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Second Section: Practice (cont.)

Lost Shadows – Migrants, Refugees and Social Class: A Group-Analytic Challenge

Elisabeth Rohr

Migrants and refugees have proved to be a challenge for modern society and certainly a challenge for group analysis as well. This challenge links migrants and refugees to the members of the lower social classes, who always seem to have been a very specific challenge for society as well as for psychoanalysis and group analysis. Against this background, the article explores the possibilities for understanding migrant identities, drawing attention to new theoretical perspectives beyond psychoanalysis and group analysis, and offering new ways of conceptualizing and understanding transcultural phenomena.

Key words: hybrid identity, migration, 'third space', transcultural experience, 'working class'

International migration has become one of the most significant social and political phenomenon of the late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. According to the United Nations *World Migration Report 2000* more than 150 million people worldwide had left their countries of birth at the turn of the new millennium, to escape persecution, violence, natural and human-made disaster, in search of work and education, liberty and dignity (International Organization for Migration, 2000).

There have always been migrants and refugees throughout history. But no era seems to have produced such gigantic movements of refugees and migrants as the 20th century (Arendt, 1973, 1986).

Because of the extremely restrictive legislation concerning the

political status of migrants and refugees within the European Community, of these millions of migrants and refugees worldwide, only very few entered Europe, and far fewer have entered as patients into analytic groups. But slowly, as the second and third generation of migrants and refugees is growing up, the situation is changing and we do meet migrants and refugees in therapy and supervision groups. Therefore group analysts can no longer ignore the specific reality of migrants and refugees and their unique transcultural experience.

And it is not only political or moral obligations that should provoke us to take a more profound interest in their fate. The most important thing is to recognize that *migrants and refugees, more than anybody else, represent a phenomenon of modern society and issues of modern individual identity, that affect a growing number of people. This phenomenon, which refers to the core of the migrants' and refugees' transcultural experience, can be described as a feeling of corrosion, as Richard Sennett (1998) put it, a feeling of being lost and uprooted in more than one sense of the word.* This feeling is not a specific or unique feature of the emotional situation of migrants or refugees, not shared or known by anyone else. On the contrary, social studies have shown this feeling not to be grounded any more in one secure identity, and is one of the major topics of discussion of Western civilized society at the beginning of the 21st century.

Modern society is developing into a 'society of nomads', as the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1993) put it, moving from one job to another, from one place to the next, getting married, divorced or living alone. Ulrich Beck (1986, 1992), a German social scientist, called modern society a 'society of risk', pointing out that modern individuals have a lot of personal freedom, but they also have to cope with all the upcoming risks of life – alone.

This feeling of being alone and bearing an almost unbearable amount of responsibility, is one of the major issues of migrants' and refugees' transcultural experience. Migrants and refugees have therefore turned out to be unwilling witnesses of a modern social drama, that compels men and women in modern society to continuously bear separations, to be perennially flexible and mobile, young and successful. Migrants and refugees seem to hold up a metaphorical mirror, reflecting all the ambivalence connected to these demands: the joy and relief of having achieved an almost impossible task, but also feelings of overwhelming sadness, due to

the suffering involved in leaving so many cherished people and things behind, and, finally, feelings of extreme exhaustion as a result of the never-ending efforts necessary to re-establish oneself in a new job and a new social environment.

Looking at the lives and experiences of migrants and refugees, therefore, implies a confrontation with denied aspects of modern civilization and society: there is no absolute security to be found anywhere, and no guarantee of happiness and wealth. We simply tend to forget that life is very precarious and that material goods, a prosperous way of life, a satisfying job, professional success and a happy family life may vanish from one day to the next. Modern society, in its endeavours to create more and greater things every day, supports our denial and helps us to forget about the fragility and the limitations of our existence. This denied fear is split off and driven into the social unconscious (Hopper, 2001). But I am convinced that this fear is one of the main sources of xenophobia and racism – because, projected upon social minorities, these groups appear in the social unconscious as a most powerful group of people, whose only aim seems to be their desire to take away ‘our’ wealth, ‘our’ women and ‘our’ jobs.

As those who exemplify the fragility of modern man’s existence, migrants and refugees seem to have been substituted for the ‘working class’ as those who bear witness to significant, but ignored issues of modern life. This substitution is due to the fact that migrants and refugees seem to share a striking number of similarities with the ‘working class’. Many immigrants and refugees are poor and illiterate, with little formal education, coming from an agrarian or suburban, low-class social background, mostly with patriarchal and authoritarian family structures. They are ready to take up jobs which are not appreciated or sought after by anyone else – that is, hard, physical and dirty work, domestic and nursing services, generally connected with low social status, little monetary remuneration, long hours, bad working conditions, reduced or no legal security.

Nonetheless migrants and refugees do not form a new social class in the strict sense of the word, because of their very diverse ethnic, religious, cultural and social backgrounds (Hall, 2000). Even though this seems to be generally acknowledged within the debate and scientific research on migration and exile, migrants and refugees are still often described in terms of a social class, appearing as a homogeneous and stereotyped group of people, whose outstanding

features are reduced to their lack of modernity, emancipation and rationalization. Bhabha (1993) and Hall (2000) have criticized this position, pointing out that migrants inevitably appear as a minority, representing all the major deficits of modern society, and are therefore stigmatized as a potentially conflictive social group.

Not surprisingly, the bulk of scientific literature about migration thus reproduces a negative image of migrants and refugees, almost always forcing them into a position of inferiority, contempt and exclusion – another image that they share with the ‘working class’.

Psychoanalysis and Migration

In many ways, psychoanalytic literature seems unvarying when it comes to describing and analysing therapeutic experiences with migrants and refugees. Looking at the psychoanalytic reception of the subject theme, it is quite noticeable that psychoanalysis has had its difficulties with both ‘working class’ people, and migrants and refugees: difficulties with the ‘working class’, because they seemed more ‘resistant’ to the new method of exploring the unconscious and less reliant on spending a lot of time lying on a couch, indulging in a ‘talking cure’ without the option of acting and without visible results; difficulties with migrants and refugees, because there are language and cultural barriers to be overcome and traumatic experiences to be worked through. All this might question our professional identity and our theoretical framework (Gerlach, 2000).

Even though there have existed brief periods when psychoanalysis raised the question of social class – since 1967, insurance companies in Germany have made it possible to obtain psychoanalytic treatment without having to pay for it personally – this still did not motivate the poor or the migrants to avail themselves of psychoanalysis. They remained, as Klaus Horn (1980) put it, a complete rarity within psychoanalytic practices. This only started to change in the last decade, when therapy in general gained more recognition and lost its reputation for being a cure for the rich or the insane. Today, the lower social classes seem to have lost most of their psychoanalytic reluctance, especially when it comes to the therapeutic needs of their children, because child and youth therapies have found a widespread acceptance particularly among the lower social classes.

This also seems to be true for migrants and refugees. Whereas adult migrants and refugees seldom appear in psychoanalytic or group-analytic practices, seeking therapeutic support only when suffering under severe traumatic stress, their children have found their way into child therapy practices. This situation might partly explain the lack of psychoanalytic literature and research about migrants and refugees, not only in Germany, but apparently in other European countries as well (Sengun, 2001; Zeul, 1995). An outstanding exception is certainly the internationally renowned research about migration and exile done by León and Rebecca Grinberg (1989).

The fact that a large number of psychoanalysts and group analysts such as Freud and Foulkes were refugees themselves might explain their resistance, their apparent reluctance to engage with a subject area that played such an important, disruptive and painful role in their own lives. But is this reluctance still a feature of today's psychoanalytic and group-analytic community? The foundation of the European Association for Transcultural Group Analysis provides at least one answer, although papers published by members of the Association clearly highlight other obstacles when dealing with patients from other cultural or social backgrounds. The understanding of transcultural experiences with migrants and refugees needs an interdisciplinary approach, including theoretical knowledge beyond the theoretical frames of psychoanalysis and group analysis (Gerlach, 2000; Parin et al., 1983). If there is not at least some anthropological and sociological knowledge of a migrant's cultural and religious background, it will be difficult not to fall into the traps of social prejudice and racism, as Dalal (1994) and Modena (1995) have outlined. But of course, only few psychoanalysts and group analysts dispose of such specific knowledge. So while it might be true that there is little demand for transcultural group analysis, surely it is equally true that little is offered in group analysis that is sensitive to the transcultural experiences for migrants and refugees (Sengun, 2001).

Concepts for Understanding Transcultural Experiences

In the last few years a new scientific debate about culture, identity and racism has been initiated, offering new and interesting insights into the complexity of identity-building processes of migrants and refugees. Authors like Stuart Hall (Jamaica/UK) and Homi Bhabha

(India/UK/USA) have become known as founders of 'cultural studies', raising the question of cultural identity mainly from an immigrant's point of view. Their arguments are quite convincing, since they manage to avoid the widespread stigmatization and stereotyping of migrants and refugees, emphasizing the strength, power and courage that is needed to migrate, and stressing the point that migrants and refugees are not only a conglomeration of suffering and losses, but also a sign of hope. Certainly it is true that migration always is, as Leòn and Rebecca Grinberg (1989) have stated, 'a mild traumatizing experience', but, under certain conditions, it can develop to a liberating and emancipating experience as well.

Bhabha (1993) explains this experience as a never-ending effort to create something new, a 'third space', enabling migrants and refugees to establish a 'hybrid' identity, living with contradictions and ambiguities, never completely absorbing the new, nor completely rejecting the old, traditional culture. But, in contrast to the idea of a transitional phase as originally conceived by Winnicott (1971) and mentioned in Sengun's (2001) recent article, the metaphor of third space and hybridity are not conceived as provisional transitory stages, but as more or less permanent, yet transitory structural components of a new identity.

Applying this concept of hybridity to our psychoanalytic and group-analytic way of thinking would mean departing from the notion of a solid personality structure and accepting an identity 'in flow', a 'migratory identity', not only true for migrants and refugees, but also true for members of social classes, who have left or lost their social living space.

This image of an identity 'in flow' fits a concept created by a French psychiatrist, Tobie Nathan (1986), who has specialized in the treatment of migrants and refugees in his clinic in Paris. Nathan's concept is concentrated on the figuration of 'lost shadows'. He argues that migrants and refugees are suffering because they have lost their social mirror of their inner world of primary objects, their shadow.¹ Unable to mirror themselves in the 'Other', migrants and refugees find themselves caught in endless chains of misunderstanding and encounter rejection and aggression. Shadows are, in this sense, a social reflection of the internalized world of primary objects (Bollas, 1987). Nathan, unknowingly using one of Hall's concepts (Hall, 1989), tries to help his patients *to translate* their cultural experiences into cultural symbols of the new society.

In a group-analytic setting, a symbolic third space is offered, a space of collective mourning, enabling patients to become 'translators' of their own migratory experiences. Hall and Nathan both call particular attention to the fact that their translations will inevitably have to bear differences that never can be completely overcome, emphasizing the tremendous effort involved in this process of translation. Something definitely is lost and can never be recaptured, but maybe something new can be gained. A migrant's identity therefore stays irreconcilable – always. A most disturbing thought. But a thought equally true for all people who have moved from one social space to another and who, in one sense or another, will always remain strangers in their new environment.

A Moroccan Girl – A Case Study

A short case study will illustrate how irritating these issues are for the migrants themselves.

This case is not a therapy case, but part of a research project about female, adolescent migrants (Rohr, 2001). From a scientific point of view, we are trying to find out more about the specific nature of their growing up in a Western society.

A young Moroccan girl, beautiful and shy, 18 years of age, but looking a lot younger, manages to attend high school, but feels rather unhappy, because she studies very hard at home, without ever being successful. She talks about her family, about her mother, who came to Germany many years ago, illiterate. Now her daughter is the first of a large family of immigrants attending high school. Having crossed cultural and social class barriers puts an enormous pressure on her. Everybody is proud of her and therefore she hardly dares to think of her own, secret desire to leave school. She would feel like a traitor.

Responding to her story, I didn't point out the conflicts she was caught up in, understanding that her cultural background did not allow her to oppose what was considered by her family as a matter of pride and honour. For her it was not a question of suppressed rebellion and desire for more individual autonomy, but something else.

She must have felt understood, when I didn't try to convince her to pursue her own hidden desires, because she started to talk about what turned out to be her main problem.

She actually lives in two different worlds. In school, she hardly ever finds anything connected to her cultural or religious background. When her school-mates talk about boyfriends and disco-nights, she can't join in, since she spends her weekends with the family, picnicking out in the park. She is unable to reconcile these two worlds and this, of course, has consequences: whatever she studies at home, she cannot reproduce at school, it simply won't come out of her.

With tears in her eyes she comes to realize, that she doesn't function well outside her family and, in school, she feels terribly alone and lost.

Looking up to me with her beautiful dark-brown eyes, she asks me, what to do. I feel an enormous pressure to help, feeling pushed into the role of a magician, pulling out of a hat all kinds of miraculous things, solutions never before thought of. But her persisting regressive and helpless state provoked me to move away emotionally. Taking up a more distant position helped me to realize that what I felt were her pressures and her desperation of not being separated from her family, but terribly separated from her new society. With this idea in mind, I was able to relax and to find a way to describe to her what might be her emotional discomfort, and share an idea with her that had just entered my mind. I asked her if she thought it might help her to take an image of her mother, to whom she felt particularly close, into school. Maybe this would relieve her loneliness and turn into a transitional image, helping her to connect.

I do not know if the image helped her to translate her experiences and to construct an emotional bond between the two completely dissociated worlds. But since she had already physically bridged the gap, there was hope that, one day, she would be able to establish a fluid transition between the two worlds, enabling her, as a Moroccan girl, to be successful in a modern, Western institution.

However at the moment of our dialogue, she was not yet capable of translating ethnic and family experiences into the requirements of a modern schooling system. Instead, she tried to transfer and not translate her ethnic, but dysfunctional shadow into the new world. This did not work. Similarly, she had tried throughout our talk to incorporate parts of myself, instead of identifying with me. Translating her experiences and identifying with myself as a representative from the new world wouldn't be possible without a partial separation from her family. She didn't yet dare to take this step, even though this thought already existed in her mind, if only as a prohibited fantasy. This fantasy of a prohibited separation might explain her hesitation in developing a hybrid identity and a third space to live in, because it would have meant confronting a fearful individuality and independence, something not valued and even despised in Moroccan society. Now she stood on the edge, not daring to separate, hesitating and oscillating between the two dissociated worlds, hoping to find a solution somewhere.

This case highlights the challenges and difficulties that have to be met and overcome by refugees and migrants if they want to integrate into modern society. It is one task to cope with 'lost shadows', with lost securities, and another task to move easily from one social space to another, to be extremely flexible and to develop

the capacity to be alone and separate, without feeling lost and lonely.

Considering all the skills needed by refugees and migrants for their survival in modern, Western society, it becomes quite clear that many are not capable to meet the requirements of this society. Even though they have had the courage to cross many bridges, many do not have the capacity to create a third space, to consolidate their broken identities. But, of course, others do manage to integrate into modern society, to be successful and capable of creating a new hybrid identity, without giving up completely ethnic traditions, nor adapting totally to the Western style of modern living. They belong to a growing segment of refugees and migrants, who are able to turn the transcultural experience into an emancipatory experience, using the crisis to create a new life – in a third space.

In our group-analytic or supervisory practices we most probably meet those who do not manage to profit from the transcultural experience, and who might be caught in a deep regression and depression. Another case study illustrates this.

Portuguese Migrants and Migrant Counsellors – A Case Study

Some years ago, I had been working with a group of migrant counsellors from several different countries, all of them social workers, engaged in counselling migrants and refugees. One day, a Portuguese social worker talked about a most disturbing case: a family of Portuguese immigrants was in severe trouble. A couple lived with their two young children in a one-room apartment. The father, an alcoholic, extremely violent and out of work, was beating his wife, his son and his tiny daughter as well. In school, the boy proved unable to cope with study requirements and turned out to be a troublesome child. The family lived on social welfare and an armada of social workers took care of them: at times at least five different social welfare institutions were involved in the case. *And – nothing changed.*

The migrant counsellor felt extremely frustrated, because whenever something went wrong, the other institutions called her to translate, since she was the only one who spoke Portuguese. And there was always something to complain about, for example, the father wouldn't participate in the family therapy, the mother would forget to bring the son to the school psychologist and she didn't see much sense in him going to a special group after school, where he was offered help for his homework. She herself decided again and again to leave her husband, but never managed to realize what she claimed to be her most serious intention.

The family was drowning in misery and the social workers were exhausted.

because the family seemed to be a hopeless case and maybe the family felt the same, that they were just a hopeless case.

The solution we found in the supervision was the proposal to organize a 'family' conference of the institutions involved. The migrant counsellor is now coordinating the work of the different institutions and calling in for regular group meetings to discuss the case. All agreed to offer support only on condition that the family proved willing to participate in all therapy or social-support actions. Otherwise, support and therapy would be withheld. This decision would have to be communicated to the family, to establish a stable working base for any future support.

Even though the migrant counsellors recognized the necessity of this strategy, they felt guilty when thinking about the limitations that they might have to impose on their deprived clients. As migrants themselves, they had managed to integrate into German society, and even had managed to create a third space within their frame of work, using their own capacity to translate for the benefit of other migrants and refugees; they therefore felt a natural solidarity towards their clients.

These migrant counsellors were a wonderful example of a successful hybridity, keeping in contact with their cultural background on a professional level and functioning as translators for migrants and refugees.

The Portuguese family seemed, by comparison, the complete antithesis, having lost their shadow and obviously all hope of ever reshaping it again. Maybe they felt like social orphans, naked, miserable and vulnerable, or like zombies (the living dead, who do not have shadows).

In this case, transcultural experience does not mean occupying a transitional, much less a third space, but being thrown into a vast empty space. The Portuguese family reacted to this vast empty space by trying to fill it with an armada of social workers and counsellors. Maybe this was their way of unconsciously trying to re-establish their shadow, by arranging a substitute – but, of course, a substitute that never would work. This strategy only led to violence and despair, because there seemed no remedy to restore their shadow. And they obviously did not have the capacity or the psychological disposition to move out of this trap, to create a new shadow and move to a third space.

Group Analysis, Social Class and Lost Shadows

Such dimensions of social deprivation do not only exist among migrants and refugees, but can be found among lower social classes as well, and the necessity to move from one social space to another and to create a third space and a hybrid identity is not a problem specific to migrants and refugees. In 'societies of nomads, travellers and tramps' the necessity to re-create lost shadows and hybrid identities is an important task for everyone. But of course members of different classes use different ways of coping with this task – and in this perspective, the lower social classes are underprivileged, because they are permanently forced to defend their specific way of living, without ever gaining recognition. At the same time, they are not invited to cross the borders of social class. On the contrary, statistics about the school performance of children of the lower classes in Germany show that there has been a steady decline in achievement relative to their middle class peers, in spite of all efforts to allow more permeability (Lersch, 2001). The upper social classes seem to reinforce their social borders whenever pressure is rising. Members of the lower social class, who manage to cross the thresholds into the middle or upper social classes will always have to bear the feeling of being a stranger, *a migrant in one's own society*, with a hybrid, but permanently fragile identity.

Conclusions

More than any other issue, migratory experiences show us the double face of social change in a modern world, telling us very clearly what it means to lose your social and cultural roots. Leaving behind the world of the internalized primary objects means losing your shadow and the possibility of mirroring oneself. This might signify a tremendous loss and can be a traumatic experience that needs a lot of mourning and a lot of reconciliation. But it might also turn out to be a challenge and a chance to recreate a new life without the old cultural and religious chains. These experiences are of course not only known by migrants and refugees alone, but are most certainly an important issue for a growing number of people in an ever more rapidly changing world. Therefore migratory experiences might be considered a special expression of a generally important issue, linking the theoretical necessity of re-evaluating identity concepts with the social necessity to tolerate and accept transitory spaces of life and fragile hybrid identities.

Group analysis can provide a facilitating environment and a secure space in a radically changing world that requires individuals who are flexible and capable to adapt to changing conditions of life. Maybe group analysis will turn out to be a third space on its own, a transitory and multicultural space in which to explore the possibilities of identities in crisis, supporting the restoration of the creative resources and potentials of human beings, enabling them to create something new and to live with fragile, but authentic identities in a new, created third space on their own. Because group analysis opens up eyes and hearts to different social realities by engaging group members in multi-personal transference relationships, it helps patients and therapists alike to stay flexible in our way of thinking and feeling, allowing the emergence of ideas and feelings never thought of before. Group-analytic groups could therefore turn out to be a fertile environment for the development of hybrid identities that maybe are fragile, even uncertain, yet authentic and genuine, with enough strength and potential to bear and to enjoy life.

Note

1. I am aware that Foulkes (1992) already used this expression, when talking about the shadow of the conductor, meaning a person who sometimes is needed in the group to express what the group conductor can't see, feel or express. The shadow Nathan is talking about is similar, yet different, and is linked to Bollas's idea (1987).

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