

2009

**A TRANSCULTURAL WORKSHOP HELD at the EFPP CONFERENCE
in Prague, 28-31 May, 2009***Mary Spreng-Courtney*

Preparation :

The workshop took place at an EFPP conference in Prague. The theme of the conference was “Bridging Identities: Clinical impact of Groups”. The workshop was conducted as an experiential group for conference participants by two conductors, Inger Larrson from Sweden and Mary Spreng-Courtney from Switzerland and comprised four sessions. The idea behind this ongoing workshop, which began in the EFPP conference in Copenhagen in 2006, is to give the participants at the conferences a possibility of tuning in to the transcultural aspects of the theme of the conference. The members of these groups were mostly, but not exclusively, professional psychoanalytic psychotherapists. As at the Copenhagen conference many of the group members had as their mother tongue a relatively unknown language. The Czech language was not widely known to the non-Czech participants. Nonetheless the group remained open to Czech members. A declared part of the group task was to experience the frustration in not understanding one another exactly. Strategies could then be created by the group, in order to deal with this situation and to bridge the gap.

The group conductors were aware from the outset that the group would be in flux as regards its members. Every member with one exception was at one time or another participating in a parallel group session, giving a paper, introducing speakers, or moderating discussions. When one or other member was absent from the group, he or she returned to the next session with new input from the conference and from the themes discussed in the individual sessions. With the ensuing flux within the make-up of the group and the influx of new material, the setting became the anchor for the atmospheric ups and downs and for the management and absorption of the constant inflow of new impulses and content into the group. From the outset the conductors were aware of what an important function the setting would have in keeping the group together and focussed on their task. For this reason they considered the setting carefully.

The theme chosen by the conductors for the small group had to do with change: “Shifting Identities in a rapidly changing world”. The theme of the conference and the change, taking place within the group due to the circumstances of the conference, echoed the theme. The conductors reflected on this double level of change, in order to create a setting, which allowed the individual members, not only to tune in to the changing microcosm within the group and

how it affected them, but also to enable them to connect this immediate experience with the changes they were subjected to in their larger environment. It was the conductors' task not to lose sight of a possibility of integrating and connecting the evoked experiences or memories back to the theme of the workshop.

In order to create a space that allowed for much coming and going among the members, but still providing a possibility of developing a process, the idea arose of creating a small picture exhibition. It was decided to take pictures of contemporary artists from different European cultures, who have tackled the same subject matter we had chosen for the workshop in their art work. We also included two photographs of previous generations from two different cultures. It was decided to introduce these pictures to the group at the beginning of each session. This introduction gave continuity to the group sessions. It also served the double purpose of allowing the members, who had attended one or more sessions, to re-focus on the theme of the workshop and allowed the new members to be integrated into the work in progress of the group. It became a ritual of welcome for the new members.

One of the conductors, familiar with the history of the EFPP, gave a short exposé of the Conferences and background of the EFPP, an organisation set up to integrate the psychoanalytic psychotherapeutic training in different European countries. The other conductor gave a short exposé of the work done by EATGA, an association specifically researching transcultural issues. These short introductions were never repeated in the following group sessions, but provided an anchor for the group, enabling them to stay focussed on the task. A small number of group members attended all the group sessions and in that way shared with the conductors the function of continuity for the group, representing its, albeit short, history.

It was astounding the process that developed in the four sessions available to the group. In the first session the question arose as to how to manage the conflict between the need for developing a professional identity and the need to fulfil the demands made on one from the private sphere of family and friends. It was voiced by a Czech member of the group, who was not himself a psychoanalyst. He expressed his ambivalence in being here in the group and sacrificing a weekend, away from family and friends, in order to further his own professional interests. Would it prove to have been worth it, or would it prove to have been a waste of time? Would it leave regrets at having left young children behind for the weekend? A painting of a female Iranian artist, comprising 16 small self-portraits, with and without a headscarf, entitled "I and I", was hanging on the wall. It illustrated the difficulty of bringing the various selves, cultural, professional and private, under one roof. This theme continued on many different levels throughout the workshop.

There was also a parallel struggle to assess the capacity for holding within the group. The conductors were looked at critically, both coming from the so-called western side of Europe, unfamiliar with the many aspects of repression and occupation that had plagued Eastern Europe in recent history. In retrospect, it became clear that some members needed to probe this capacity for holding at the beginning, before allowing their painful experiences of

a professional and private nature to surface.

Experiences of temporary emigration that occurred, because of the need for professional training or further study, now became a topic for the group. The sudden loss of one's mother tongue in a strange environment surrounded by people, who communicate differently and have different values and priorities, was related by a young Czech student, who had returned from a year's study in the US. This theme was taken up by others in the second session. The difficulty of adjusting to a new environment, working in a language different from one's own mother tongue and finding roots as a professional was described by yet another member. Also the estrangement, when she returned "home" to her own country after fifteen years away and the difficulty she faced in re-connecting to what had become another world, took her by surprise. Another member related the pain of permanent emigration as a child, entering a strange school and being constantly excluded from the school group. The inability to communicate intensified her feeling of isolation.

One of the photographs, which the conductors had hung on the wall, was taken of an elderly couple in an open, spacious, green field and this became a symbol of a longed for oasis, a place one could be. Fears about the environment, first voiced by a young student member of the group, the search for space and green and the rapid disappearance of it, were expressed. It was in this session that the idea of national identity and how one is seen from the outside began to occupy the group. When one's country is or was at war, one's sense of belonging can become beset with confusion or shame. Travelling outside of the country, one is faced with how inhabitants of other nations can quickly change from a positive to a negative attitude. In the eyes of others, one can suddenly become a representative of a repressive regime. One has changed from being a native of a model country in their eyes to a native of a country of perpetrators and oppressors. One member of the group related how, because of this change, his family holiday in Europe, envisioned as a respite from stress and anxiety, based on previous experience, had suddenly become a nightmare. People looked at him differently, received him with reservations. A photograph of an installation of Louise Bourgeois, comprised of flat and convex mirrors, was one of the pictures hanging on the wall. It seemed, the experience of this group member was as if his fellow Europeans were holding up a convex mirror to him, when he was anticipating the usual flat mirror, where he could see himself as his expected, familiar self.

The fate of families, caught in the throes of war, and the effect of war on the individual's sense of identity, developed into major themes for the remaining two sessions. At the beginning of the third session the destruction of the environment and the dangers of climate change returned as a subject matter for the group. Maria Lassnig's portrait of a human head, caught in the mesh of a grid, which could also be a chip of an electronic circuit, "Barred Speech", came to mind. A recently published novel was also mentioned in this respect, describing the planet earth with one survivor, a dog. The two conductors were envisioned as two space dogs.

One member spoke of how national identity, seen through the lens of one's own national history, can often be in stark contrast to the historical view of the same events, seen from the perspective of the colonised neighbours. Realising that one's own nation's history, written by countries that were dominated by it, could tell the negative side of the story of the same historical events, one grew up to be proud of, forces one to refine the lens and to revise one's own national and individual identity. One Czech member, who had not spoken in the session up to then, was at this point addressed and he explained that he knew little English. He was encouraged to speak in his native tongue. The Czech Republic, with its recent history of repression by the soviet regime and with its exposure to constant surveyance by the secret service, was unable to reflect on its own history. Memories of the IAGP conference in Amsterdam, some months before the Berlin wall fell, where secret police had enrolled as participants, was still fresh in the memory of several members of the group, who had been present at that conference.

One member brought a painful memory of holding a gun in a war situation and being given the order to shoot all moving objects coming from a particular direction without hesitation. At that moment this participant had a sudden realisation that, if someone had come from that direction and had to be shot, the participant's identity would have suffered a split. This sudden shock at the possible loss of identity never left that group member, who had had already lost a close family member in a previous war situation. Another group member spoke of how, when he returned to his country, he had the painful task ahead of him of taking leave of his only son, who was due to do his military service in a war zone.

In the fourth session sharing of trauma continued, even though the group had grown in size. Even one member, new to the group, brought memories of being separated from her children during the war. She had to remove them to a safer place far away, while she continued her work in a bombarded city. She too felt the shame of being considered a perpetrator, coming from a country at war with its neighbours. Others expressed a sense of shame at their nation's history. Another participant told of the shameful uncovering of acts of violence, done to children in her country under their parents' "blind" eyes.

The "silent" Czech member, who suddenly broke his silence, spoke of a very traditional, conservative branch of his family, who were forcing a female cousin of his, now caught in the mesh of a dynasty of autocratic women, mother, grandmother, great grandmother, to take a husband she did not want to marry. There was a large Czech presence in this last session and this Czech member, who now spoke in his native tongue, was translated into English for the group by a female Czech colleague. It was an attempt perhaps to pick up the threads of a history that had suffered breaks and interruptions. The host country of the conference was allowing us visitors a quick look through the keyhole into their own fragmented history.