

# TRANSCULTURALITY/INTERCULTURALITY AND ITS MEANING FOR EATGA IN TODAY'S WORLD.

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I am very pleased to talk tonight about transcultural and intercultural hypotheses especially after Zack's very comprehensive lecture. Especially her emphasis on the fact that cultural difference is an important issue in therapy. Some time ago I gave a lecture in Basel at the Psychoanalytic Society talking about transcultural issues based on my experiences in El Salvador and in my private practice in Basel. Many colleagues argued that they don't work with patients from other cultures, even though they have patients from other European countries. For many therapists transcultural issues are part of the therapy with non-western migrants. Thus in everyday life it is very common to speak about the British, Germans, Italians etc. or we go for vacation to Italy, Germany, England and so on being well aware that we will be faced with cultural differences.

My personal interest in the topic originates from my involvement in El Salvador, Central America and my contact with Goldy and Paul Parin, two psychoanalysts who went to West Africa already in the late 1950th. Their objective was to investigate whether psychoanalytical concepts like transference – countertransference are also valid in interviews in non-western cultures. I myself have been involved since 1995 in projects of team-supervision and training in group work and introduction to psychoanalytic theories in El Salvador where I became aware of intercultural issues which interfered many times with the work I was doing.

In 1985 the first workshop of EATGA took place in Maastricht. Since then the world has changed considerably, the EU has grown from 9 members to 28 today and Europe is no longer divided into two power blocks. But there have also been other important political changes and events; with the Balkan conflicts and the subsequent collapse of Yugoslavia we experienced the first war on European territory since 1945. 9/11 with its global impact provoked the “war on terrorism” and in its aftermath widespread islamophobia. With the Schengen Convention Europe has become the fortress Europe and with the implementation of the Euro in 18 countries Europe is now one of the largest economic regions in the world. And last but not least there is the growth of nationalism which right now is preoccupying us with what is happening in the Ukraine.

Besides the political and social changes there were also important transformations in the field of communication. Most people have access to internet; we use email to communicate with each other, we have mobiles, Twitter and Facebook and more and more we use Skype. For me it was an interesting experience to get to know Zack Eleftheriadou via Skype, we both found it really helpful not only talk to each other on the phone or write by mail but also to see each other; communication is different when you can have access to the facial expressions especially when you don't know the other person.

Transcultural and intercultural have become two terms widely used but very often without a clear definition. EATGA has continuously held its study days and workshops trying to reflect in experiential groups what transcultural and intercultural means in this changing world.

On the occasion of our last scientific meeting in Lyon we used the technique of Photolangage®. The task was to select from a collection of about 200 photos the one which shows best what transculturality means to each one. It was a very interesting experience; in particular to learn how different people had different associations to the same picture. Subsequently the question came up, whether we were really talking about transculturality or was it rather interculturality. This leads to the questions about the meaning of these terms in our discussions during group work in EATGA.

In the following I would like to show how I understand the terms using the concepts of Berenstein and Puget and their model of a psychic apparatus which they see as separate zones or psychic spaces. Berenstein and Puget are Argentinian psychoanalysts who lived through the dictatorship from 1976 to 1983 in their country and started already then to reflect on the impact of the outer reality on psychotherapy and group analysis. Yet outer reality doesn't interfere only in extreme situations like state terrorism, in fact it is a constant even though less obvious in "normal" times.

Emphasizing the difficulty to become aware of the sociocultural space of the patient in psychoanalytic clinical work, the authors postulate three different psychic spaces existing side by side. They regulate the interaction of the inner and outer reality. It is a metaphor of psychic representations and the link of the ego with its body and one or several other subjects. It's the intrapsychic, the intersubjective and the transsubjective space.

The intrapsychic space covers the representations, images, dreams and phantasies of the subject, that's where the body representations and the mental functions are. I will not get into details of it as Zack has already explained this space quite thoroughly. The other two spaces are the ones I will use for my discussion of the meaning of intercultural/transcultural.

The intersubjective space is the link between the subject and the outer world. It is the sphere of relation of the self with the outer world, the exchange of intimate immediate emotions such as love, tenderness, anger and hatred. Berenstein and Puget elaborated their concept from individual psychoanalysis as well as from their experiences as family, couple and group analysts. They argue that some material is excluded if the two, analyst and analysand are insisting on certain assumptions. "This material refers to the social subjectivity as well as to the effect of an irreducible other on one's own ego, one's own being." (my translation) as Janine Puget says in her article. (Psyche 9/10, 2004).

Intersubjectivity is a term with many different interpretations depending on the psychoanalytic school the authors come from. As couple-, family and group analysts Berenstein and Puget use an interpretation which seems to me of special interest for us as an organization working with groups; they include in their thinking the sociocultural space. They talk about the link between the subjects and differentiate it from the object relation.

Puget differentiates two spaces of thinking, thinking alone and thinking with others, with one or several persons. If we are thinking alone we have our own inner systems of reference, we relate to our experiences and history. It means to be in relation with oneself, with one's inner world and to understand the world through our ideas; we try to explain what we see, hear or experience by means of our inner representations, introjects, identifications and internalizations. It is a "monologue" between two individuals where one individual is

present in phantasy; it is the attempt to explain information from the outside through our own experiences, our own thinking. Thinking with others refers to the space between two or several subjects, it is thinking the interspace. In order to think the interspace, one or several persons have to be present; otherwise we imagine what the other would say and therefore it is what's called by Puget thinking "alone". This means becoming aware (consciously or unconsciously) of the impossibility of fully understanding and explaining what is happening which leads to tensions. The natural tendency to reduce the other to an object in order to understand his or her thinking and attitude fails; we are confronted with an irreducible difference. Our own inner structure is challenged by the unfamiliar and the otherness. It is a narcissistic injury and for this we try to unmake the difference.

This difference originates in the dissimilarity of the outer reality of each person and not on his or her handling of intrapsychic mechanisms. Thinking with others refers to the link with the other whereas thinking alone refers to the object relation. The link is the relationship between subjects and their individual sociocultural space. Thus intersubjectivity as Berenstein and Puget define it is more than the space created between analyst and analysand, it includes the world view which each individual brings. In every group, be it a family, a therapeutic group or an organization there is a tendency to belong by understanding each other through past common experiences and by having a shared interpretation of the outer world; in other words they try to have a stable structure which gives the members a feeling of belonging; they construct a common phantasy using identification, dissociation and transference as a repetition. Newcomers and their new ideas are challenging this structure because they are bringing new perceptions, a new awareness of the outer reality and thus are challenging the familiar, the comfortable.

The third space is the transsubjective space. This is the place where the shared values of society such as ideologies, religions, ethical and moral values are developed. It is the space which is the least conscious as it refers to the world we are living in and which we take as a given. It becomes only conscious if an unexpected, extraordinary event happens which strikes the society as a whole and challenges our system of beliefs and assumptions about the outer world; e.g. the fall of the wall in 1998 or 9/11. This challenges the hitherto existing interpretations and explanations of what we assume as "normal" and give rise to deep anxieties.

The three spaces together, intrapsychic, intersubjective and transsubjective are the foundation of identity and belonging. Belonging has two roots, the family identity and the social identity. The first one refers to the fact that we are part of a homogenous group of similar fellows: Similar in this context means that we share, at least in phantasy, the same traditions and history. Social identity refers to the belonging to a heterogonous entity, the social, historic, geographic, linguistic and political groups to which the subject belongs. This part of belonging becomes of special importance if the heterogeneous entity changes as for instance through migration.

Let us come back now to the terms intercultural/transcultural. I will use culture in this context as the values, beliefs, behaviors, customs and material objects which are characteristic of a certain society, region or nation.

I would like to refer to transculturality the way Dennis Brown used it: “I propose that we tentatively use the term transculturality to describe the ideal relationship between cultures” and later “...it would acknowledge at least some similarities between different cultures and some processes which cross over and through them, and so bind them together in a common humanity”. And René Kaës said in his lecture at the study day in 2009 in Aix-en-Provence: “The common and the shared, the continuity beyond differences. Transculturality cannot be felt nor thought otherwise than beyond interculturality, but starting from it. Its realm is the identity of human civilization.” As in the term transsubjectivity the prefix “trans-“is referring to what we have in common, the continuity beyond the differences.

“Inter-“on the other hand is what is in-between, what is different. Interculturality consequently refers to the differences, the foreign and otherness. Taking up again intersubjectivity the way I used it earlier, I would like to refer to our above mentioned experience with Photolanguage in Lyon last year. As I explained, it is a technique where every member of the group selects a photo which symbolizes for her or him the best the answer on a question asked by the group leader. In our case it was “Select the photo which represents best what transculturality implies for you?” Unlike verbal answers the group is confronted with a visual image. As all had the same options to select a photo it was amazing for all the participants to see (literally) how different the metaphors were for each person. We were confronted with the otherness, the foreign where we had expected at least some common agreement.

As Europeans we assume automatically a “European” culture being alike for all of us, but as soon as we meet somebody from another European country we expect him or her almost automatically to come from a different background, a foreigner. The saying “he or she is just the way he is, he is an Italian, French, British, German etc.” is widely used, often in a joking or at first sight affectionate way, in order to explain some behavior which may seem foreign, incomprehensible or irritating. It is an attempt to hold off the incomprehensible and ambiguous and by giving it an explication, keep it under control. Though the expression includes implicit prejudice and makes clear that the other doesn’t belong to the same group. On the other hand it helps to avoid conflicts, to have to admit that there is an otherness which is irreducible, a gap we can’t close.

As mentioned earlier the members of every group have a tendency to seek a common ground, a common structure, a wish for belonging and hence a tendency to exclude or avoid the unknown. This way of talking about people of another nationality gives rise to a feeling of similarity, we all know how they are, and hence to a transcultural identity as Dennis Brown defined it: “...acknowledge at least some similarities between different cultures and some processes which cross over and through them, and so bind them together in a common humanity”

Yet another possibility of avoiding confrontation with cultural otherness is the referring to the common history. As Europeans we share a large history stained by many horrible wars and regimes and it is very painful to see how over generations these experiences are carried on. These themes are very important and have often been part of our group work. They refer to another “trans-“, the transgenerational which will not be part of our discussion today but a theme which might be a consideration for future meetings of EATGA.

A short vignette illustrates how we automatically look for the common ground when we meet somebody:

A patient called for a first interview. His German sounded to my ears Austrian with a slight accent which I interpreted as eastern European. My surprise couldn't have been greater when I went to the waiting room. A brown skinned young man was sitting there. As it turned out he was from India and had studied at the University in Vienna before he came for personal reasons to Switzerland. Thus my first impressions on the phone turned out to be unusable, unfounded and I was confused. What I automatically assumed as common ground, -a European culture -didn't apply. On the other hand we had more in common through his level of education and social background. I became conscious of how strong our expectations and ideas about a person are formed by external attributes and how disconcerting it is if our assumptions are found to be false.

This disconcertion reminds us of what was said about intersubjectivity, according to Janine Puget and Isidoro Berenstein. There is a part of an irreducible difference which is a narcissistic wound. As we in EATGA try to understand the intercultural through our experiential group work how can we deal with this fact? How can we deal with the differences amongst our members who come from different cultural backgrounds? We are all Europeans with a common history but also citizens of different countries or regions. Fakhry Davids explores in his book "Internal racism" the fact that we all need a place where we can project our own negative feelings. He uses the term "racial other" for social stereotyping to differentiate it from the other in the early mother-infant relationship and later the relationship with the "third", usually the father. By referring to social stereotyping he makes clear that racism is a metaphor in order to have a place where parts of the unwanted internal objects can be projected. This shows how we are constantly oscillating between the intrapsychic and the intersubjective. Going back to the experience with Photolanguage the choice of a photo by an individual is on the one hand lead by his or her intrapsychic world and at the same time by the intersubjective process going on in the group. Thus showing the picture to the group makes it evident that the group is not a homogenous group, but consists of individuals each with a personal and cultural history. On the other hand each picture refers also to a unique identity formed by the personal history formed on the background of the social and cultural experiences.

Concluding my reflections on the meaning of transcultural/intercultural in today's world I would like to emphasize the difficulty of accepting the fact that there is always an irreducible otherness. This gives rise to perplexity and anxiety which might lead to negative feelings such as anger, disdain and disregard. This threatens the group coherence and the feeling of belonging for its members and there is a tendency to seek a shared history be it the narrative of the family, the group or the organization or the broader common history.

As the object of EATGA is to explore transcultural and intercultural issues in a multicultural experiential group the challenge is to become aware of these inclinations and reflect it on a conscious level in order to understand the intercultural differences and our limits of

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