutionised the self-improvement genre by developing a female friendly and highly empathetic makeover platform for its female participants. In *HTLGN*, Gok Wan's approach instigates a sequence of self-reflective practices and self-esteem building exercises based on the narratives that female participants relate whilst looking into a

mirror. The presenter attempts to guide participants in making sense of their body related troubles. The psychological mechanism of self-reflection is enabled and activated through the presence of Gok Wan along with the use of a popular makeover prop which is the full-length mirror(s). This activates a safe reflective space of consideration that enables the makeover participant to voice their inner body-related frustrations safely.

The appearance of the specific format facilitated by Gok Wan in *HTLGN* signals an important shift in the makeover frame towards a discourse of the therapeutic, chiming with what has widely been hailed as a particularly 'therapeutic' moment in popular culture (Richards, 2004; Richards and Brown, 2011, 2002; Bainbridge and Yates, 2012, 2014; Yates, 2013). The format foregrounds the importance of self-reflection and emotional expressivity as well as the articulation of emotional experiences and feelingful bodily states, but the programme also appeared at a point when there was increasing popular attention to notions of therapy and its role in everyday lives. In this context, it is interesting to ask how Gok Wan came to occupy the role of the makeover presenter in this television show that enjoyed such popular and longstanding appeal.² It is important to understand how Wan's own biographical experience played a part. It is well documented across the media and through the publication of his autobiography (Gok Wan, 2010) that Wan has encountered his own personal body related struggles with being overweight as well as having experienced eating disorders. This article examines Gok Wan's empathetic stance towards the reflective narratives of his female participants during the 'mirror sequence' of their makeover process and places the presenter himself 'on the couch'³ in order to understand how the innovative format of *HTLGN* opens up a reflective space for the makeover expert himself to revisit and/or confront some unresolved corners of his own early body-related struggles.⁴

In his popular media appearances, Gok Wan has been candid about his former problems with obesity and eating disorders, and he has publicly acknowledged that his capacity for empathy towards his subjects' body loathing derives from his own personal experiences of body hatred and his battles with weight gain from a young age. In 2010, he published his autobiography under the title *Through Thick and Thin* (2010). Here, Wan reflects on his complex relationship and issues with food from a very young age, his earlier memories of his own 'naked' mirror moment and body loathing practices, as well

as his drastic weight loss through laxative use that later developed into an eating disorder. The following lengthy, excerpted quotations from his autobiography show in detail how Wan makes use of autobiographical narratives to offer an insight into these formative experiences, and this can be used to evaluate the roots of his personal capacity for empathy towards the women of *HTLGN*:

I considered myself the most unattractive person in the world. I used to daydream about how I would look if I had the magical powers to transform myself. I would be slim and good-looking, and have a flat chest with pecs instead of small breasts. I'd have a taut stomach with a neat button right in the middle, instead of one lost deep within rolls of flesh... my self-esteem plummeted further, and my lack of confidence made me a sitting target for the bullies (49-50) ... I was stupid, worthless, fat, ugly, greedy, gay (51) ...[M]y body had grown even bigger and my weight had become an all-consuming issue. I was disgusted at how I looked ... How could anyone find me attractive if I couldn't even look at myself? (76-77) ... [I] blamed my body for stopping me from getting an education ... [and] for never letting me find love. ... I began to diet and of course I had no idea about how to diet healthily (136-137). ... My food intake began to get smaller and ... I started to take laxatives. (141) ... I began seeing big changes in my body. My face slimmed first. It was like watching a piece of fruit decompose as it changed shape. ... My changing body thrilled me. Now I'd had a taste of being slim, I wanted more ... Anorexia had taken hold of me. ... I felt in control for the first time ever, and I was morphing into the person I had always wanted to be ... (143) ... I started to become obsessed with my reflection. I would stand naked in front of the mirror and pull my sagging skin in ways that made me look thinner (148). The fat, wobbling, twenty-one stone me had vanished, and in its place was a new and odd-looking version. I was emaciated ... exhausted and beaten. (160)

Wan is clearly keen to disclose his inner and outer emotional struggle with body hatred, his emotional conflict with his weight, and his battle with anorexia as a result of social pressures and school bullying. He claims these forms of emotional and experiential 'capital' to inform a general impression of 'authenticity' around his charismatic capacity to understand the emotional and body-related anxieties brought to the show by his female participants. Richard Sennett (1977) argues that the notion of the authentic self and the charismatic public persona rest on what a person reveals about his or her life experience on a personal and emotional level. As Candida Yates argues, 'charismatic public figures are now increasingly defined by displays of intimacy and a perception that they are revealing aspects of the "true" authentic personality' (2011: 73).

Gok Wan's autobiographical revelations, then, allow him to be seen by his subjects and viewers as a highly empathetic and emotionally attuned figure, aware of the emotional complexities that result from low body confidence, body dissatisfaction and/or body-loathing. For instance, in his interview with Hadley Freeman in *The Guardian* (2008), Wan shows himself to be painfully aware that his capacity for empathy towards his female makeover subjects derives from his own personal experience. His assertions about the relevance of such experience emerged at just the right time in terms of the UK's cultural turn towards a discourse of the therapeutic:

Gok Wan: I know what it's like to look in the mirror and absolutely hate what's looking back at you, and to pick up a fashion magazine and think, why can't I look like that? It's not fair. (Freeman, 2008)

The emotional authenticity of Wan's claims to have 'been there' (Rice, 2011), as revealed in his autobiographical narratives and media interviews, not only publicises him as a man with great empathy towards his makeover subjects, but also validates his position as an 'expert' within the popular media landscape. He is someone who recognises popular female body-related troubles as well as someone with a capacity to act as a mentor and guide within a makeover discourse that had hitherto focused on more critical, 'bitchy' engagements between women presenters such as Trinny Woodall and

Susannah Constantine on *What Not To Wear* (McRobbie, 2009). This positions him ideally as an empathic expert enabling women to understand 'how to' overcome their body-related anxieties, marking a discursive shift toward the broader therapeutic turn in culture.

It is worth noting that Wan's autobiography was published in 2010, the same year that *HTLGN* came to a close. This raises questions about the extent to which the cultural space facilitated by working on *HTLGN*, and all the encounters with women's reflective narratives that this entailed, offered an opportunity for Gok Wan himself emotionally to revisit and reflect on his own experiences of body loathing, so that the publication of his autobiography provided a logical next step, once the series itself had come to an end.

The close relationship between Wan's personal experience and his framework for engaging with participants on the programme is frequently on show in *HTLGN*. Indeed, the emergence of his focused use of 'mirror narratives' with participants on the show can be traced back to a specific moment in the fifth episode of season three, when Gok Wan recognises his own emotional familiarity with the subject's (Debbie's) experience of dealing with self-image related to both her bodyweight and her weight loss behaviour. In this encounter with Debbie, Wan re-articulates the use of the mirror in the makeover genre. This familiar prop of self-scrutiny becomes an object through which to get to grips with the deepest aspects of hidden emotional experience, and this trope of Wan's work emphasises the dominant therapeutic discourse.

The procedural and symbolic arrangement of the mirror sequences in *HTLGN* are central to Gok Wan's approach to makeover encounters (Figure 1).⁵ The studio where the makeover process begins includes three full-length mirrors on set which 'symbolically' form a close reflective space in which the encounter between the makeover subject and the expert can take place. On *HTLGN*, the mirrors are positioned so that the makeover subject enters into a closed space that enables a 360-degree reflective view of her own body (Fig. 1). The 'mirror sequence' thus symbolically provides a reflective mental space where one's emotions and body-related fears, anxieties, and insecurities can be expressed, explored and contained. The *mise-en-scène* of the encounter encourages a therapeutic sensibility.



Figure 1: Debbie's HTLGN 'mirror sequence'

During the mirror sequence, Gok Wan positions himself within the mirror room with the female subject. This is suggestive of Wan's willingness to offer emotional guidance and assistance during the participant's overwhelming 'naked' moment in front of the mirrors. Wan's symbolic and physical presence in the 'mirror sequence' also depicts the expert's willingness to open himself up to the possibility of a reflective and emotional subjective experience. The mirror experience enables Gok Wan to become acquainted with the subject's body-related troubles and thus he becomes an observer of the emotional resistances and anxieties that transpire through her reflective narratives in response to her body-loathing experiences. Such experience allows Wan to engage with the subject as she undergoes her reflective process, and this arguably also requires the makeover expert himself to participate emotionally, unconsciously and/or subliminally in the reflective encounter with the female subject. The encounter with Debbie introduced above is illustrative here.

After losing six stones of body weight and becoming a leader of her own slimming club, Debbie says that she loathes her body and lacks self-confidence due to the excess saggy skin that her dramatic weight loss has left on her body:

Gok Wan: Tell me, what was it like to lose the weight?

Debbie: I felt really proud of myself!

Gok Wan: Was this how it was ever supposed to be?

Debbie: No.

Gok Wan: Tell me, how does that feel now, standing here in front of the mirror after losing six stones?

Debbie: I feel like... It's all just been hard work and I haven't ... I don't look the way you are supposed to look.

Gok Wan: So, how are you supposed to look Debbie?



Figure 2: Debbie reflects on her body-image frustrations.

Debbie: You're supposed to look like how they look in the magazines, you know; it's supposed to look all nice and flat and you are supposed to look slim and slender and you're not supposed to look all big and you're supposed to look all pretty and skinny and just really – just not like this!

Debbie's storyline clearly resonates with Wan's own personal account, as detailed in the excerpts from his autobiography discussed above. It thus creates an opportunity for emotional relatedness to inform the relationship between Wan and the participant, and we

can conjecture that Wan's own experience informs his empathic response to Debbie. As depicted in Figure 2, Gok Wan is seen standing at the side, behind Debbie, and gazes into the mirror looking at the reflection of himself and Debbie. Here, Wan steps in front of Debbie and recalls his own body related struggles. At that very moment and for a split-second, he turns and stares at his own reflection in the mirror and then immediately turns back at Debbie. With his hands placed on the sides of his head Wan reveals how her current body-image dissatisfaction resonates with his own past experiences (Fig. 3).

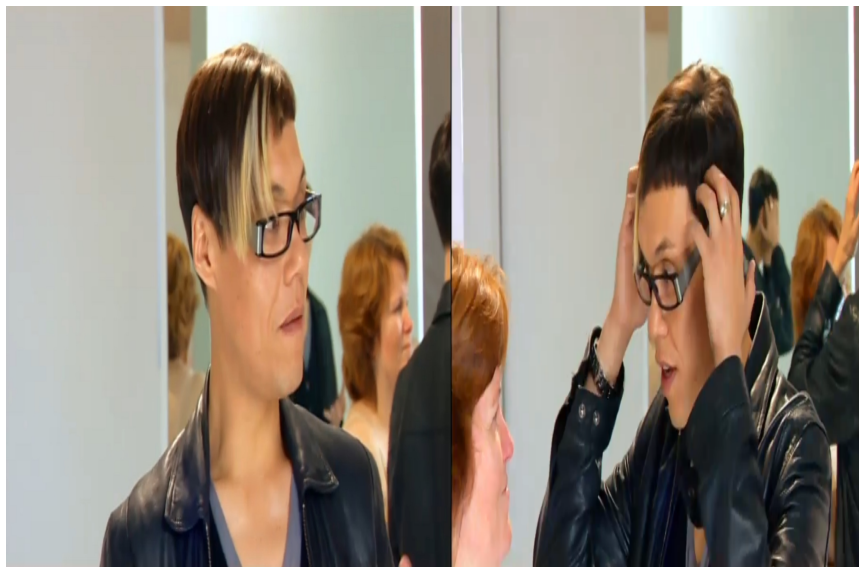


Figure 3: Gok Wan reflects on his own body related struggles

Gok Wan: I know absolutely first-hand how unfair this is; I absolutely do know! Because I am listening to you and I am watching you and I see me, because I was there, and I was BIG, I was 21st and I lost it and I lost 10st. You have got 100% to start liking yourself ... This is about liking the person that is inside and you gonna look in that mirror and you gonna say: My name is Debbie and regardless of what I look like, I am worthy, I have got a voice, I have got an opinion, I have got a heart and I deserve to like myself and other people to like me!

Wan's shared self-reflection on his own experiences within the makeover space reveals his capacity to generate a form of emotional relatedness. His 'emotional knowing' (Greenson, 1960) allows relatedness and shared experience to emerge between himself and the female 'other'. This draws attention to, firstly, Gok Wan's capacity for empathy towards his subject's emotional experience of body loathing, and, secondly, to his charismatic qualities as a makeover expert, thus distinguishing him from his presenter competitors, and accentuating the significance of the therapeutic turn in popular culture in shaping the discourse of the show.

It is Gok Wan's 'emotional knowing', through his personal experience of body hatred and weight troubles, that enables him to enter into that self-reflective space and consequently to empathise with Debbie's reflective narratives. The latter is also echoed through his biographical narratives, where Wan (2010:345) remarks that if I '[h]ad not starved myself and suffered loneliness and body hatred, I would have never had the kind of empathy I do with people who allow us to tell their stories'.

Empathy is about seeing someone from their own point of view and for Paul Ornstein (2011: 442, italics in original), empathy is 'the act of *feeling* oneself and *thinking* oneself into the inner life of another, to understand, both emotionally and cognitively what the other thinks and feels'. In the object relations psychoanalytic framework, the capacity for empathy is explicable through the mechanism of what Klein refers to as 'projective identification'. Klein suggests that,

By projecting oneself or part of one's impulses and feelings into another person, an identification with that person is achieved ... the identification is based on attributing to the other person some of one's own qualities. Projection has many repercussions. We are inclined to attribute to other people – in a sense, to put into them – some of our own emotions and thoughts; and it is obvious that it will depend on how balanced or persecuted we are whether this projection is of a friendly or a hostile nature. By attributing part of our feelings to the other person, we understand their feelings, needs, and satisfactions; in other words, we are putting ourselves into the other person's shoes

... The character of projection is, therefore, of great importance in our relations to other people. If the interplay between introjection and projection is not dominated by hostility or over-dependence, and is well balanced, the inner world is enriched and the relations with the external world are improved. (Klein, 1959: 252-3)

Gok Wan's empathetic response to his participant narratives, which is enabled through the mechanism of 'projective identification', allows him to step into the emotional experience of his subjects and to cognitively, emotionally and psychologically understand them. His former experiences of having 'been there', of loathing his own body reflection in the mirror, his emotional struggles with obesity and the extreme dieting measures used in an attempt to find happiness and measure up to popular media body ideals enable him to engage with his makeover subjects on a more emotional level. Thus, the mechanism of projective identification that is at play during the subject's 'mirror sequence', as seen in the case of Debbie, opens up a space for Gok Wan to contemplate his own experiences. Wan's active self-reflective participation in the 'mirror' moment makes it possible for him to articulate a therapeutic experience. Here, the familiar notion of the media 'expert' as omnipotent is undone and this signals a shift away from other makeover formats, highlighting the potential of the makeover space as a 'therapeutic' phenomenon requiring relatedness between those involved – namely the makeover 'expert' and the makeover subject.

The importance of mirrors for Wan and his personal recovery can be seen in other disclosures made by the presenter in media appearances. In his radio interview with Kirsty Young on BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* (2010), for example, he discusses his first 'naked mirror' experience, which shares common ground with the 'naked' mirror sequence in the makeover space of *HTLGN*:

Gok Wan: One of my earliest memories that I remember of deciding to lose the weight was being completely naked; [I] sat on my bed and at the end of my bed, there was a big old beautiful wardrobe with this great ornate mirror on it, and it makes me feel quite sad when I say

this, but I remember looking in the mirror and thinking, that wardrobe is so beautiful apart from the reflection - and that was really tricky. ... Then I decided that's it! ... you got to do it, you have got to lose the weight and it is the only way you are going to feel successful or happy and I couldn't be more wrong. Because it was not about the weight; it was a cry for help.

Wan's descriptions of his earlier 'mirror' moment clearly parallel the one that he creates and develops as part of the makeover process in his programmes. However, whereas Gok Wan stands naked in his bedroom in front of his wardrobe/mirror and negatively scrutinises his naked body reflection, in *HTLGN*, the female subject is asked to remove her clothes and stand 'naked' in front of the mirror for positive, insightful purposes. Although the *HTLGN* subject always holds a negative perception of her body and often the main issue under discussion is body mass and weight, as is also the case in Gok's own media memories, the mirror encounter created by the presenter aims at dispelling the negative experience in search of more therapeutic goals.

The emotional and psychological disparity between these two poles of experience is rooted in the concept of 'holding' and 'mirroring', as psychoanalysis tells us. In the makeover setting, once the female subject has negatively examined her body and expressed her frustration and hatred towards it, Wan 'mirrors' back to her, in a compassionate function, the emotional states that emerge in the subject's reflective account, and he makes available new meanings for her to make sense of her psychological experience. In order to make those meanings available to his subject, Wan offers his own interpretation of the subject's emotional reaction to her own body image. To do this, he starts by saying 'I will tell you now what I see in this mirror'. As part of his analytical response to the subjects' reflective accounts, Wan has a tendency to identify the emotional resonance and beginnings of the subject's body loathing experiences. This is further exemplified in the case of Clare (Series 3, Episode 15) which is emblematic of the type of 'mirroring'/analytical explanation employed by Gok Wan:

Gok Wan: What are you feeling right now?

Clare: I just don't like what I see. This is a view I normally tried to avoid, I don't like looking at it ... Because I just feel fat and ugly.

Gok Wan: Who do you talk to this about Clare?

Clare: I don't really discuss it that much, because it feels like it's my problem, it's not anyone else's problem, it is me.

Gok Wan: But maybe that is the problem, maybe it's the fact that you haven't spoken to anybody about this and that you are dealing with this completely on your own. Which basically means you're having a relationship with your body on your own that is quite unhealthy ...

For the duration of this reflective encounter, Wan's presence is also visibly reflected in the three full-length mirrors (Figure 4)⁶ alongside Clare.

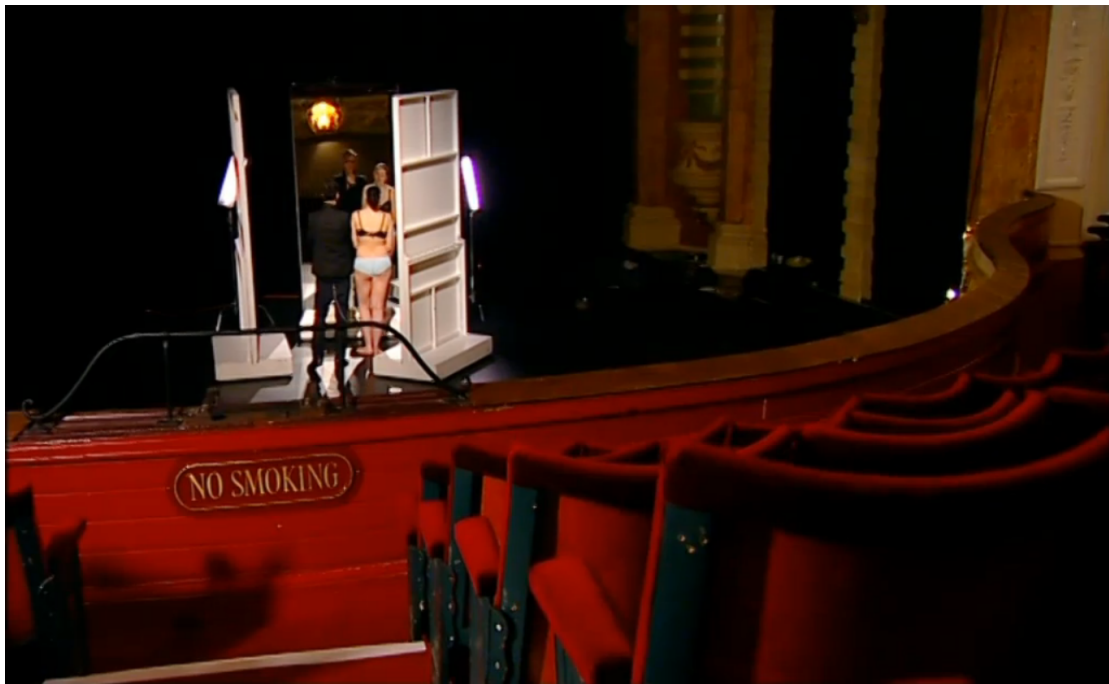


Figure 4: The HTLGN mirrors on the theatre stage⁷

While Clare is negatively scrutinising her body, Wan holds a firm stance behind her and his emotionally attuned gaze is fixated on Clare's facial expression (Fig. 5) and more

particularly on her intense stare when scrutinising her body. When in dialogue with Clare, Wan's presence remains visible in the reflection of the mirrors and when Clare responds to his queries, she directly responds to him by gazing back at his reflection.



Figure 5: Gok Wan's affective gaze is visible in Clare's mirror reflection

The possibility of looking at Clare's reflection in the mirror allows Gok Wan to comfort and reassure his subject, since he is 'looking' exactly at what she is looking at, indicating an attuned mirroring. In Kohut's (1977) thinking, this moment involves 'the confirming/mirroring process'. Here, mirroring is a process that requires accurate empathy, i.e. knowing, absorbing what the child is feeling, communicating back recognition, and acceptance of this. Such a process becomes evident in the makeover moment through Wan's interpretation of Clare's feelings concerning her body and the way in which he makes available new meanings and reflections for Clare to take on, thus providing for her the necessary 'holding environment', to draw on the work of Winnicott.

Winnicott (1960) comments that the availability of 'holding' (which can take either a physical or psychological dimension) contributes to a child's emotional development. The 'holding environment' which is provided by the m/other's⁸ capacity

for care and empathy towards the child's needs is beneficial for the child's emotional and ongoing development. The holding environment 'protects the fabric of the child's "going on being", by holding or sustaining over time the child's developmental proof of being alive. Holding in this way involves the provision of a "place" of psychological state in which the child may gather, collect or hold themselves together' (Collins, 2014: 55). This 'holding' availability then facilitates the eventual separation from the mother but most importantly leads the child towards a sense of inner self-awareness and self-growth. The context of this holding environment is an activation of the child's sense of their own being in time. According to the object relations psychoanalytic perspective, this mirroring moment is a symbolic reflection of what Winnicott (1971) writes about as the importance of the mother's mirror function.

In his paper 'The Mirror Role of Mother and Family in Child Development', Winnicott writes about a stage of emotional development when the infant still perceives the mother as part of himself. Therefore, the 'environment – mother' (whose role is to 'continue to be herself, to be empathetic towards her infant, to be there to receive spontaneous gesture, and to be pleased' [Winnicott, 1963: 76]) performs her holding and handling function in a good-enough way, and thus presents herself as an object who will respect 'the infant's legitimate experience of omnipotence' (Winnicott, 1971: 112). As depicted in Clare's mirror sequence, Gok Wan adopts the role of the 'environment-mother' where, in a gentle and empathetic stance, he is able to tolerate his subject's frustrations and allow them to be felt in a constructive way that enables a process of (re)evaluating and (re)examining body-related frustrations and anxieties which can later develop into self-growth and body-awareness. This position once again confirms Wan's charismatic qualities, as he embraces the role of the makeover expert in a constructive and meaningful way.

For Winnicott, then, mirroring confirms the infant's self-esteem whatever s/he happens to be doing, whatever his/her needs and responses. In his paper on the mirroring role of the mother, Winnicott states:

What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother's face? I am suggesting that, ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or

herself, in other words the mother is looking at the baby and *what she looks like is related to what she sees there*. ... The baby gets settled in to the idea that when he or she looks, what is seen is the mother's face ... when the average girl studies her face in the mirror she is reassuring herself that the mother-image is there and that the mother can see her and that the mother is en rapport with her.
(Winnicott, 1971: 112-3, italics in original)

The mother's mirroring gaze upon her infant is a founding experience, as it establishes a template in the infant's ego as a site for something good and confirms the infant's place in the world.

The parallels between the psychoanalytic ideas discussed here and the tropes and mechanisms at work in *HTLGN* are clear. However, while this 'mirroring' and 'holding' become available for the female subject because of the actions of the 'good-enough' mother (Gok Wan) in the makeover setting, this very moment is 'absent' in Wan's own personal and reflective narratives, as we saw in his interview recollection about his own 'naked mirror' moment. Wan describes the bedroom setting of his 'naked mirror' experience with a particularly emotionalised reference to the presence of a big old wardrobe furnished with a great 'ornate mirror'. Gok Wan describes the wardrobe as 'beautiful' apart from the reflection in its mirror, while indicating that the appearance of his 'naked' body in the mirror reflection was ugly (*Desert Island Discs*, 2010). It is important to note that Gok Wan was alone in this moment: there was no holding presence to absorb and/or make sense of his anxiety in order to make it safe.

Wan's reflective narratives, then, indicate a certain 'absence' and/or 'emptiness' in the 'in-between' space between his 'naked' reflection and the 'object' wardrobe. By considering the strong symbolic presence of the wardrobe in this scenario, I interpret Wan's reference to the position of the 'wardrobe' as serving as a psychological object that signifies the symbolic presence of a mother and the position of the 'ornate mirror on it' representing the mother's face. His 'naked' narrative indicates a lack and/or the absence of any maternal mirroring, leaving him feeling inadequate without any holding presence

to absorb and/or recognise those painful emotions of his that are reflected in the 'mirror'. Thus, he is left unable to recognise his self-worth.

If Wan's 'naked' experience lacks any maternal 'holding' and/or 'mirroring', then the makeover space of *HTLGN* and in particular the 'mirror' phase can be symbolically interpreted as a reflective recurrence of Gok Wan's personal experience. What was 'absent' and/or 'lacking' in his mirror experience is 'present' in the *HTLGN* setting. This becomes evident in the good-enough maternal holding and mirroring relation that Wan makes available to female subjects during their naked mirror experiences through his capacity for empathy towards their body loathing. Furthermore, Wan's affective 'mirroring' is more profoundly 'present' because of his capacity to be seen by the subject in her mirror reflection. Nevertheless, Wan's availability in the mirror reflection serves a therapeutic function for Gok Wan himself since it opens up the possibility of restoring the 'absence of mirroring' that he previously encountered.

When Gok Wan offers interpretations of his subjects' reflective narratives, they often resonate emotionally with his own personal experience of self-loathing. By adopting the role of the m/other, Wan reveals once again whence his capacity for empathy derives, since he has already experienced these body-related troubles, struggles and concerns. For instance, in the case of Debbie, he brings forth his own emotional struggles with being overweight and dieting. In Clare's case, Wan identifies her relationship with her body as 'unhealthy', while at the same time drawing attention to the fact that her own body loathing has led to feelings of loneliness linked to her decision to hide her body-related anxieties from her immediate others. The resonance with Wan's own experience of loneliness due to his emotional body struggles is clear. For instance, in his autobiography, Wan confesses that for a very long time he hid his despair and frustration from his family and friends (Wan, 2010: 76-7), revealing the 'unhealthy' approach he took to cover up his drastic and extreme diet regimes, as well as his unrestrained use of laxatives that eventually resulted in the development of an eating disorder (Wan, 2010:141-60).

Wan's life experience in this regard resonates through all his encounters with *HTLGN* participants, as shown in the case of Ali (Series 3, Episode 3):

Ali: I just don't feel any confidence in anything anymore. I don't feel that I am attractive; I don't feel people want to be my friends. I don't feel anyone wants to go out with me.

Gok Wan: I think what's happened is you were told you were short, fat with glasses and I think now you feel very, very lonely. What you are doing is blaming your appearance. But you are an adult now and I promise you, when you start dealing with the idea that you are a beautiful, petite, curvaceous, very well proportioned woman, I guarantee you will be a lot happier.

Here, Wan locates Alison's development of a negative body-image and her lack of confidence as originating in her school days, when she was bullied. Once again, this resonates with his own personal experience of childhood bullying, highlighting the extent to which the presenter relies on his 'emotional knowing' to sustain the related encounters he provokes with participants on the show.

In all these cases, Gok Wan makes himself available '*to-be-looked-at*' (Mulvey, 1975: 11, my italics) and 'mirrored' by his female subjects when he is (self-) reflecting on their emotional and body loathing experiences. The presence and availability of the participant's reflection activates a form of 'cultural experience' (Winnicott, 1971) for Wan himself that emerges directly from the embodied subjective experiences of his makeover participant. Winnicott treats 'cultural experience' as something positive and emotionally constructive that enriches notions of self and thus contributes towards an emotional understanding of our inner and outer subjective experiences in relation to the self with others, as well as to our society more broadly. The discursive setting of *HTLGN* develops into a 'potential' reflective space for Gok Wan, since the subjects' emotional reactions and narratives reawaken his former unresolved body anxieties. My claim here is supported by Wan's personal reflections in his autobiography, as we have seen. As he narrates how he arrived at an emotional realisation that his emotional experience had never been reflected upon nor worked through, Wan draws directly on his work in *HTLGN*:

I stood in front of the mirror with my lady and asked her to strip down; I saw the fear and embarrassment in her eyes. She tensed and tears sprang to her eyes, and I could see the struggle inside her. She agreed to do it, though, and, as she broke down in front of her reflection and told me that she hated her body, her pain hit me hard. I knew exactly how she was feeling. I put my arms around her, feeling every part of her anguish and fear inside me just as my own had been ten years before. I was taken back to the most difficult and awful time of life in an instant – I was reliving the pain I'd tried so hard to forget. (Wan, 2010: 262)

Once again the mechanism of 'projective identification' is clearly at play here. Gok Wan feels the participant's pain and identifies with it, tapping into his own residue of experience to structure this exchange. His account of 'I knew exactly how she was feeling' reveals not only his emotional capacity for empathy but also his 'emotional knowing' about being in their position. Wan discloses this moment of 'emotional knowing' and awakening by himself in his autobiographical narratives, suggesting that *HTLGN* may also have enabled Gok Wan himself to work through his own experiences in a way that chimes with therapeutic encounters. For Gok Wan, then, the makeover setting becomes a space of emotional awareness that offers him the possibility of engaging in a process of self-knowledge leading towards the interpretation of self-experiences. Arriving at one's own interpretation and making sense of unresolved issues or even becoming consciously aware of them is paramount in the analytic setting and signals the efficacy of what Sigmund Freud (1914) coins as a 'working through' process.⁹

Gok Wan highlights the roots of these experiences during his *Desert Island Discs* interview:

I had no idea at all that the emotion was going to be there and the tone was going to be there, something clicked inside my head, and at that point I hadn't told the press or told anyone that I used to be big and I almost went into a trance, it was like a memory of how I felt

about my body. I never expected that to happen. (Gok Wan, cited in Young, 2010)

Here, we also see that the emotional texture of the presenter's experience was unexpected/unanticipated, adding weight to the notion that he, too, is participating in the emotional work that is taking place. Wan confirms that the space of *HTLGN* developed into a 'potential [reflective] space' (Winnicott, 1971) for him since it activated his former emotions and some unresolved questions, as well as allowing him to make interpretations of those experiences. As a result, 'the mirror' in this makeover space holds a reflective value, creating a 'shared' reflective space for both expert and participants, allowing them to merge and to mutually work through their unresolved emotional experiences and anxieties. This leads me to consider that the presence of the mirror in the makeover discourse develops into representative object for both Gok Wan and his female subjects, thus giving rise to the therapeutic qualities of *HTLGN*.

As my discussion has shown, the 'mirror sequence' of the *HTLGN* method and the role of mirrors in the show's setting hold crucial emotional and therapeutic significance for the expert himself, allowing him to stage symbolic replications that parallel his own earlier 'naked mirror' experiences. It thus seems apparent that Wan's reflective interaction and emotional involvement with his participants' 'naked mirror' narratives constitute a form of emotional restoration for the presenter as he works. This analysis reveals an important evolution in the discourse of makeover programming, such that the omnipotent figure of the expert as objective judge is culturally undone.

An object relations psychoanalytic perspective on what is emotionally at stake for Gok Wan in his reflective encounters with participants offers a deeper understanding of the importance of the development of a capacity for relating and relatedness, or for the experience and discovery of self both in relation to lived experiences and psychological relationships. Ultimately, object relations psychoanalysis offers us an understanding of the internal world, thus enabling us to shape a sense of subjective self, and it therefore needs to be further integrated into academic analysis of our cultural frameworks. Such integration will provide us with psychoanalytic nuances in making sense of how

emotional subjectivities are created, shaped, formed and often challenged by the cultural politics of mediated emotions.

Notes

1. This article is based on doctoral research exploring the cultural impact of Gok Wan within the makeover television context. That work suggests that the specific televisual framework of *How To Look Good Naked* is a culturally constructive one that offers meaningful spaces of therapeutic potential for female participants (and by extension for the show's viewers) because it facilitates the emotional exploration of the self in an a creative way, enabling the development of inner self-awareness in relation to the body and enriching notions of identity. My doctoral thesis arises from and is influenced by the 'Media and the Inner World' research network (www.miwnet.org). As such, it consists of an in-depth psycho-cultural reading of the methods used by Gok Wan in *How to Look Good Naked*, highlighting the need to recognise the affective impact of popular makeover television in shaping our subjective experiences, whilst confirming the cultural usefulness of object relations psychoanalysis as a methodological tool for the study of popular media and cultural texts.
2. Gok Wan's makeover project had popular appeal. Audience figures reveal that 3.52 million viewers (14.3%) tuned in to the first episode in order to 'get naked' with Gok Wan, Channel 4's highest ever viewing figures at that point (Rogers, 2007). Drawing on Broadcasters' Audience Research Board data, Sara Rodrigues (2012:43) indicates that the *HTLGN* series episodes were 'consistently ranked among the top thirty programs in each week of the series'. She notes that since its beginning the *HTLGN* series and for each week the 'average viewership was 2.54 million viewers per week' and in 2010 which marked the final season of Gok Wan's makeover series, 'the average viewership was 1.65 million viewers per week (ibid).
3. The 'couch' is a key symbol of psychoanalysis and to be 'on the couch' has become a universal shorthand for psychoanalytic and psychotherapy treatment. The couch acts as a symbol for the work and ideas of Sigmund Freud. It is on the couch where Freud's patients lie to reveal their dreams and memories, narratives that would later inform Freud's theories of the unconscious. Freud called the couch an 'ottoman', or at other times, his examination bed, but it is referred to now as 'the analytical couch' (Warner, 2011:149).
4. It's important here to note that I am not proposing a psychobiography of Gok Wan. The dangers of this are well documented. However, the presenter's ascendance into the sphere of celebrity has allowed him to publish memoirs, in which he makes firm links between his work on television and beyond and his own lived experience. It therefore seems important to consider the ways in which this experience resonates, firstly, with the methodology that he puts to work in *HTLGN*, and, secondly, with the broader cultural context of 'therapy culture'.
5. The screenshots used in this article were obtained from Channel4's website. Full access to the online episode on Debbie's case can be found on <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/how-to-look-good-naked/on-demand/44474-005>
6. The screenshots used in this article were obtained from Channel4's website. Full access to the online episode on Clare's case can be found on <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/how-to-look-good-naked/on-demand/44474-014>
7. This is a very interesting screenshot as the mirror sequence has moved out of the usual studio space into a theatre, and the audience is positioned in the role of the spectator. Here, the notion of the gaze becomes apparent and significant, as it suggests the dynamic of the audience as active participants; their engagement with the characters on the stage opens up space to observe, relate and arrive and/or make their own interpretations.
8. The use of word m/other instead of mother is suggestive of the possibility that a motherly approach is not provided only by a mother but potentially by 'other' caretaker.
9. Freud's concept of 'working through' has no precise definition and thus it is one of Freud's most ambiguous concepts. However, in his 1914 paper, Freud states that 'Remembering', 'Repeating'

and 'Working Through' are three concepts central to the patients' analytic experiences. Freud writes that in the analytic process the patient is 'working' towards overcoming traumatic experiences that are often repressed in the unconscious mind and thus often described by the patient as 'forgotten', especially when s/he adds 'As a matter of fact I've always known it; only I've never thought of it' (148). Freud then adds that a certain kind of patient 'does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it' (Freud, 1914:150). According to Freud, where there is repetition, there was repression; and where there was repression, there was trauma. In the analytic process, Freud adds that 'one must allow the patient time to become more conversant with this resistance with which he has now become acquainted, to *work through* it, to overcome it ... Only when the resistance is at its height can the analyst, working in common with his patient, discover the repressed instinctual impulses which are feeding the resistance and it is this kind of experience which convinces the patient of the existence and power of such impulses (1914:151). When Freud talks about the 'working through' process and 'overcoming', resistances he does not simply mean putting behind but is more about coming to a realisation.

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