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PARALLEL PAPERS III
SATURDAY 8th JULY 1100-1215
ROOM IV - 7.0.22

Antoaneta Mateeva & Zlatko Teoharov
The Stranger is a Stranger only from Afar: An Interactive Model of Group Work with the Issues of Ethnicity, Stigmatization and Tolerance

This study is based on the experience of the authors with the organization of 5 training events with professionals and volunteers from Roma and Bulgarian ethnicities concerning the living situation of Roma women victims of domestic violence. Two days workshops were implemented with the aim to explore the specific ways in which the representatives of both ethnicities co-construct their group identities in a stable opposition to the “dangerous other”.

The notion of the “dangerous other” was introduced by the authors in order to emphasize an image of the other who represents huge difference from the participants’ own culture and is perceived as strange, unusual and even dangerous.

Drawing on some specific concepts developed in the fields of psychoanalysis (D. Winnicott’s transitional space and the role of playing, V. Volkan’s understanding of large group identity formation), psychodrama methodological principles offered by P. F. Kellermann for the discovery of the blind spots in the perspective to the other, and sociological knowledge

developed by B. Link and J. Phelan about the stages of stigmatization and discrimination, specific model of interactive work with the group was developed and explored. It included combination of role play, self and group reflection, discussion of movies, social advertisements and drawings.

The main intention with which this model was created was to offer to the participants a space for exploration of the specific images and ideas through which both ethnic groups created their identity in relationship with the other. The dynamics through which the internal huge distance from the dangerous ethnic other was enacted back in the physical and mental space of the workshop was also part of this reflective process.

The aim of the interactive model was:

- to shorten the internal distance kept by the culturally developed stereotypes and the lack of direct positive experience with the other group;
- to broaden the image of the other and the meaning of the relationship between the two groups;
- to keep the existed differences between the two ethnicities but to make them not so frustrating.

In order to do that we used the place and space of the workshop in several ways:

- as a real space of meeting between the two ethnic groups when sharing similar tasks and equal power in their participant’s role;
- as a transitional space in which group members were able to play with an alternative, broader and controversial image about self and other;
- as a mirroring space where some ‘socially unacceptable’ feelings and ideas could be shared and further explored in a non-blaming context and new

meaning about the experience with the other would be achieved.

The conclusion was made from this experience that in order to challenge the limited perception about the dangerous other with which our minds usually operate a specific place and space have to be created in which an alternative to the power imbalanced way of meeting with the other can occur. We introduced the concept of the ‘mother’s face as a space’ both real and symbolic in order to explore the specific function of the space created by the physical environment of the workshop and its directors as a space for intense sharing and provision of new meaning about the relationship with the different other.

Antoaneta Mateeva

Organizational consultant and supervisor of social and healthcare services, researcher and lecturer at the Department of Healthcare and Social work, NBU. MA in Clinical social work (New Bulgarian University) and PhD in Psycho-social studies (University of the West of England). Organizing Committee member of the Psychology of Groups Institute and co-founder of Right to Childhood Foundation.

Zlatko Teoharov

Psychodrama therapist (DEA Institute), group psychoanalyst and trainer (IAG Institute, Bonn, Germany), lecturer at New Bulgarian University (MA in Artistic Psychoanalytic Practices and Psychodrama) and at EFHD, Germany. President of the Psychology of Groups Institute. Published widely in Bulgarian and German language in the fields of psychotherapy, psycho-social practices and philosophy.