



## Directors' Umbrella Report

### 1. General Introduction

The original idea for the series emerged from the turbulence witnessed across the world following PCCA's fundamental decision to engage not only with atrocities of the past, but also with those unfolding in the present. In that context, the series arose from the troubling reality that there was, regrettably, no shortage of contemporary material to work with, given the abundance of atrocities currently being witnessed globally. The renewed surge in antisemitism, the unprecedented intensity of global migration, and a rising trend of Islamophobia were among the dynamics that stood out most prominently. However, in order to avoid conflating too many dynamics and thereby diluting them — and, as a consequence, limiting the depth with which each could be explored — the decision was taken to keep these themes distinct. Rather than organising one longer Group Relations Conference, three separate experiential online events were therefore designed.

At the same time, the initiative marked a methodological innovation in the field of group relations: to our knowledge, it was the first time that three distinct Group Relations Conferences were conceived and organised as a coherent series, held together by one overarching theme — namely, othering and the hatred of diversity. As such, the series represented both a timely response to current global conditions and an important development in the design of group relations methodology. It was therefore of utmost importance to attend carefully to the balance between, on the one hand, offering a sufficiently consistent experience for members who chose to attend one, two, or all three conferences in the series, and, on the other, ensuring that each conference retained its own autonomy in decision-making and its own capacity for containment. Great emphasis was also placed on ensuring that the series as a whole would generate in-depth learning and insight into the umbrella theme of othering and the hatred of diversity. Accordingly, the learning from each individual conference was reflected upon in relation to that overarching theme.

### 2. Sponsors & Supporters

Our traditional sponsoring organizations generously supported us in this project: DPG – Deutsche Psychoanalytische Gesellschaft, DPV – Deutsche Psychoanalytische Vereinigung, and IPS – Israel Psychoanalytic Society, for which we thank them. This much appreciated financial support enabled us to lower the fee and to give generous bursaries so that the fee would not be a barrier to participation.

The sponsoring and supporting organizations allowed us to use their logos and actively promoted the conference to their members: IPA – International Psychoanalytic Association, APA – American Psychoanalytic Association, EPF – European Psychoanalytical Federation, TIHR – Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, OPUS – An Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society, OFEK – The Israeli Association for the Study of Group and Organizational Processes, Il Nodo Group – The Organizational and Community Training and Development. We thank them as well. A number of additional institutions and societies, including AKRI and the Dialogue Society, were also willing to support the series by lending their names and logos.



### 3. Marketing & Series Recruitment

We used our usual PCCA marketing and recruitment channels, i.e. the PCCA mailing list and social media (LinkedIn and Facebook) together with personal invitations via conference staff and their networks. We also asked sponsoring and supporting organizations to share the information in their communities and networks.

We had a webpage for the series, including a section for each conference, hosted on our main PCCA website, and flyers for both the whole series and each individual conference. This allowed us to combine communications for drawing attention to the whole series on the one hand, and to each individual conference in order of their scheduled timing on the other hand. With that, we could focus marketing efforts onto the conference that was about to take place at any given time. Social media posts followed the same strategy.

Altogether 63 people registered and paid to participate: 12 for all three conferences, 13 for two conferences and 38 for one conference, meaning that the first conference “Antisemitism and Otherness” counted 29 paid members (2 ppl withdrew last minute, 1 no show) so in the end 26, the second conference “The Double Absence, Despair, Displacement, and Hope in Migration” counted 38 paid members – 37 actual people, and the third conference “Islamophobia in an Upside-Down World” counted 29 paid members – not all of them came – 25 actual members.

### 4. Budget, Fee Structure and Bursaries

For the series, there was a per conference fee, a bundled two-conference fee and a bundled three-conference fee, with early bird and full price rates for each, and an additional discount available for students and those from Eastern Europe or ‘developing countries.’

	<i>Early Bird</i>	<i>Full Price</i>
One Conference	€395	€495
Two Conferences	€640	€790
Three Conferences	€885	€1185
Discount	€70	Student, Eastern Europe, Developing Country

Overall, 12 bursaries were given: 5 for applicants who registered for all three conferences, 1 for an applicant who registered for two conferences and 6 for applicants who registered for one conference.



## 5. Technology

We used Zoom in all three conferences with one zoom link to help staff and participants to hopefully move easily in space. We entered the main entrance room and from there we could go to the designated rooms for each session. We used google drive to share documents with staff and members and padlets as notice boards

In these online settings, differently than in an in-person territory, it emerged that space does not become the limiting boundary but time is the factor that shapes the dynamic.

## 6. Content and Collective Themes related to the online Series

*(please refer to each individual conference report for more detail)*

The titles of the three conferences were challenging. “Antisemitism” and “Islamophobia” were direct and uncompromising, leaving little room for avoidance. “Migration,” appeared more nuanced—broader in scope and perhaps less immediately threatening. This difference was reflected in attendance, with the “Migration” conference attracting a larger audience.

The broader global context also shifted significantly between the time the conferences were conceived by the PCCA Board in late 2024 and when they were held. Among other events, Donald Trump’s election, the ongoing situation in Gaza, and the war with Iran in June 2025 contributed to an increasingly charged atmosphere.

Addressing Antisemitism and Islamophobia proved particularly challenging, as both became highly sensitive and emotionally charged issues. Israel’s involvement in what was happening contributed to a sharp rise in antisemitism, while Islamophobia—its counterpart in many ways—also intensified across the Western world and beyond. In both cases, long-standing and unresolved fears and prejudices resurfaced.

In the “Migration” conference, with its more explicit framing title, overt expression of conflict and aggression within the group dynamics emerged, which in turn made these tensions more accessible for exploration.

As has been observed in post-Holocaust work involving Germans and Israelis/Jews, the conferences highlighted how difficult it is to address current traumas when they are immediate, raw, and experienced at a deeply physical level—especially in the absence of the “Other,” the perceived enemy or target of hostility.

Across all three conferences, some common themes emerged. Racism in its various forms was a central organizing factor throughout the Series. Issues of inclusion and exclusion, alongside a fundamental search for belonging and “home,” were pervasive in the group dynamics. The process of “Othering,” as well as the broader theme of a “hatred of diversity”—reflected in the title of the Series itself—proved to be powerful motivators for engagement among participants.

In this context, the title of the in-person conference, Splitting Image: Seeing the Other in the Self, effectively captures the essence of these themes, complementing the online Conferences and rounding off the Series.



Partners in Confronting  
Collective Atrocities e.V.

PCCA Conference Series  
**OTHERING** and Hatred of **DIVERSITY**



### 7. Series Acknowledgements

We are deeply grateful for the considerable support we received in the implementation, organisation, and delivery of this innovative PCCA Group Relations series. In addition to all sponsors and supporters acknowledged above, we would particularly like to thank the PCCA Board for its authorisation and for the trust it placed in our capacity to deliver such an important milestone for PCCA as an organisation. We also wish to express our sincere appreciation to all members of the three directorates, as well as to all staff involved across the series, for contributing to such a profound and invaluable learning experience.



## 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?)

# ANTISEMITISM AND OTHERNESS



- 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*"

# ANTISEMITISM AND OTHERNESS



- 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  
Conference Director, Antisemitism and Otherness

# 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”.

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



## 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

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



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.

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



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.

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



## *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

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



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

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



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

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



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.



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



## **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

# ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD



## Director's Report

### THE CONTEXT AND THE CONFERENCE TITLE "ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD"

This Conference was the last conference of the online Series **Othering and Hatred of Diversity** and took place on the 30, 31 January & 1<sup>ST</sup> February 2026, after **Antisemitism and Otherness** 11, 12 & 14 September 2025 · and **The Double-Absence Despair, Displacement, and Hope in Migration** 5–7 December 2025.

The title was **ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD**.

"Phobia" comes from the Greek word φόβος = fear, panic, terror, aversion

In Greek mythology, Phobos was also the personification of fear, the son of Ares (god of war) and Aphrodite. He was said to accompany Ares into battle, spreading terror among soldiers — very on-brand for the meaning

**Islam** comes from the Arabic word *islām* (إسلام).

It means "**submission**" or "**surrender**" to **God** — specifically, willingly aligning oneself with the will of one God.

It shares the same Arabic root **S-L-M** as:

- **salām** → peace
- **muslim** → "one who submits (to God)"

So the deeper idea is that by surrendering to God's will, a person finds **inner peace**. It's not about forced submission — it's meant in a spiritual sense of trust, devotion, and alignment.

The history of Islamophobia is complex and deeply rooted in centuries of political, religious, and cultural conflict. Islamophobia has evolved significantly over time from historical religious rivalries and colonial attitudes into a modern-day phenomenon shaped by geopolitics, media, and extremist actions, as well as by social anxieties. Islamophobia, as the fear, hatred, or prejudice against Islam or people who are perceived to be Muslim, Arab or both, often stems from ignorance, misinformation, or political agendas. It is or becomes a form of racism.

Islamophobia is not simply a set of hostile attitudes. It is a psychic and political defence, — a way of warding off strangeness, allowing the 'in-group' to project all sorts of unintegrated fears and social contradictions into the Other. So **Islam becomes a screen and mirror**, it embodies **the legacy of colonial knowledge. Identity, integration, and unbelonging**, the tension between visibility and erasure, and the emotional toll of being labelled "suspect," an "exception", are some of its challenges today.

Lets move on to An "**Upside-Down world**" which means a world that feels **reversed, inverted, or completely out of order**. It is a **figurative description of a situation where** normal rules don't apply, right seems wrong and wrong seems right, things feel strange, unfair, or surreal, everything feels flipped from how it *should* be. Is this the world in which we are living? Is the figurative dimension becoming real?



# ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD



This online Conference was an opportunity for us all in our different roles coming from diverse backgrounds, regions and generations, to examine these dynamics in “here-and-now events”, in larger and small groups, as well as review sessions

The primary task of the conference was:

**to explore how Islamophobia, as a form of Othering and Hatred of Diversity, manifests itself in our inner worlds and in our upside - down societal context today**

## OUR VISION OF THE CONFERENCE

**ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD** is a very complicated and challenging theme, as for the whole Series. Being part of the group of Directors of the online Series. including the Director of the final in-Person Conference, I have been working with my colleagues almost weekly for a year I was aware of what was going on in the other two conference preceding my own, and I had the privilege of being able to build on their outcomes. Thus, part of the design was similar in all three conferences, for example the Societal event, which had the greatest number of sessions in this conference.

A conference, including one held online, can be seen as a transitional space in Winnicottian terms. Having this in mind, our aim was to offer a space for exploration of Islamophobia as a form of Othering and Hatred of the Other and racism. This meant creating a space, both through the structure (the design and technology) and the content (in terms of food for thought), where participants could develop new insights, experiment with new learnings, and also could take different roles and develop working hypotheses). For the staff it meant developing the capacity to contain such dynamics and to contain the Other within us without expulsion and projections, for example through polarization or stereotyping. A motto has been “perfection is not of this world”. It seemed to help to get in touch with vulnerability and to use mistakes a means for understanding the dynamics and learning.

## PRE-CONFERENCE STAGE

### *Membership recruitment*

Since this conference was the last of the Series, most of the recruitment was done from the beginning of the Series for all three conferences, followed by a specific emphasis on this conference’s recruitment in the final two months. 14 members had already participated in at least one of the other Series’ conferences, so that had its own path. The others came in slowly and three people registered on the boundary of the registration deadline.

# ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD



## *Staff*

Following my appointment as Director, I immediately invited Olya Khaleelee (United Kingdom) as the Associate Director to whom I am extremely thankful for her ongoing availability to think together and work with me all through a complicated and challenging journey, and to Nicola Sahhar (Germany) as Administrator and Consultant, for his ongoing presence, ideas and continuous commitment and to Katarzyna Gębala (Poland), as Technical Assistant, who joined the staff two weeks before the conference, for her admirable dedication and enthusiasm. The four of us formed the Directorate. The Consultants were: Soulmaz Bashirinia (United Kingdom), Mira Erlich-Ginor (Israel), Mo Khan (USA), Luca Mingarelli (Italy), Ben Neal (United Kingdom), and Allan Shafer (Australia) to whom I am very grateful for their dedication, support and ongoing engagement before and during the conference. The staff group varied in terms of age, personal and professional background and approaches and institutional affiliations, citizenship and nationality, and group relations experience.

Before and during the conference mentorship was offered to the new generation staff, which seemed to be helpful.

The online conference required an enormous amount of preparation. The conference management met regularly for months, the administration was tightly supervised. All the staff met three times before the conference. A lot of invisible and amazingly generous and dedicated work was done before and during the conference. All staff adhered enthusiastically to this new pioneering project. Although the schedule was tight and even tighter for the staff, staff was able to have enough space for reflection and to address the issues at stake. Among many other things that emerged from the conference material, it was noted that as staff, we deeply engaged with our different identities and the challenges we go through in our lives. This work on identity was mirrored in the membership in a parallel process. During the preparatory staff meeting the two Social Dreaming hosts ran two Social Dreaming Matrices for the Staff which was helpful in creating a collaborative environment.

## **THE CONFERENCE**

### *Technology*

We used the Zoom platform with only one link for all the events, hoping that this would make everything quite simple and accessible. We used Padlet for the conference notice boards. Apparently, things worked quite smoothly for the participants who were able to use these online resources. Nevertheless, it created a dynamic in the staff, see the themes below in this report.



## *The Conference Time*

The conference took place over three days from the 30<sup>th</sup> of January to the 1<sup>st</sup> February. Working online can have some challenges and can be stressful for the body, the mind and in terms of learning. So, we designed a sustainable timetable with quite a long break for lunch, working with members between 10.30 and 17.30 CET. The timetable seemed sustainable for most people and at the same time there was enough space for learning.

## *Composition of Membership*

On the final day before the conference, we had 29 registered members. Unfortunately, 2 participants withdrew at the last moment, 2 did not turn up, a few went and came back during the conference. So, we had 25 members in the conference, 20 women, 4 men and 1 not declared. Age-wise the membership comprised: 1 member between 23-34, 4 members between 34-45, 7 members between 45-54, 11 members between 54-65 and 6 members over 65. 14 members had already attended a PCCA Conference and for 11 it was the first-time attendance. There were 14 countries present: Australia (1), Austria (1), Canada (1), Germany (6), India (1), Ireland (2), Israel (2), Israel/Germany (1), Poland (1), Portugal (1), Russia (1), Singapore (1), Switzerland (1), United Kingdom (4) and the USA (5).

## *Conference Program and Events*

The program consisted of the following events:

**Entry and Exit Groups** – 2 sessions overall, 5 groups, 5-6 members with a consultant in each group.

**Social Dreaming Matrix** – 2 sessions, all participants and staff, 2 staff hosts.

**Societal Event** – An Opening Plenary, a Mid-Point Plenary and a Closing Plenary and 4 group sessions, staff as Governing Body and Consultants.

**Review Groups** – 2 sessions, 5 groups, same configuration as in the Entry and Exit Groups: 6-7 members with one or two consultants.

**Plenaries** – Two plenaries: an Opening Plenary at the beginning and a Closing Plenary at the end of the conference.

Due to the strong emphasis on the societal dimension of this online conference, it was decided not to have a Large Group (LSG), but only a Social Dreaming Matrix to enable the unconscious to emerge in a floating horizontal way, differently from a more hierarchical dimension of the Large Group “here and now”. Based on the experience this seemed appropriate.

# ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD



After each session the 2 hosts posted the dreams on a Padlet, a technological wall, available all the time for both staff and members. This task was very demanding for the staff, Mo Khan and Allan Shafer, who very generously worked before the conference and after staff meetings to carry out this job and to whom I am really grateful. Social Dreaming was valuable, serving as a channel for creativity and emerging unconscious themes for the system.

The **Societal Event** involved all members and staff. There was a Governing Body formed by the Directorate. For the plenary opening we provided two consultants, Soulmaz Bashirinia and Ben Neal, to whom I am very thankful for a great job. Other consultants were allocated to some of the territories for the first two sessions and one territory was left without consultants After the Midpoint Plenary, all consultants returned to the Governing Body and consultancy was provided when requested by membership groups or, on request, to any intergroup meetings that may take place.

The **Primary Task of the Societal Event was:**

**To provide a space in which participants can explore ideas, fantasies and feelings about belonging to their own group, and their developing relationship and relatedness to other groups in this learning society, taking into account Islamophobia as a particular theme of othering and hatred of diversity in an upside-down world.**

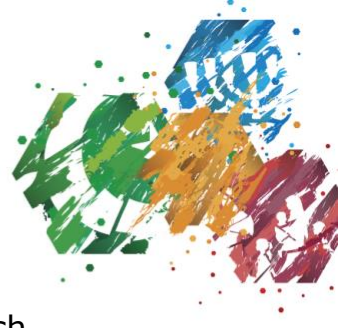
## **SOME OF THE MAIN THEMES**

### *Anxiety re Technology*

In this specific conference technology was an ongoing challenge in the Directorate. On the one hand, its members were not fully familiar with it. Three weeks before the conference a technical assistant was recruited. And things improved a great deal, nevertheless, emotionally there continued to be tension and much anxiety about how and whether the technology would work. The evidence was that a great deal of discussion in the Directorate was about this issue. We all wanted to offer a safe space for members to be able to explore and address hot topics connected to the theme of the conference, which undoubtedly was challenging. One hypothesis is that we, also on behalf of the system, projected our anxiety on the container 'technology', a less familiar one than a physical location, since it was so difficult to address "Islamophobia in an Upside-Down world". Another hypothesis could be that the overwhelming influence of technology has a controlling, almost dominating, presence in and on our work.



# ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD



In the Social Dreaming Matrix a hypothesis emerged according to which “preoccupation with whether any container (room, safe space, relationship, conference, identity) can hold when the outside world feels chaotic and intrusive!” and we were caught in it,

## *Islamophobia*

The theme of Islamophobia was present at the conference, it was not avoided, although often members switched to others as described below.

A member in the Opening Plenary said that they had come to encounter their Islamophobia. Throughout the conference it became clear that it was quite difficult to encounter the Other without the presence of the Muslim/Arab (also online). Unfortunately, there were not many participants from that group, but those who were there contributed to the exploration.

This manifested itself in the names of the group’s members formed in the Societal Events: Christianity and Lost Power, Terror and Phobia, Islam, Nomadic/ Liminal Group. Interestingly Judaism was not included as a group.

Islamophobia confronted differences and bias. The fear of being labelled (e.g. terrorist) shaped the interaction. For example, there was a strong desire to distinguish Islam from jihadism and terrorism. Broader themes of othering, stereotyping, and societal prejudice emerged and were explored, for example the idea of “good Muslim/bad Muslim”.

So, it emerged that Islamophobia could oscillate between curiosity, fear, and avoidance. Islamophobia becomes more than prejudice—it reflects anxiety about the “Absolute Other”. Islamophobia is present not only as an external threat but as an internal organizer of attention—shaping what feels discussable, respectable, and “safe to be seen”, especially around Muslim identity, professionalism, and intimacy. Full understanding remains partial, fragmented, often resisted. This can enhance the feelings of being lost, overwhelmed, or “not fully understandable”.

Addressing the Muslim/Arab in ourselves did not seem enough and could lead to only partial understanding, leaving the rest under a veil. There was a persistent struggle to engage with what feels radically different or unknowable

Reflections on Islamophobia, white supremacy, and colonialism took place. Members tried to explore both personal and societal prejudice, developing more awareness of how individuals and groups project fear onto others.

# ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD



## *Identity, Belonging, Fluid Selfhood, Othering and Prejudice*

Identity was shown as unstable, relational, and contested. The tension between self-definition and imposed labels (e.g. religion, gender, group names) together with the experiences of being inside/outside, majority/minority emerged, leading to polarizations and to identity shifts across contexts, highlighting its fluid and constructed nature in how identity shapes experience and perception. It highlights differences in background (race, religion, gender and post-colonial past), the tension between individual identity and group belonging, influencing power relations, our viewpoints, and the recognition and awareness that “reality” is often subjective and perspective based.

“Othering” and prejudice were central and explicitly named in all dimensions. Since there were a limited number of Muslims/Arabs, the Series title was attractive, easier to work with and influenced the dynamics.

All this also led to fear, trauma, and unconscious survival dynamics and revealed the anxiety linked to war, violence, and historical trauma. Survival responses (fight, flight, freeze) shaped both individuals and groups. Transgenerational trauma and collective fear influenced the dynamics. For example, succession and the future: gifting light vs inheriting violence emerged.

## *Silence, Communication, and the Struggle to Think Together*

Silence was visible, especially in the plenaries, communication was marked by both expression and avoidance. Important topics remain unspoken, shaping the group as much as spoken content. Barriers included language, virtual setting, emotional overload, and fear of conflict. The group struggled to “think together”, sometimes fragmenting or retreating into silence. This was a manifestation of the complexity, uncertainty, a difficulty in making sense of the experience. The recognition that complexity cannot easily be simplified and that learning may remain incomplete or unresolved, was difficult to accept.

## *Gender*

The limited number of male participants was perceived as a loss for exploration also of that different perspective. Whilst because of the numbers women inevitably dominated the scene, men felt deprived of that experience of the dimension of their collective identity. This was also a contradiction in the exploration of Islamophobia, apparently and publicly a male dominated culture.



# ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD



## *Learning, Reflection, and Transformation*

Despite the challenges (i.e. being exhausted, overwhelmed, frustrated, confused), the experience was also framed as meaningful and transformative. There was emphasis on reflection, “digestion,” and ongoing learning that could lead to personal growth, increased compassion, and self-awareness. and that acceptance that transformation is ongoing rather than complete process that continues also after the conference.

## ***Acknowledgement***

I would like to thank the PCCA Board and Management Committee for the trust shown in authorizing me to direct this conference. It feels that it was a significant conference for all participants, staff and members. I am truly grateful to all the staff for their very generous dedication, contribution, passion, availability, insights. I am very thankful to all the members who accepted our invitation to attend the conference, making it so rich and powerful. Our hope now is that this conference has been a learning experience for members, even though with different degrees for different people, because this is the *raison d'être* of this work and what makes it meaningful to run a conference.

Louisa Diana Brunner

Director  
Islamophobia in An Upside-Down World