Interplay between Closed and Open Psychic Space*
-
Indefinite Reservoir for the Growth and Harmony -

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Migration as a Fact of Life-Trauma and the Chance for New Birth

Over the human civilization, migration between West and East has marked its history. The history of Switzerland itself is the succession of events which have attracted persecuted people by the great political power and religious conflicts in Europe. Nowadays situation of Switzerland is a little bit more complicated. Growing globalization demanded one to be mobile and to adjust wherever one goes. Therefore, understanding the effect of cross-cultural contact and developing the ways in which one can keep one’s personal space, while simultaneously open to the diversity of cultural influence, became a significant issue for practically everybody.

In this short essay I will try to illustrate the processes an immigrant has to work through to settle in a foreign society-space. Through the understanding of those reactions, mutual communication between immigrants and the host land can be enhanced, which would eventually facilitate interactively enriching process as that has been the case in Swiss history.

Migration as a Trauma

Immigration has a variety of different situation. Involuntary immigrants who do not have a choice of going back to their own countries have to survive here. In such a situation for some people, the process of adjusting can be paradoxically easy, because one can not allow conflicts to seep over one’s mind. However for some who can not give up the idealized lost paradise -one’s noreturn home-town- can experience constant resentment and frustration. These feelings can gravely interfere with one’s process of integration. With the voluntary immigrant, the fact that one can always go back heavily interferes with the adjustment process, because each frustration and disappointment provokes immediate doubts about the place one is in.

When one decides to leave one’s homeland to settle in a foreign country, one is dealing with two situations - one country that is lost and the other new world. Intense feelings of uprootedness and a marked sense of loss for all that they left behind are constantly hurting one’s mind. Every day one is confronted with the task of learning to dress differently, to have different jobs, to eat different food, to perform different social habits, and to speak a different language. Here one has to remember that these serious emotional upheavals are spinning in the immigrant’s mind through out every moment of his life. Migration is, therefore, not an isolated traumatic experience, which passes when one finishes moving from one place to another. It is a kind of cumulative traumatic situation in which every day life situations constantly evokes the traumatic experience, juxtaposed by loss on the one hand and struggle to comprehend a new society on the other. The effects of such trauma runs deep and lasts long, while it is invisible from the exterior. Sociopolitical or economic explanations are not enough to capture the emotional experiences of an immigrant, because people do not migrate just for external factors such as poverty, political and religious
persecution, and cultural conflicts. There is another reason, in their unconscious dimension, which drives them to move to a new world. They seek for a new mother and father who can provide what their motherland could not provide, namely a safe and idealized perfect world without persecution from the inside and outside. We have to be aware of this dimension in order to understand various diversities of emotional reactions of an immigrant.

**Change from the Closed Safe Space to the Open Hostile Space**

Migration inevitably comprises with the loss of the protective secure space which reminded of oneself the childhood experiences of losing the object. When we are born, we migrate from mother’s womb to the new external world. We migrate from the mother’s nipple to solid food during the weaning. We migrate from home to school at a certain age. All these past experience of separation can be called up during the process of migration.

Here the degree and quality of “containment” (Bion, 1967) which the new open space can provide for the immigrant play the deciding role for the assimilation process of the immigrant. I will now explain it with the mother-child interaction for the child’s psychic growth.

When a baby is born, the mother helps the baby to explore and understand the new world, while containing all the anxieties and fears of the baby. The mother’s understanding of the world, her ability to be in tune with the baby, to perceive and to digest what she has perceived, her capacity to transfer those experiences to the baby with words stimulates the baby to observe and to develop its own spacial psychic world.

Using her maturity and intuition, the mother successfully converts the baby’s hunger to satisfaction, loneliness to the state of being in company, and the fear of dying to peacefulness. When there is a defect in the mother’s mind-container for various reasons, the baby can not develop an orderly world of different meanings and the connection between those meanings. Instead he is threatened to be confused and disintegrate.

When one migrates to a new country, one is driven to a similar situation. One becomes in a way like a baby who has to go through laborious steps to explore a new language, culture and customs. The only trouble is that a newcomer is not in reality a baby. Most of them had already established their life in their homeland, yet they are driven backwards to an infantile stage. This unavoidable process of infantilization is partly responsible for the painful feelings of humiliation and shame that so many immigrants suffer in their journey to adjust to their new surroundings.

The new society is functioning like a container in which the newcomer can grow and build up his own understanding, if things goes smoothly. But the trouble is that a new society in the twentieth century in Europe is not like a mother who is ready to offer infinite patience and intuition for the newcomer. More often than not a newcomer experiences the new society as a hostile and rejecting container. Therefore an immigrant has to struggle to build up the understanding of each social cues in order to have a coherent sense of his world, while he is fighting against the pressure from the hostile container. It is easily understandable why the prevalence of psychiatric illness among immigrants is reported to be 10 times higher than the normal population.

Confusion increases when culture, language, place, memories and experiences become mixed up and superimposed on one another. Depressive anxieties are persisting while loss and mourning process are dealt with. Paranoid and persecutory psychotic reaction are frequently happen. Sometimes one resorts to the manic defense and tries to achieve and maintain compulsory adaptation, while one denies the depressive pain. When this defense is exhausted and when an immigrant achieves the adequate position and goals, postponed depression can hit hard.

An immigrant’s presence in some cases can create the paranoid fears in the host society. The newcomer may be regarded as a persecuting intruder who is trying to deprive the host’s labor, possessions and property. Intense xenophobic reactions with marked hostility can be evoked. Xenophobia is a very primitive reaction with nonsensical and illogical quality. It derives from a stranger reaction and is harden by the projection of all the primitive fears and fantasies which they can’t accept within themselves. When those unacceptable sexual, aggressive needs are projected onto the foreigner, then they feel as if they are surrounded by a crazy, dirty, sexually amoral and physically dangerous intruder from a foreign country.

Particularly in the turbulent adolescent period, when one is often exposed to extreme anxiety of keeping one’s identity together, one can be especially intolerant to other skin colors and cultures. Sometimes one is very frightened of the familiar traditional value being threatened by a foreign culture then of losing one’s identity. In order to defend this
anxiety, one unquestionably assume that his own cultural values reflect the best possible reality and judge what is not familiar -alternative culture- as being inferior, incorrect or immoral.

**Creation of the Transitional Space**

What can be done about it? Although necessary social structures which would help to ease the tension between an immigrant and hostland can be discussed, I will only mention on the psychological aspect, particularly the concept of transitional space (Winnicott 1972).

As a baby’s understanding of external world grows, he begins to differentiate it’s internal world and objective external world. Transitional space resides in between oneself and the external reality, in between subjective experience and objective world in the child’s mind. It is a third space, an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. In this space, the child can elaborate fantasies, think adventurously, imagine orderly, connect inspirations, verbalize images, understand cultural needs and symbols. In other words, the child can create his own personal product of understanding out of himself and his environment. It can be formed while the child begins to separate from the mother during which the child feels safe enough to being alone yet not feeling totally alone because a child can be with his mother in his mind. With an ordinary devoted mother’s care any child can develop this space which helps the child to cultivate his own identity.

When the child has this space, he can play with himself and his environment. The child can explore many different cultural experiences and create his own integration which can add to his previous self. So his self can grow and expand. Having a transitional space means being able to create a metaphorical potential space on a different dimension, beyond the level of right or wrong, good or bad. Finally then one’s internal world becomes three dimensional in which one? past inherited tradition and present new cultural experience can meet and play together to create something of his own.

An immigrant needs to elaborate this space in his mind so he can store all his experiences of the particular foreign culture in this space so that the new original self can be created through the interplay between his own tradition and foreign culture. In order to achieve this space, one has to foster the capacity to retain simultaneously two different spaces in one’s mind -the original, safe, closed space of one’s previous identity and the new, challenging, open space of cultural diversity. Here the notion ‘simultaneous’ is very important. Only when those paradoxical spaces can be con-tained in the mind simultaneously, third transitional space can be generated out of integration of both, not just the sum of both. Then the child can think, fantasize and create his own ideas from the mixture of subjective experiences and objective world. This capapcity that we all have are the basis for the human civilization such as arts, religion, imaginative living and creative scientific work. I want to emphasize that this adpatation process needs to be facilitated in both sides, immigrants and hostland. Both need to create transitional space within the individuals level and in the wider social structure such as school, community and government.

Process of changing one’s identity is by any means easy. It requires to go through the loss of a familiar part of oneself and working through the mourning process of it. Moreover giving up one’s familiar self evokes the unconscious fantasy of betraying one’s mother and father and consequent guilt. All this implies how our identity is bound with our family situation and extended to the idea of nationalism. Transitional space enables one to jump beyond this boundary of one’s own culture and to meet a potentially infinite rich world where one can play with a vast diversity of human reactions, customs and cultures, therefore broadening one’s horizontal scope. One’s original wish to create a new system, different from maternal context through immigration is fulfilled through paternal function of foreign culture which allows him to be more fully affirm his exogamy.

The Swiss history has shown that different cultures and languages can be contained in one’s identity which proves that this society has been able to maintain transitional space in abstract terms. It seems to me, apart from many sociohistorical, political reasons, being able to keep two different dimensional space in the political system -allowing each kanton to keep certain autonomy, let’s say closed space for the individual Kanton’s interest and at the same time encompass these space in the more open framework of confederation enable Switzerland to contain diversity of culture and language within it’s broad boundary. Here lies, I think, potential for the growth of humanity.

With it’s globilizing world, I hope we, both immigrants
and the hostland can contribute to achieve mutual integration through the interplay between our internal and external surroundings. Therefore it is possible to maintain a positive and stable relation to his own country without having to reject the old in order to accept and be accepted by the new. This is only possible through slow and hard work of integration in which diverse inputs of East and West can be not just conflictual but more complimentary.

References
