

THE DOUBLE-ABSENCE - DESPAIR, DISPLACEMENT, AND HOPE IN MIGRATION



PCCA GRC on Migration - Director's Report

Conference Initiative and Context

This conference was the second in a three-part PCCA series on othering and the hatred of diversity. The series was conceived as a set of timely, experiential events addressing current global issues. At a time of increasing uncertainty and instability, fear of difference is fuelling a rising tide of racism, polarisation, hatred and violence at individual, group and societal levels. In response, PCCA hosted three online experiential conferences, each focusing on a different facet of exclusion and othering in contemporary society, offering a space to explore how these dynamics are lived internally, in relation to others, and collectively.

The conference on migration, titled **The Double Absence: Despair, Displacement, and Hope in Migration**, ran from 5 to 7 December 2025. Although migration is as old as humanity itself, the topic has taken on renewed intensity. What is being defended when borders are fortified and rhetoric is mobilised that frames diversity as a threat? The conference invited migrants, those who host migrants, and those who find themselves in both positions, to join a global, temporary learning community in which personal stories could meet and illuminate wider societal patterns.

Like the other two conferences in the series, the migration conference also reflected PCCA's decision not only to engage with past atrocities, but to turn towards those currently unfolding.

Primary Task

Against the backdrop of the latest United Nations research indicating that global migration has more than doubled since 1990, this conference sought to offer a space in which all experiences of migration, from every perspective, could find a voice and be grappled with.

The primary task of the conference was

“to experience, explore and reflect on the conscious and unconscious aspects of migration and Otherness as these unfolded in the here-and-now of the temporary organisation: within individuals; in and between groups; and in the conference as a whole”.

In this sense, the conference was understood as a fractal of our wider contemporary society, providing an experiential laboratory for studying how migration and otherness are lived, organised and defended against.

Sponsorship

Please see “Series Section”.

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Marketing

Please see “Series Section”.

Staff Recruitment

Staff consisted of 11 members. The directorate comprised Dr Nadine Tchelebi (Germany) as Director, Shmuel Erlich (Israel) as Associate Director, Matthew Gieves (UK) as Administrator, and Anna Pupek (Poland) as Technical Assistant, making a directorate of four. The Technical Assistant role was conceived as an additional function feeding into, and supporting, the Administrator—particularly in holding the boundary around the conference and its different events. This was regarded by the Director as especially important in an online setting, where crossings of territory and boundary are both more easily enacted and more readily obscured; given the conference theme, such dynamics were anticipated to become salient in the life of the temporary organisation.

In addition to the directorate, seven further members of staff were recruited as consultants: Renate Gronwald Bugge (Norway), Jack Marmelstein (United States), Anna Frank (Germany), Nicola Sahhar (Germany), Julian Lousada (UK), Maxine Dennis (UK), and Pearl Tran (UK). Several criteria were employed to select staff carefully. Attention was paid to achieving a balance between psychoanalysts and non-psychoanalysts, as well as between staff members with prior PCCA experience and those without. Consideration was also given to gender balance. Most importantly, the selection prioritised diversity of national, cultural and religious backgrounds, in order to mirror a breadth of difference that could better contain the diversity anticipated within the membership. With this in mind, conference staff represented at least the following diverse backgrounds: in terms of nationality, Germany, Israel, the United Kingdom, Poland, Norway, the United States, Tajikistan, Palestine, Jamaica, Vietnam and China; and in terms of religion, at least Christianity, Islam, Judaism – as well as non-religious representations.

Membership Recruitment and Composition

Membership recruitment was strongly aligned with the overall recruitment strategy for the PCCA conference series. Alongside the circulation of flyers (see the conference series marketing section), the conference was also advertised as a standalone event through regular postings on LinkedIn, via the PCCA email listserv, and through direct outreach drawing on the Director’s and staff’s immediate professional networks.

As recruitment progressed, the Director’s attention increasingly focused on ensuring that a wide variety of perspectives on migration would be represented, so as to reflect a core PCCA specificity: *working in the presence of the Other*. Considerable thought was therefore given to how “the Other” might be represented within the context of migration. Recruitment aimed to put out a narrative that include those who migrate, those who stay behind, and those who were there before, and care was taken not to locate or project experiences of estrangement, displacement, and anxiety and hope about the future

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solely onto any one of these groups. Instead, these were held in mind as difficulties that can be faced by all those in contact with migration—those who encounter the Other in their midst, as well as those who find themselves turned into an Other.

Whether this particular desire of the conference Director was reached is of course rather arbitrary to answer. By the registration deadline, 39 members had registered and 38 of these had paid, resulting in a total conference membership of 38. Of these, 29 identified as female and eight as male (one preferred not to say). In terms of age distribution, the majority of members (16) were aged 65 and above, followed by the second largest group aged 55–64 (14). Three members were in the age range 45–54, and five members were aged 35–44.

The geographic and nationality distributions held particular meaning for a conference on migration. More than half of the members came from Europe (55%), with a further quarter from North America (24%). Four members came from Asia, two from the Middle East, and two from Oceania. Of the 38 participating members, eight registered as German and eight as American; five as British; four as Israeli; two as Polish; two as Russian; and two as Indian. A further seven members reported another or dual nationality.

Looking at professional backgrounds, the largest group registered as psychoanalysts (10). Seven members identified as consultants, four as psychiatrists, four as working in academia, and four as psychologists. Three members described themselves as retired, three worked for NGOs, two registered as coaches, and one registered as “other”. Overall, the conference membership was highly experienced: 28 of the 38 members (74%) reported previous group relations experience, and 20 (53%) had prior PCCA group relations experience. Only 10 members encountered the group relations method for the first time through this conference.

Fee Structure and Bursaries

Please see “Series Section”.

Conference Design and Events

The conference was delivered online over three full days (Friday to Sunday). Each day, members began their work at 12.00 Central European Time and continued until 19.30 CET. The conference “doors” opened half an hour before the official start time and remained open for one and a half hours after the final event, providing a wider containing frame around the formal programme. The timetable was chosen to enable participation across global time zones, and in practice allowed members and staff to work across 12 time zones worldwide. This inevitably meant a very early start for members based in North America, whilst members in Far East Asia were required to stay up very late in order to take part.

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The conference comprised a number of traditional elements that characterise group relations conferences: opening and closing plenaries; three Large Study Groups (LSG); three Small Study Groups (SSG); and three Review and Application Groups (RAG). Two Social Dreaming Matrices (SDM) were also offered, taking place on days two and three.

In addition, the conference included a Societal Event, which in the PCCA adapted style represents a blending of the original Intergroup Event and Organisational Event, meaning that Consultants and Management do not separate, and consultancy is partly given to territory, and partly to particular dynamics upon request. The Societal Event comprised four sessions, including its opening and closing, and all participants—members and staff—took up roles within it. Particularly the Societal Event, but also the conference design as a whole, underlined that this was an applied group relations conference: the method was used in relation to a concrete theme, so that learning could be generated with explicit reference to migration and otherness.

Emergent Themes and Dynamics

Theme 1: Victimhood as an aspired position and a contested currency

A first theme concerned how victimhood can become an identity one aspires to, and therefore something that is fought over. Rather than functioning solely as a description of vulnerability, victimhood at times operated as a language of competition and hierarchy—particularly amongst migrants—creating intense rivalry in the system over who could claim the more legitimate suffering. Alongside this, victimhood appeared to carry a destructive force. Not in a linear sense of “victim turning into perpetrator” over time, but as a simultaneous coexistence: vulnerability and aggression, guilt and entitlement, could be present at once. The conference brought into view how easily one may deny either one’s vulnerable parts (the victim in me) or one’s aggressive parts (the perpetrator in me), and evacuate these into others—then becoming increasingly convinced of one’s own righteousness.

There was also something felt as outrageous, even forbidden, about naming the destructiveness in the victim position. At times, the very process of claiming victimhood carried a persecutory quality in itself, especially when linked to the aggression and guilt it evoked. Traces of this dynamic became apparent whenever the system attempted to think about victimhood together with its shadow: the aggression it can mobilise, and the guilt that may accompany it.

At different moments during the conference, both staff and members appeared to move into these positions. Staff spoke from a place of fearing they were not good enough and presenting as helpless; elsewhere, staff and members accused one another of occupying a “knowing better” position, locating perpetrator-ness in the other whilst protecting a more righteous self.

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Theme 2: Being stuck in old representations and reconstituting familiar social roles

A second theme concerned the pull towards familiar, and often rigid, social representations. As the conference unfolded, it sometimes appeared to rebuild and re-establish societal roles already well known in the outside world, organised around race, ethnicity and gender. In this sense, the temporary organisation seemed repeatedly drawn towards recognisable templates for authority, threat and entitlement, rather than staying with the uncertainty of not-yet-known meaning.

At times, “old white men” were cast into highly charged roles—appearing in the collective imagination as rock stars (SDM), rapists (SDM), colonisers (SE), or right-wing representatives (LSG). These representations carried a strong affective charge and seemed to function as containers for wider anxieties and rage. The difficulty was that such roles, once established, could become sticky and self-reinforcing, narrowing the space for complexity and for individuals to be experienced beyond the assigned part.

A further illustration emerged when a British member spoke about suffering from poverty and feeling deprived, which elicited significant outrage amongst other members—as though a Western, and particularly British, member of society was not permitted to speak of poverty, given there is “real” poverty in the world. It was as if the individual’s subjective experience could not be acknowledged when it deviated from their presumed societal representation.

This dynamic also placed a disproportionate burden on the conference’s only Black participant, who became implicitly tasked with much of the “heavy lifting” around racism. The system appeared to lean on this member as a primary representative of racial difference, which both intensified the experience of othering and risked reproducing—within the conference—the very asymmetries and exclusions the work was intended to explore. In fact, another, white member tried to deal with the theme of racism in the Societal Event, but they did not manage to win over any other member to form a group, nor did they get a hearing from the Council (the Management of the Societal Event).

Theme 3: The Coming Unstuck of Traditional Gender Roles

A third theme concerned gender dynamics within a membership that was predominantly female. Male roles in the conference tended to be positioned either at the periphery, or—when they became more central—were readily perceived as potentially aggressive. In this way, masculinity appeared to be easily linked with threat, whilst femininity and the majority position carried its own complexities around representation, legitimacy and power.

These dynamics were also observable within the directorate. The Associate Director, an elder white male, often adopted a relatively restrained and supportive stance in order to back the leadership of the much younger, coloured, female Director. Yet whenever he did speak more explicitly, questions quickly arose amongst the membership about whether “the patriarch” had

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returned. In this sense, the system seemed highly sensitised to shifts in male visibility and voice, and to what these might signify about authority, hierarchy and the reassertion of familiar gendered arrangements.

However, what was less available for exploration was authority, hierarchy—and therefore also competition—amongst women, regardless of ethnicity. The call out of one male member during the conference closing plenary, “the future is female” could be read as too uncritical of what was really going on during the conference.

Theme 4: Racist Colonialism as the Basis for Migration

Migration in this conference was frequently framed as a direct consequence of colonialism, with colonialism in turn understood as inextricably linked with racism. Racism, however, seemed to be “too hot to handle”, perhaps because it was not lodged only in the “usual” places—white Westerners discriminating darker people—but in far more complex constellations, including amongst darker people, migrants, and within groups that might otherwise be assumed to hold a shared victim position. In that sense, racism appeared to be left “lying around like dead bodies” (as referenced in the Social Dreaming Matrix), rather than being picked up and worked with. This created a significant blind spot that seemed to dictate the conference dynamics, quickly turning genuine curiosity for one another into irritation. Touching felt too dangerous—let alone attempting to create something new together.

Temporary intimacy seemed to threaten bringing people too close to their own evacuated helplessness or aggression, without sufficient equipment for integration. The idea of producing a “Mischling” felt too shameful. As a result, the main form of closeness between individuals was often fighting, which simultaneously re-confirmed that one could not get together. The closing plenary may have indicated a further confirmation of this pattern: many members mourned lost opportunities, and some claimed that virtual work is not “real”.

Theme 5: Something perverse in the reversal of the usual order of global power

The conference touched on the reversal of a settled, stable world order: the reality that around 85% of the world’s population is non-white, whilst the other 15% has historically controlled disproportionate power and resources. The possibility of a reversal of this global power order was spoken about, including projections such as large-scale future migration into Europe from “more than 2 billion young African males” —Europe imagined as the land of milk and honey—including from a war- and poverty-stricken Arab world.

This was experienced as perverse in so far as Europe, alongside other Western powers, had long regarded many of these countries as “lands of milk and honey” to be exploited—extracting

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resources in order to become powerful—whilst now facing the consequences in the form of mass migration towards the very centres that benefitted from that extraction.

Theme 6: Age transition as a dynamic of mourning and loss

Another theme concerned age transition as a painful process, spoken about with a strong sense of mourning. Ageing was not only referenced descriptively but carried an emotional weight in the conference—as if moving through life stages involved losses that were difficult to metabolise, and separations that could not easily be repaired.

This connected with migration through the experience of leaving something behind. Migration was repeatedly associated with separation, discontinuity and a kind of disconnect—an inner and relational rupture that seemed to echo through the conference, including in the way generations were spoken about and related to. Age transition and migration became linked as parallel experiences of crossing a threshold: stepping away from what has been known, whilst not fully belonging to what comes next.

Alongside this, there was also a concern—at times voiced as painful anxiety—about children and grandchildren not knowing the homeland and becoming rootless: growing up in the new land without a felt sense of where they came from, where they stemmed from. This sharpened the experience of mourning and underscored something like a cut-off in transition.

Alongside mourning, there was also a pronounced concern for the next generation. Migration was often framed as an attempt to pave the way for younger people to have a better life, whilst simultaneously investing that younger generation with a great deal of hope. In this sense, the next generation appeared to carry not only aspiration, but also the weight of what could not be resolved—or lived—by those who came before.

Theme 7: Rush, time pressure, and panic

A final theme concerned rush, time pressure and panic. Throughout the conference—and already during the preparations—there was a persistent sense of not having enough time. The schedule itself was at times experienced as strangling and persecutory, as if it did not allow either staff or members to reflect with sufficient calm on the unconscious dynamics evolving across the three days. At various points, both staff and members appeared to feel a rising panic about not being heard, or not getting it; not getting a word in, not mattering, being overlooked, and being overrun. Haste became a dominant atmosphere, and this seemed to climax in the Societal Event, where the tempo and pressure intensified and in places could be interpreted as representing a mass panic.

The rushed movement into the different territories within the Societal Event also carried a strong associative link to refugees fleeing their homeland or being forced out, and arriving in a society

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that “runs a tight ship”—a social order that is itself pressured, controlling and time-bound, and which manages migration through speed, constraint and throughput rather than through spaces for integration.

For example, none of the territory waiting rooms (these were added, because in a virtual conference, group members cannot “knock on the door” of another group’s territory; however, having the choice to manage one’s own boundary was of utmost importance given the theme of migration) were used in the Societal Event, which may have symbolised how difficult it can be for migrants to manage their own boundaries and authority when there is little sense of entitlement to claim space. And since this was a virtual conference—where space is, in principle, limitless—the scarcity of space so central to migration may instead have become represented through the felt scarcity of time.

Given that the conference took place entirely online, technology and boundary management assumed a particularly significant role, especially in the face of technological challenges. At several points during the conference, members appeared to feel profoundly displaced and, at times, in what seemed like sheer panic. They expressed concerns that they were in the wrong space, could not find their bearings, were unable to move, felt trapped, could not find their way around, were lost, and did not know where to go. On the surface, these experiences were attributed to limited technological ability. However, they also seemed to resonate closely with the feelings of despair and displacement that a migrant may experience upon arriving in a foreign land.

This dynamic was already evident in the opening plenary itself. Some members insisted, in a state of visible anxiety, that they needed to get to the opening plenary, despite the fact that they were already in it. Indeed, the conference began with one member panicking about being in the wrong place and not knowing where to go, while already situated within the opening event. A strikingly similar dynamic unfolded immediately afterwards in the second event of the series, namely the first Large Study Group.

Concluding Thoughts

Overall, the conference allowed for a wide range of emotional experience linked to migration to surface. The Social Dreaming Matrices in particular brought forward unconscious material that did not find sufficient space elsewhere in the conference. It became clear how many facets migration holds. Many of these were named and brought into the work, whilst others remained only partially available—left to be grappled with further if a fuller sense of completeness is to be approached. In that sense, a great deal was brought up, and yet a great deal was also left raw.

The raw experience itself—despair, hope, aggression and vulnerability, amongst other states—seemed to follow one another in quick succession, creating an intensely emotional conference atmosphere. This left a sense of unfinished business, which also strongly echoed the current global reality. In this way, the conference really functioned as a fractal of our wider society: a temporary organisation in which the dynamics “out there” could be encountered, felt, and—at least in part—made available for reflection.



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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the PCCA Board and Management Committee for trusting me—alongside the other two directors in the series—for authorising me to direct this conference. It felt that the timeliness of the work spoke to a truly global audience: the theme brought together a wide range of diversity—people with different backgrounds and utterly different individual stories—yet all connected to despair, displacement and hope in migration.

Special thanks also go to my Associate Director, Shmuel Erlich, for his capacity to support me and, in doing so, to model and bridge something that could not always be bridged throughout the conference: the male–female divide, the young–old divide, the white–non-white divide, and also, the Israel–Arab divide. Likewise, the conference staff worked hard to draw on their own diverse identities in order to contain and grapple with the complex dynamics of this conference.

Respectfully submitted,
Nadine R. Tchelebi
Conference Director