



A HOUSE DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF? Identities and Cultures in Violent Conflict

An Experiential Working Conference in the Series "The Past in the Present"

April 6 – 11 2016

Kliczków Castle, Poland

Director's Report

Conference Title and Concept

This was the third in the series of conferences which PCCA launched in 2012 with a focus on Europe. The first two conferences were titled "European Victims and Perpetrators, Now and Then". In view of the drastic events and turbulence in Europe, the terrorist attacks, controversial influx of refugees from the Middle East, and ethnic and religious strife, PCCA decided to focus on the currently burning issues in Europe and elsewhere. As part of the wish to remain current with these developments, the date of the conference was moved up to April 2016. To capture and relate to the current strife, the conference was titled: "*A House Divided against Itself? Identities and Cultures in Violent Conflict.*"

The crisis in Europe seemed to have found its way into the conference, as I will elaborate, giving rise to an impressive series of incidents that accompanied the entire course of events, at times in an almost uncanny fashion. It would be accurate to say that while the conference was in many ways highly successful, it contained a theme of something constantly missing and being out of control, representing a systemic replication of the conference theme.

Sponsorship

Aside from the PCCA initiative and ownership, the conference had an impressive list of sponsoring organizations: The German Psychoanalytic Society (DPG), the German Psychoanalytic Association (DPV), the Israel Psychoanalytic Society (IPS), the Polish Psychoanalytic Society (PPS), the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA), OFEK (Israel Association for the Study of Group and Organizational Processes), and the Tavistock Institute.

Pre-Conference Stage

Venue: The conference took place again in Kliczków Castle, Poland. As noted in my previous reports, the Castle bears a special historical and geographic legacy: it is situated in an area that was German for centuries and belonged to a German



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aristocratic family, the last owner having been involved in the assassination plot against Hitler. A further reason for selecting and maintaining the relationship with the Castle are its adequate spaces, its very reasonable financial conditions, and the excellent services and cooperation it offers. These positive attributes were evident this time as well, perhaps even more than in the past.

Staff Recruitment: The selection of staff reflected several principles: continuity with previous conferences as well as providing new inputs; age (especially adding younger staff) and gender distribution; representation of diversity – ethnic, religious, national, etc. Originally the list of staff included 4 UK, 2 German, 2 Israelis, 1 Polish and 1 Australian. In fact, the diversity represented by these staff persons was even greater than the bare facts reveal. Two staff were asked to step down three weeks before the conference started due to the low state of registration. Shortly thereafter, however, two other staff members, the designated Associate Director and Administrator, had to be relieved due to family and medical issues, whereupon one of the relieved staff was asked back. The final staff numbered seven: 3 UK, 1 German, 1 Australian, 1 Polish, and 1 Israeli.

The unexpected resignation of the designated Associate Director and Administrator presented a last minute gap in the conference management that had to be filled quickly. Fortunately, Dorothee von Tippelskirch-Eissing, who was on staff and had previously taken up these roles, agreed to step in and assume both functions on very short notice. She did so brilliantly and the conference was held and maintained flawlessly.

Membership Recruitment: Recruitment efforts followed the usual paths of sending the flyer to PCCA and our sponsors' mailing lists. The flyer was on hand in several conferences. A personal letter was sent to the presidents of all the European psychoanalytic societies. The conference had its own website and it was also featured in the IPA website's Events Calendar. An innovation for this conference was the launching of a PCCA page on Facebook, but it is unclear if anyone actually registered from it. There was a report from the UK of refusal to register due to the conference being perceived as "Israeli" and the strong anti-Israel sentiments in the UK.

A group of 9-10 Palestinians (Israeli Arabs) registered simultaneously and requested full financial support, including travel expenses. They were offered very substantial bursaries without coverage of travel expenses, upon which they all withdrew. The withdrawal of this large number (about a quarter of those



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registered at the time) shortly before the conference opening date is what forced the downsizing of staff.

Two surprises, perhaps more accurately disappointments, should be noted with regard to the membership: First, the relatively small numbers. This was quite surprising in view of the unanimous across the board response to the theme of the conference as being both very timely and greatly important and interesting. Viewing this positive response and the subsequent decline to participate (often stated as "I will come next year") in systemic terms, it suggests an acknowledgement of the issues together with a refusal to deal with them, and a wish to avoid it. The second noteworthy fact is the glaring failure to recruit members from East Europe. This failure is especially notable in view of the successful PCCA event in Krakow in December 2015. In fact, only a single person who had participated in it came to the conference.

Fee Structure: The full fee was raised a bit, reflecting changed currency values. As in the previous two conferences, the fees were divided into a full fee and about half of that (even slightly reduced compared to previous fees) for East Europeans. In addition, a further reduction for double occupancy was also available.

Bursaries: We were able to offer bursaries due to the financial support of the two German and the Israeli psychoanalytic societies. As mentioned, the generous bursaries offered to the Palestinians were turned down (with the exception of one), which made it possible to offer considerable bursaries to several other participants.

Composition of Membership: The final number of members was 37. Less than 25% of the membership were repeaters, so a large proportion was new to this work. The breakdown of the group shows a much higher rate of women to men (30:7), a considerably older group (only 2 under 50 and most in the 56-78 range), and two large nationality groups (18 Germans, 10 Israelis). For the first time we had one member from France. There were 4 UK, 3 USA, 1 Swedish and 1 Polish members. Professionally, the largest group by far consisted of psychoanalysts/ psychotherapists (25), with smaller groups of educators (4) and organizational consultants (4). On the whole, the membership reflected sufficient variation despite these statistics, and it was markedly serious and work oriented.



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Conference Design and Events: The design of the conference was similar to the previous ones: Opening and Closing Plenaries, 5 Small Study Groups, 5 Large Study Groups, 3 Review and Application Groups, 4 Social Dreaming Matrices, and a System Event spread over 8 sessions. It is noteworthy that the last session of the SE was not designated a priori as a plenary and/or review session. It was left up to the membership and developments within the SE to initiate and organize the final session. In the event, a group of members took this initiative and negotiated the structure of the final session with management and the other groups in the event.

Group Relations Methodology and this Conference: More than ever, this conference demonstrated the immense value of utilizing the Group Relations approach and methodology. As already mentioned, the conference was beset by a chain of events that impinged upon its boundaries in potentially destructive ways. I mentioned already the need to make quick changes in the staff and to adapt their deployment. There were difficulties in managing staff arrivals due to unexpected changes in flight and train schedules, and a last minute car breakdown. The pre-conference staff meeting began with 2 staff missing (and the first comment in the Opening Plenary was about the two empty chairs facing the Director). Similar issues affected the membership: a group of four travelling together did not receive their luggage for several days, the last suitcase arriving after the conference had ended. A member had to be hospitalized with a suspected heart failure, which turned out to be pneumonia, but he had to leave the conference prematurely. These various events, which could be upsetting and disruptive, were perceived and understood in systemic terms, in a way that was actually productive and related to the conference theme and primary task. It was possible to see the larger system permeating the conference system, and the conference system as an integral part of the external system. Group Relations methodology, taken seriously, is what enabled this kind of work.

Themes: Continuing the above description, the conference was permeated by a theme of imperfection, of something missing, going astray, endangering and challenging the comfortable view of the world. This fitted well with the theme of “A House Divided”. To avoid a wrong impression, it should be pointed out that while this theme was present, the conference itself was nonetheless well held and contained, judging by the experience of both members and staff.

Another aspect of the title and primary task had to do with *identity* and its *complexity*. Both membership and staff struggled with this difficult notion. Members groups in the SE reflected fragmented parts of a whole identity. All the



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groups were inner-directed, with binary titles concerned with internal states: rootedness and being uprooted, helplessness and inner violence, pain and reconciliation, love and hate, risk and craziness, and envy and competition. It was indeed difficult to hold the vast array of identities and internal struggles together, but the membership worked hard at it. A poignant realization came from an encounter with two of the oldest members. It was related in a working hypotheses of the management in the SE: “Hope for moving out of paralysis may have to do with the older generation not pushing [the possibility for change] into the younger generation and continuing to struggle.” It may be said that this conference, given its relatively older membership, represented the determination of the older generation to continue to struggle with these issues, and not to give up and assign the work to the younger generation. At the same time, the dearth of the younger generation raises questions regarding its willingness and readiness to engage.

The Learning: Judging by many responses, a great deal of learning seems to have taken place, even if it cannot easily or neatly be put into words. The intertwining of one’s personal identity with overarching identities is difficult to acknowledge. It was often experienced as a struggle between a stance of “me-ness” as against belonging to a larger entity which generates the fear of losing one’s identity. One of the recurring themes in the LSG was clinging to a personal identity as a defense against the loss of one’s boundaries in the group. It would appear that members have at least experienced this tension repeatedly and powerfully, and for some it may have been a difficult experience.

In Closing: As this conference is the third and last in a projected series of three, it is important that PCCA considers the direction to be taken by future conferences. The European focus was very much needed and productive, and undoubtedly can be pursued even further. At the same time, the fact that the conference presented a picture of two large nationality groups, Germans and Israelis, may also be a message and a reminder of PCCA’s original work and roots, and where the real interest lies. This needs to be coupled with the fact that, for whatever reason, the East European focus seems to have failed. All this calls for a reflective process that PCCA needs to engage in.

As for me, I feel privileged and grateful to have had the opportunity to direct this series of three conferences.

Respectfully submitted,



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Shmuel Erlich

Conference Director