



Antisemitism and Otherness – Director’s Report

Antisemitism and Otherness was the first conference in a new and experimental PCCA series on othering and the hatred of diversity. Given the sharp and troubling rise in antisemitism globally, it was decided that this would be the opening conference of the series.

Membership Composition

29 members participated in the conference, representing 12 different nationalities from 11 countries of residence. These included USA (8), UK (7), Israel (4), Germany (3), Australia, Austria, the Netherlands, Ireland, Portugal, Russia and Spain.

Gender and Age – Two thirds identified as female. The majority were over the age of 55, with 14 aged 55-64, 11 over the age of 65, three between 45-54 and only one between 35-44.

Professional Background – About half were psychoanalysts/psychotherapists/psychiatrists, six were organizational consultants, four were from academia (lecturing/teaching) two were development workers and the remainder were either in career transitions or retired.

Previous PCCA/GR Experience – 17 had participated in a previous PCCA conference, 8 had participated in a group relations conference and 4 had no previous experience of either PCCA or a group relations conference.

Series Participation – 17 participated in at least one other conference in the series. 12 participated in all three, 3 participated in Antisemitism and Migration, 2 participated in Antisemitism and Islamophobia and 12 participated in Antisemitism only.

Registration – Over three quarters of the membership registered before the early bird deadline.

Bursaries and Discounts – 5 people received a bursary, 1 received an Eastern European discount, and 17 received bulk discounts for registering for at least one other conference in the series.

Attendance - Of the 29 participants, two informed us just before the opening plenary that they would be unable to attend, and one – who was registered for all three conferences - did not attend any part of the conference, leaving 26 who were present.



Other Identities – There was no specific question on the registration form about religion. Rather, a question that asked “Other Identities” to which only 3 responded.

Through the unfolding dynamics of the conference, it became evident that over a third of the members identified as Jewish, and several had parents or grandparents who had been Nazis, with some having fought in the Second World War.

General – Overall, it was a relatively small membership compared to previous PCCA conferences. Was this because exploring antisemitism in the current climate may suggest that one is taking sides in relation to the ongoing situation in Gaza? Was the topic too current and hot? We began marketing in March and registration opened in June, which though later than we hoped, seemed long enough in advance, particularly based on past experience.

Interestingly, although Migration had notably more members (by almost 25%), Antisemitism and Islamophobia had quite similar numbers.

Staff

The staff team of nine was very diverse, in terms of nationality, country of residence, religious background, experience in the work and the complexity of their identities. Among them, two psychoanalysts, one clinical psychologist, one social worker, four organizational consultants, and one former business executive, now a consultant. The group comprised Christians (Polish Catholic, German Catholic by birth, Israeli-Palestinian Greek Orthodox) Jews (Diaspora, Israeli, new immigrant to Israel; observant, non-observant; not raised within a Jewish community, of Syrian descent) and Muslims (from both observant and non-observant backgrounds), including two women whose Jewish and Muslim identities were visibly expressed through their head coverings.

Directorate: Leila Djemal, Israel/UK/Thailand, (Director); Olya Khaleelee, UK (Associate Director); Katarzyna Gębala, Poland (Administrator).

Consultants: Mira Erlich-Ginor, Israel; Markus Feil, Germany; Lubna Khalid, Canada/Pakistan; Saleem Khliefi, Israel; Miriam Shapira, Israel; Mannie Sher, UK/South Africa.



The Directorate and Pre-Conference Work

The Directorate met regularly over a period of approximately four months, every three to four weeks. In addition, three pre-conference staff meetings were held – in July, August and September, approximately three weeks apart. These meetings gave the staff team time to explore the theme together, to reflect on the design and how to take up their roles within it, and to begin building the container that would hold the work with members. This way of preparing proved useful in deepening our understanding of the theme and in preparing us to work together as a staff team.

Program, Structure and Design

The conference was designed as a three-day event, held over a weekend in line with PCCA tradition. As we began planning the conference, it became clear to me that I did not want to hold a conference on antisemitism – and part of a series on othering and hatred of diversity – during the Jewish Sabbath, as its very design would have excluded observant Jews, both among staff and potential members. We therefore decided on three active days with a day of rest in the middle, enabling those observing the Sabbath to participate in the conference. The schedule was a full day on Thursday (7.5 hours), a shorter day on Friday (4.5 hours), and a full day on Sunday (7.25 hours). Saturday was included in the timetable as a “free day,” explicitly holding this day of rest within the conference boundary. We hoped that this would support a sense of continuity across the four days, and perhaps also allow the conference to percolate beyond the time boundaries of its events. (In my opening remarks for the conference, I highlighted that the Open Space Padlet – a collaborative online message board – would be available for participants to share thoughts and stay connected, even when we were not meeting.)

The Societal Event formed the core of the conference, spanning eight sessions. Alongside this was the ERE event, comprising Entry, Review, and Exit groups, as well as two Social Dreaming Matrices on the second and third mornings. In addition to the Opening and Closing Plenaries, there was a here-and-now, plenary event – which we called a “Citizens’ Meeting” – that took place at the end of the second day, before the long break from Friday afternoon to Sunday morning. No Small Study Group or Large Study Group events were held.

A feedback questionnaire was sent to participants two and a half weeks later and 19 out of the 26 responded to it.



A Post-Conference Follow-Up Meeting of 2.5 hours was held five weeks later, designed to provide a space for ongoing reflection and integration – recognizing that learning from the conference continues beyond its boundaries and that new insights may emerge over time and through renewed contact among participants. After a half-hour plenary, participants met in one-hour randomly divided small groups of four, followed by a 45-minute closing plenary. Sixteen of the 27 conference members registered for the event and 12 participated, along with 8 of the 9 staff members.

Societal Event

While PCCA conferences have previously included a Societal Event, **we developed this approach further** by introducing an innovative element: the “citizen role”. The event was designed to enable staff and members to take up “citizen roles” in relation to the temporary society of the conference. Staff worked as “Citizen Consultants”, with some forming a “Governing Group” in place of a traditional management group. This reflected our feeling that conventional management did not fit easily with the theme of antisemitism (what would we have been managing?) and that a governance perspective, was more appropriate, alongside a less hierarchical approach consistent with PCCA’s partners-in-learning stance. In keeping with that approach, we did not stipulate the traditional representation roles (observer, delegate, plenipotentiary). Member groups were free to use them or alternatively, to create representation roles of their choice. In the feedback, some members referred positively to what was perceived as a “less hierarchical approach” in this event.

We decided to have **consultants present in all the breakout rooms throughout the event**, partly to provide more ‘safety’/holding, given the conference theme, and also because there were no Small Study Groups – this was the primary here-and-now event, within which this continuous consultant presence could be offered as a resource. There was some discussion within the staff team about whether this level of presence might diminish members’ sense of freedom or autonomy, but ultimately, we decided to proceed on this basis. (In retrospect, did this also reflect the staff team’s fear? As one consultant asked after the conference, were we afraid that a territory without a consultant, a ‘legal vacuum’, might allow an ‘atrocious’ to occur?)

The Citizens’ Meeting, a here-and-now plenary event in the middle of the Societal Event, provided an opportunity to examine the society so far, and to offer an anchor before the 1.5-day break.



Strengths and Weaknesses of Key Design Elements

- **Societal Event**

The design was felt to be innovative, well suited to the conference theme and seemed appreciated by both members and staff.

For staff, taking up the ‘citizen consultant’ role, i.e. a ‘more peer-like stance’ as one consultant put it) was felt to be more challenging – one had to take up one’s authority to find the ‘citizen consultant’ role, and the task was felt to be harder to consult to. At the same time, there was a lot of curiosity and excitement about working in this way. Overall, the ‘citizen’ role held a sense of accountability or responsibility which was welcomed and felt to be appropriate for this topic.

Having consultants in the breakout rooms for the duration of the event and not having any staff meetings until the evening, may have contributed to the Governing Body’s feeling of isolation and being less in touch with what was unfolding during the event.

The **Citizens’ Meeting** seemed to work well and be helpful for members, though a question was raised about whether its ‘individual citizen’ focus came at the cost of members speaking from their groups/group identities.

Overall, we felt that design of the Societal Event worked well and would be worth repeating and exploring further.

- **1.5 Day Break / Day of Rest within the Conference Boundary**

The one day pause after the first two days and before the third day of the conference was for the most part felt to be helpful for the experience and learning. As one of the staff team put it: “This was an inspired decision, recognizing the religious and cultural significance of the Sabbath while also allowing a pause for digestion and reflection... The length of the conference and the allowance of rest proved critical in enabling participants to move beyond defensive into genuine learning”. Member responses included this (pause) being a welcome opportunity to rest and reflect, having had experiences during the break that also “fed into the conference” making it “a powerful interlude that enriched my learning,” and “an inspired and powerful intervention that allowed the conference to percolate beyond the time boundaries of the event.”



- **The Post-Conference Follow-Up Meeting**

The post-conference follow-up meeting appeared to be helpful in supporting and consolidating the learning from the conference. One question, however, was whether such a meeting was needed, given that the next conference might itself function as a continuation. For those who attended the meeting (about half of those who participated in the conference), it seemed to fulfil an important function in supporting the learning from this specific conference. Knowing that a follow-up meeting would take place helped them to continue reflecting on the conference in the interim, during which significant world events occurred, including the Israeli hostage release, further antisemitic attacks, and the increased prominence of Trump on the world stage — potentially adding external context to their reflections. It also seemed to enable participants to ‘wrap up’ and explore how to carry the learning forward, providing an additional space for reflection and consolidation beyond the Review and Exit Group during the conference itself. Feedback from attendees seemed very positive; one participant described the meeting as “brilliant” and three subsequently registered for additional conferences in the series.

Feedback Questionnaire

Nineteen (out of 26) participants completed the post-conference questionnaire. Responses reflected appreciation for the opportunity to engage with a difficult and emotionally charged subject and to hear a range of perspectives. Several expressed the wish for more time, continuity and opportunities for further dialogue. Almost all said they would recommend PCCA conferences to others, though some noted that the work had felt hard to access or had stayed closer to the surface than they had hoped.

ANTISEMITISM AND OTHERNESS



Excerpt from the Opening Plenary

We live in a world of disruption and uncertainty,
where identities and values feel fragile and under attack.

In such a world, Jews have long been marked as different —
feared, scapegoated, mythologized.

They have been hated for being
too poor and too rich,
too radical and too conservative,
too insular and too assimilated.

How can we understand these contradictions?
Why have these myths and stereotypes been perpetuated and sustained?
How do we explain the shifting portrayal of Jews as both victims and aggressors?
And what might this reveal about our wider struggle to live with difference?

Vasily Grossman, in *Life and Fate* (written 1959, first published 1980), wrote:

*“Antisemitism is always a means rather than an end;
it is a measure of the contradictions yet to be resolved.
It is a mirror for the failings of individuals, social structures and State systems.
Tell me what you accuse the Jews of — I’ll tell you what you’re guilty of.”*

What collective fantasies or anxieties are projected on to Jews, still today?
How do we — and our institutions — participate in these dynamics, knowingly or unknowingly?

Why does this hatred remain so difficult to name,
even in spaces committed to justice and equality?
And why has it grown so sharply again in the past two years?

Antisemitism, of course, is not the only form of otherness.
Each of us carries experiences of being “other” —
or of making others into “other” —
whether by race, religion, gender, sexuality, nation, or belief.

Otherness is the experience of being set apart,
marked as different, excluded, mistrusted.

Could antisemitism offer a paradigm
for how societies manage — or fail to manage — difference itself?

What might we discover here, together,
about antisemitism...
about the ways we other and are othered...
and about what we can learn from it?

I imagine you have other thoughts and questions to add to what I have just mentioned.
Over the next few days, I invite you to bring them into the work with us.



Themes and Reflections

The following themes are offered as observations:

1. The difficulty of speaking about / confronting antisemitism

- Antisemitism was seen as very relevant but seemed difficult to speak to.
- No participant identified as an antisemite, though othering and the feeling of being 'other' were prevalent throughout the conference.
- An idea to form a group representing antisemites was rejected – perhaps feared as contagious, and as though it may infect participants or become legitimized?
- Two German members noted feeling hesitant to speak about antisemitism: possibly in relation to the presence of Jewish participants.
- Several participants — both in feedback and during the conference itself — noted feeling guarded, reluctant, or sensitive about speaking to antisemitism; some non-Jewish participants noted this explicitly in relation to their own identity.
- There were numerous expressions of curiosity, solidarity and empathy between members which seemed to function as a defense against deeper exploration and acknowledging antisemitism in the conference ... or within oneself.

"Curiosity and sensitivity were accessed as demonstrations of solidarity that ran counter to real exploration of the difficult feelings of recognizing that we are all infected with antisemitism without really understanding what it is or how it managed to lodge in our psyches so completely." (Participant feedback)

- During the Societal Event, participants seemed to remain in silos for a time — work was done within territories but not always shared or risked across the conference.
- Jewishness — being Jewish or not Jewish — came up a lot; at times, and certainly early in the conference, some had the sense that it felt like a Jewish conference – centered on the Jewish experience or identity – rather than a conference on antisemitism.

2. A need for protection:

- There was a sense of protection around the director and associate director —
 - The (Polish) Administrator described feeling like a bodyguard for the director and the conference, and
 - The director was not directly attacked. (Was there a fear that such an attack could have damaged or destabilized the container itself, making the whole conference/ enterprise less safe?)



- The conference design itself may also have reflected a protective impulse: a consultant present in every territory for the duration of the Societal Even, to ensure there was always a containing and holding presence.

(One consultant reflected that this may have been to prevent a 'legal vacuum' in which, as he put it, 'the eternal antisemite could gather'.)

- Were we too frightened that an 'atrocious' could occur?

3. Hidden violence beneath the surface of harmony

- Both violence and vulnerability were present but needed to be concealed — they were enacted in the dynamics rather than named and worked with directly.
 - *"The Dead Sea looks still, but beneath are sinkholes — like the hidden dangers under our discussions." (Participant reflection)*
- Imagery and images from the Social Dreaming Matrices captured some of this, for example: *"Enemy within"; "Walking on fragile ground"; "The Dead Sea"; "Sinkholes on the beach"; "Camouflage to protect from being attacked and killed"; "Sensuality infused with danger".*
- Fear of defining oneself in case of attack; political correctness kept people silent; fear that speaking out would cause fragmentation (in a "conference family").
- Two Governing Group hypotheses during the Societal Event reflected this:
 - "There seems to be a fantasy that there is a utopia where we can choose to be whatever we want to be but in this state of harmony the individual may not look too different or express ideas that are too different from an assumed norm of acceptability, lest the harmony will disappear and be replaced by the polarization and fragmentation we experience in the outside world."
 - "The convinced positions held by individuals means that there is not sufficient trust between individuals who have different sides of the conflict experience and therefore the governing group is felt to be the only body that can mediate between the extremes."
- Two women holding opposing positions came to the Governing Group to mediate — enacting the very dynamic the hypotheses described
 - Holding a polarized view may have felt safer and less burdensome than risking the uncertainty and complexity of the middle ground
 - In sending the two women to the Governing Group, the membership may have been unconsciously testing whether the container could hold the conflict between opposing positions; was the conference safe enough?



- The Governing Group found itself relatively isolated during the Societal Event – for the most part not sought out by members, and at times feeling out of touch with what was unfolding in the territories. Was this a consequence of the unfamiliar citizen consultant role? Or did it also reflect something about the difficulty of trusting authority in the context of antisemitism?

4. Old antisemitism was easier to engage with

- Historical antisemitism seemed easier to engage with than its current forms:
 - During the Societal Event, the majority of participants gravitated toward the German consultant —who experienced his territory as becoming "like a therapeutic community designed to solve the problem of antisemitism," perhaps processing the "safe," historical antisemitism
 - The visibly Muslim consultant's territory — perhaps representing current, sharper antisemitism — was largely avoided
- The Holocaust, Nazi past, and PCCA institutional history came up repeatedly — staying with what was already known and mourned, rather than what is present, less understood and harder to face.
- One participant reflected that it seemed "*almost impossible to deal with antisemitism without being drawn into memories of the Holocaust*" — describing this at times as "*a collapse of the present into the past,*" with the danger that the horrors of the Holocaust might eclipse the perception of current antisemitism (Participant reflection)

5. The Israel-Hamas war was very present

- The Israel-Hamas war was very present throughout the conference — at times it seemed to take up more space than antisemitism itself.
 - Holding both Jewish suffering and Palestinian hardship simultaneously proved very difficult
 - Some spoke of feeling divided within themselves; in some groups the division was held between members
- Can one speak about antisemitism at all while the war is ongoing and antisemitic attacks are rising?



6. Migration and Islamophobia were also present

- The themes of the other conferences in the series — migration and Islamophobia — also played out in this conference: in the Muslim consultant's experience of being left alone in a territory, in the group names that emerged (Wandering Jew, Lost in the Desert, Divided Self) and in the roles that people found themselves taking up (refugee, curious visitor, etc.)

7. Otherness enacted – inclusion, exclusion and belonging

- Many participants experienced the rapid and unsettling shift between feeling included and excluded — insider and outsider roles shifted across groups and across the conference

"It was comforting and limiting at once — belonging always meant losing something."
(Participant reflection)

- Some spoke of feeling like outsiders, of being guarded, of wanting to belong but not quite finding a way in
- One participant described being told that her experience of exclusion was "*a Jewish experience*" — feeling momentarily welcomed in, before realizing that belonging to one group meant silencing another part of herself. As she put it: "*whom an in-group perceives as the Other might shift in a minute*"
- Many members found themselves searching for a sense of belonging — where they fitted, which group was theirs, where home or the home group was

The Muslim consultant's experience and Islamophobia

- The Muslim consultant, became a particular focus of this dynamic
- Her territory was largely avoided — no group chose to come to her room, leaving her alone for much of the Societal Event; one participant named this in the feedback as their most significant memory of the conference
- She felt she represented Hamas rather than a consultant — the embodiment of current threat rather than a professional presence or resource
- She felt herself to be paired with the "wandering Jew" (a participant who was a singleton in a territory with a Jewish consultant) — both outside, both unclaimed
 - In her words: "*I was contained/detained in my Zoom room and the wandering Jew was the eternal exile — carrying the projections of fears and transgressions.*"
- "*I felt as though the system was able to work because otherness was put into me; projected into a terrorist, who was then kept in a safe place and not able to be seen*"

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- The group names that emerged in the Societal Event captured something of this experience of othering and exile:
 - Wandering Jew
 - Divided Self
 - Wandering > Lost in the Desert
 - Antisemitism and Excitement > Incitement
 - (No group/group name in the Muslim consultant's territory)

Questions we are left with

Is antisemitism unique? Distinct in kind from other hatreds?

In retrospect, did we learn anything about antisemitism we did not already know?

This conference took place at a particularly charged moment — a renewed surge in antisemitism globally, an ongoing war, and a world in which hatred of difference feels increasingly present and dangerous. Given this context and the experimental nature of the series, I am pleased that together with an excellent staff team we were able to offer members a meaningful opportunity to explore antisemitism as a particular form of hatred, and othering and otherness more broadly — and that the conference was, by most measures, a success.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the staff team for their commitment, courage and support throughout — it was a privilege to work with such a group of people. I am particularly grateful to Olya Khaleelee for her wise and steady partnership as Associate Director, and to Katarzyna Gębala for her exceptional work as Administrator. My thanks also to the PCCA Board for entrusting me with this role.

Leila Djemal
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