GROUP BELONGING AND TRANSCULTURALITY: THROUGH EXCLUSION TO TRANSFORMATION

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Introduction

In some very poor shanty towns of Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, a local organization (Association pour des Projets Psychosociaux)1 implements psychosocial projects for marginalized young people and families with serious psychosocial and mental health problems. The activities are designed and monitored in close cooperation with the international NGO HealthNet-TPO2, in which I operate as consultant and supervisor. The team that is implementing this project is Congolese and lead by Dr. N'situ, a psychiatrist, coordinator of the Association pour des Projets Psychosociaux and also member of the University Psychiatric Hospital Staff.

With the local community a new model of community-based psycho-social intervention is developed since 2005. The intervention aims at restoring relationships within the families and the community and at increasing their resilience. An action research3 and participatory group methodology is used in which groups of concerned persons cooperate in the various phases and cycles. Such methodology has a double goal. On the one hand to better deal with common problems through a concerted action with the various concerned persons or parties, and on the other hand to achieve a kind of learning through experience and ownership that enables this community to continue working collectively towards change.

For the development of a dynamic hypothesis (both psychodynamic and socio-dynamic/systemic) and action plan we used group-dynamic/group-analytic concepts and also insights from previous anthropological and transcultural qualitative research regarding mental health problems, local idioms of distress, and the work of traditional and spiritual healers in Kinshasa 4. In particular our observations and interviews with spiritual healers on their work with so-called 'child-witches' and their families was enlightening for us.

I will elaborate in this presentation on how we integrated the primary and secondary group belonging concepts and transcultural thinking in our analysis, working hypotheses and interventions. One of the challenges in this project is to make groupanalytic and transcultural concepts operational in actual contexts characterized by rapid socio-cultural change and fragile states like Congo.

Context

Let us firstly describe in a few words the problematic situation in its context. Kinshasa, a city of 8-10 million inhabitants with half of the population younger than 15 yrs old, living in over-crowded poor shanty towns, mostly unemployed, and surviving on the daily income of

small trade and the gifts and solidarity of family members; a city with internal migration and displacement of people and refugees from the war zones in the eastern provinces; a country politically unstable since 30 years and governed by corrupt politicians; neighborhoods with mixed ethnic groups, a common language (lingala), with most of the people living in nuclear families, sharing hybrid forms of traditional, post colonial western-christian and actual globalized consumerist sets of values.

On the margins of society, the 20 to 30.000 so-called street-children, the numerous so called 'child-witches' identified as the causes of the distress and the adolescent girls with unwanted pregnancies isolated, violated or marginalized within their homes. These children live in very precarious distressing situations and do not enjoy human rights and regular access to social basic provisions, physical protection, education, health and food. They are frequently faced with violence and economic exploitation. Little girls are particularly vulnerable for prostitution, assault and rape. Male youngsters have sometimes little jobs, but in order to survive many steal, sell and use drugs, attack people. This leads to a further hostile attitude of the society against them.

For our project it was important not to take only social dimensions of exclusion into account but also to pay attention to the degree of anxiety and the importance of cumulative traumatism to which these children and their families are submitted. From conversations with these street children we understood that, how unsafely and traumatizing living on the street can be, belonging to a peer group with other street-children also provides protection, freedom of actions, socialization and an own territory. For these kids the unstable street group life is a substitute for the life within their family group from which they had been excluded or that they had left themselves after conflicts.

Research and intervention

At the research stage of the project we held focus groups with key persons in the local communities, with children in the streets, parents, health workers and relief houses of expelled children. We hypothesized that the various forms of marginalization of children and expressions of mental illness were related to tensions within the family group (between spouses, parents and children, grandparents and parents, remarriages). Consequently we considered the psychosocial difficulties of these youngsters and families not as behavior problems and symptoms of individual illness but as defensive group 'solutions', when the primary group of belonging, the family, is faced with anxieties that can not be dealt with otherwise and 'habitual' solutions are no more accepted by the group members and effective.

Indeed it seemed that the family group felt and acted as a place to fight or to flight for a danger in the group. The fight/flight is enacted through conflicts between subgroups (alliances of children against parents, or between children- mother against father, or between maternal versus the paternal kinship), scapegoating or (auto)exclusion of one member of the group (usually a particular child), physical violence and authoritarian behavior (usually the male parent) or boundary transgressing attitude (parent or child).

These defensive solutions usually create more tensions and anxiety which leads to more

rigid or radical forms characterized by the rupture of relationships and the family network.

Our question was : What could produce in many families such tensions, anxiety and emotions that needed to warded of by these defensive and destructive group solutions? What is the link of these social group defenses with the developments in the Congolese society since 30 years?

The members of the primary group of belonging, the family members, all share at least since the time of one generation, daily experiences of change that radically affect themselves in the execution of their role and relationships in the group. The population of an ever-changing massive city as Kinshasa is faced with economic breakdown, unemployment and poverty on the one hand and rapid cultural changes in codes and values of the communities in Kinshasa on the other hand. The population feels powerless and only deals on a day-to-day survival mode with these changes which are experienced as catastrophic.

From a transcultural perspective we assume that in a given social context, organization, community and family the persons that belong to these groups enact automatically and mirror for each other the cultural codes and values that rule boundaries, responsibilities, interactions with others (the stranger, the other gender, the other generation), bodily behavior and the feelings about oneself. However due to the rapid changes and ruptures in Kinshasa today, these codes are not more transmitted in an automatic way between generations and are often from one to the next generation differently constituted.

To give some examples: The attitude of respect and obedience that an older person expects from a child is not more automatically mirrored by the child to day. The child who has learned in the street and on TV to speak up to parents or do his thing as he wants will not find easily a parent who may understand this and enters into a dialogue with him. Fathers or uncles or grandparents who according to their cultural socialization schemes are behaving as they are still the only ones that take the important decisions in the family - while everyone knows this is not more true - feel powerless and cannot deal with situations when children challenge their authority or request their understanding. Children live in a world where their expectations and desires are continuously raised and magnified through stories and television and at the same time they are daily frustrated**.**

Role of culture and groups

Let us remind for a moment the psychodynamic functions of culture. Culture offers codes, standards and values for development of the identity, ideals and self-image, the social roles and the distinction between gender and generations. Moreover culture offers collective manners and rituals to reduce anxieties, deal with the not-known, and to give form to changes and passages in the functioning of one's roles in groups. Finally culture forms the basis of a feeling of being part of a social whole.

It is important to mention here one of the premises of the research work done in the EATGA. The transmission of the cultural codes and values as operators for the Self depends on the quality of the transmission that takes place from generation to generation in the primary group of belonging first and later on supported by the secondary groups of

belonging. In fact in Kinshasa, not only the family groups have become very fragile and sometimes incoherent spaces of transmission and identification for youngsters, but also the secondary groups both the formal public ones as the state , schools, church, civil society groups, initiation camps for adolescents often lack the qualities of a transitional containing structure. Many of these secondary groups of belonging that support the individuals and primary groups have disappeared (for example the initiation camps of adolescents), become extremely bureaucratic, fragmented, structurally corrupted, based on perverse leadership or like some religious groups promising for their followers ideal and better worlds to come.

In fact the phenomena of marginalization and exclusion can therefore be considered not only produced by the individual and family dynamics but should be understood in the context of larger social and cultural dynamics that have an important impact on the constitution and functioning of primary and secondary groups.

Transculturality

Cultures within families and social groups in Kinshasa are heterogeneous, partial, fragmented, changing, contradictory, hybrid. The project we have developed has therefore the objective to enable primary and secondary groups of belonging to become transcultural matrix and forms of communication and interaction to deal better with the anxieties generated by cultural transitions and ruptures within these groups.

The transfer of codes, standards and values do not happen automatically and in an univocal way, but can only be carried out by the important parental figures by means of the language and non-verbal, unconscious communications.

In the Kinshasa project, we decided after the exploratory phase to create a network of key-persons in one of the shanty towns belonging to various formal and informal organizations (healthcare, municipality, catholic church, spiritual religious groups, woman support groups, youth groups,..). Within meetings of this network of secondary groups with different cultural codes and values, dialogue was installed as the main vehicle to think together. We agreed to establish (a) a training program for both leaders of these organizations to run together a collective support project for marginalized youth (b) a training program for members of these organizations who could become community counselors and group mediators with families and (c) a listening center for short-term adolescent groups.

In order to address intercultural differences and conflicts and develop transcultural containing structures, this can only take place through dialogue in groups, the real family groups or social groups or neo-groups. However the authority to install dialogue can only be taken by those who have the legitimacy and accepted authority to do so. In fact those who are symbolically seen and admitted as parental figures in this particular culture.

Training

The trainings we designed and implemented were based on an action learning group model. With a minimal input of conceptual tools as those presented above, the counselors were put at the task to identify marginalized young people with various forms of distress in their community, meet and speak with them, and for those who wanted it to establish

contacts with some member of their family or come to participate at peer group meetings. For the leaders to establish between themselves and their organizations cooperative work relationships, support for their counselors and referral in order to set up community-based forms of social, educational, vocational support.

The opportunities, resources and difficulties the counselors and the leaders of the organizations faced formed the content for reflection, exercising in role plays and building the skills to listen, counsel and mediate between conflicting persons in family groups. Moreover the aim of an intervention was not been restricted to finding a solution but includes also learning the way in which this solution has been reached. One enables conflicting parties to learn of the experience and also contributes to the `empowerment' of the persons. The result of the intervention (for example reintegrating an expelled child in the family network) is important. But it is even more important that the primary and secondary group of belonging learn by this experience in future situations to use conflicts in a constructive manner (for example by contracting a conversation and to listen to each other reciprocally before proceeding to action).

The used model of counseling and mediation within the group corresponds with the transformative model of mediation in contrast to strict solution oriented model. There exists no pre-defined topic or step-by-step plan that has been agreed in advance or as a protocol. The aim is to make a good conversation possible.

The counselor helps the persons to share ideas and discuss feelings which are related to living together (and not only with respect to the conflict). This helps the counselor to come in contact with the emotions in the interactions and underlying meaning of the conflicts. The counselor support clarifying and developing insight in the contribution of each family member in the destructive and repeating interaction patterns. The persons are invited to tell more about their perspective on the problems, conflicts, the role of each and the relation within the family network. An important aspect of this work is that the counselor is able to contain expressed emotions and deal with the transference and counter-transference and systemic pitfalls of triangulation, not becoming a judge between parties or spokesman for one of the parties. The counselor helps the members to develop a common approach to handle tensions, conflicts and discuss other important questions in the family. The parties are helped to get their aims, options and resources clear, as a result of which they can make choices better. The degree in which space is made for individual aims and for the interest of the group is together discussed gradually during the process of mediation by the involved group members. This mediation contains also elements of family therapy - repairing borders, roles and appropriate interactions between generations - and narrative therapy - telling and constructing tales concerning living in this family network.

From a structural perspective, codes and values of living together are negotiated, re-elaborated, practiced between the sessions, commented upon and 'evaluated'. The primary group of belonging is a container in which sub-groups are creating transcultural modes of interacting and relating that guarantee the continuity of the group.

Practice of transcultural counseling/mediation

The practice of the group counseling and mediation takes 2-12 months with an average of 5 conversations with the children and key persons in the family. In general several previous contacts with the child/adolescent and/or with the father or the mother have taken place. Often also a neighbor, friend or other person from the larger family is asked by the mediator to support his trial to involve the father, often the most resisting person, in the mediation sessions.

In fact every trajectory with a family is different and the creative flexibility of the counselor is an important asset. For the counselor the most difficult is to listen and counsel adequately when he is faced with his own anxieties, feelings of compassion or hatred when aggressive children are attacking his own cultural values and modes of behavior. He may react with fear and very defensively with children who had been identified as 'witches' considered by the environment to have caused the illness or death of family members.

The counter transferences usually link to own unresolved conflicts and early trauma in the relationship with authoritarian or depressive parents in their childhood. But these are also caused by the fact that the counselor also carries unconsciously the cultural codes and defense attitudes which dominate in the community.

Of the 970 cases that were documented after the intervention 75 % were evaluated by an external supervisor as positive: in these cases connections and dialogue between family and child and in the family in general was established, and the identified problematic youngster had reintegrated school or work.

Learning

Facilitating such a process with groups of adolescents or with a family group require a specific knowledge and experience in working with dynamic processes. The training of community counselors regards therefore not only training new skills and attitudes but also making step by step one's own a work model and intervention style which is appropriate at the aforesaid aims and challenges. The training program that has been developed for the counselors had to deal with limited financial resources. This obliged us to create a new type of training including monthly teaching seminars with a trainer group therapist and technical supervision. The participants also met weekly without supervisors in a peer group, called 'anchor group'. We discovered along the process that the anchor groups were not only used to discuss cases but also to share directly or indirectly problems in his own family in his/her role as father/mother or talked about experiences of mediation the counselor has initiated in his own family. This 'training on-the-job' was initially lived by the participants as very frustrating and distressing. Only later they more openly reported that it has contributed to the personal development of the participants and for some been used as a personal therapeutic process.

During the training, most of counselors identified themselves initially with the one or other conflicting party (generally the parent position at a conflict between parent-child; or with the person of the same sex in a marital conflict). Step by step by means of the interactions and reflections with other participants they discovered their own unconscious agenda and

motivation. It was not our original aim but the participants reported during the evaluation after two years, except the successes and difficulties of the counseling, also the changes which had appeared in themselves, other attitudes in their own family, decisions which they had taken to change the link with other family members or a more founded self-confidence, which they had acquired. All this indicated an increased perception of autonomy paired with emotional insight in the dynamics in one's own role in the family, as well as the transformations and tensions which they lived just like every other family in Kinshasa.

Participants of the program reported at the final evaluation also that they felt, beyond their role as community counselor, more competent to address tensions and culturally based conflicts within their own organization and as citizens and key persons in the larger community.

This can be illustrated with a case of Yasmine, one the female counselors in the training.

Case Yasmine

Yasmine, 22 years old, had not started her high school studies when she had 18 years but had decided to do the household. She was active in a social working party of the catholic church in the district and took care of children in need. During the counselor training Yasmine had spoken in the anchor group about a problem in her family. One of her brothers, Jean, 14, had become a drug abusing and violent boy living on the street. He came from time to time home and thereby had each time large rows with father. Yasmine kept in secret contact with its brother Yasmine made up for herself an analysis of the dynamics in her family.

She became aware during the training that in the family a permanent conflict was played out between the her maternal grandmother and her father. In absence of a maternal uncle, who is traditional referent of the maternal line, the conflict concerned the role on who can decide concerning the children like Jean. This grandmother discredited the interventions of the father who on the basis of a Western vision on parenthood took the complete responsibility concerning the children. But, such as a lot of fathers in Kinshasa, he did this in an ambivalent manner and withdrew himself eventually not indicating clear boundaries and educational rules to his son. Jean experienced this situation as confusing and as neglecting and went against that in protest by means of his revolting behaviour. Yasmine avoided this situation while keeping links with Jean and looking after children in the community who were mangled in similar family situations as herself.

Some day Yasmine made on the basis of her insight clear to her father that he should better manage the problems about Jean with his spouse (her mother) and her mother . Yasmine did that when her father asked her to intervene and convey some message to Jean. Yasmine now helped Jean to find a work education project and decided herself to leave home and continue her study. It was discussed and accepted by father that both Yasmine and Jean and some of the other siblings would stay with the paternal grandmother.

Looking back, one can say that Yasmine became aware of her role in the family dynamics and the conflict situation. She also realized that she did not have to intervene as a child in a conflict of its father and maternal granny. When for some reason fathers do not communicate with the maternal line (uncle or grandmother as in this case), this frequently

leads to tensions in the family, neglect and behaviour problems of a child. She discovered that the ambiguity, conflicts and retreat from parental responsibilities of a father and of the maternal uncle (maternal line) in a society where the traditional and Western codes clash with each other happens in many families. And that it can only be solved through dialogue and dealt with as a mixed responsibility. Yasmine devised an opening solution for herself and her brother, not directly attacking her father or nanny, but taking responsibility for her own development. In her work in the church NGO Yasmine stopped to take the compassionate mother role for the neglected children but initiated forms of dialogue in the group about solutions for the problems that lied behind.

Reflection and the step to a new phase in the project

The evaluation also revealed that many counselors did not get the support within their organization necessary to conduct their work as counselor well. It became clear that the sustainability of the project and anchoring of it in the local organizations was not assured. Our local partner organization APPS was more and more considered as the organization which would ensure the psychosocial assistance in the community. This did not correspond to its role in the project. This reflection was shared and analyzed in meetings with the leaders of the organizations and a new phase of the project was designed.

All participating organizations now committed themselves to really associate their own activities within the joint inter-sectoral network. As an aim of this new phase it was also decided to build the capacity of organizations to cooperate to a collective project with other organizations in a community not only those they felt culturally speaking near to. Counseling and mediation as a component, beside other activities were now arranged with the participating NGO, municipality and health care, such as small income projects, vocational training, social practical initiatives of young people, first line health care. Cooperate action learning proved to be an excellent experience to acquire organization skills learn and be able to operate more as a connected community.

In this new networking structure a new form of transcultural containment and agents offer a psychological and social anchor at the level of the community. But also help to devise generative solutions and structures which offer an elastic answer within the context of the fast social transformations on uncertainty, fear and destruction. An answer which have its roots in the intense vitality and creativity of people.

As we start our study day, I hope to have shared with you how transcultural groupwork in fragile communities is challenging and feasible. It raises several methodological and conceptual questions which we can further discuss.