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The 'unknown' in intercultural communication

topics:

- *the unconsciousness in groups*
- *revealing the 'unknown' in group behaviour*

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Since 1977 in Eisenach¹ I have been coming to intercultural and interfaith meetings about pastoral care and counselling. My family and colleagues would testify to the extra-ordinary impact these have had upon me. I have come to expect that I will be surprised again by what I learn about myself and others as a result of these gatherings. Although this is true of my life in general, intercultural meetings generate an *extra-ordinary* quality to this knowledge. They reveal some of the unknown that is not yet thought let alone voiced or conceptualised. I think there are a many reasons for this. We are detached from our cultural and racial roots. We are in someone else's world and bumping up against differences we do not understand. These expose us like new born creatures² and we can not ignore what we feel and think even from ourselves. Likewise there is an end to this detachment when we return to the familiar places from which we have come and where our livelihoods if not our lives depend upon us fitting our culture more or less. In intercultural meetings we are bound not to fit and in our not fitting to uncover heaven knows what about ourselves and each other. Those whose homeland we visit have a special problem with our coming amongst them. We and they do not fit but on their territory. This evokes all the uncertainties and fears associated with immigration and assimilation. In Ustron it was not until the last day of the conference that anyone asked about the thoughts and feeling which lay behind the inscrutability of our hosts.

Learning from experience

These conferences remind me of learning about the dynamics of group behaviour in the 1960's. As a pastor finding myself at the mercy of the groups for which I had responsibilities, I went on a course about the understanding of group behaviour organised by the *Tavistock Institute of Human Relations*³. We were invited to learn from our own experience of being a group member. This was a revolutionary idea to me then and shocked me in the same way I have been shocked since in intercultural gatherings. My educational culture had always been academic and I had learnt to minimise the value of my own experience. Later I was to meet this

learning from experiencing culture in other forms - clinical pastoral education, therapeutic communities, liberation movements and psychotherapy. It was a revelation for me to trust my experience and the experience of others in order to learn. It was a 'new birth' to have hypotheses as embryo theories in the birth of my learning and not as credal authorities to which my experience had to be fitted. I saw the Bible and the traditions I had studied at university and seminary take on a new life. In fact to have a life, a flesh that enlivened the dead words and ideas they had been. I suppose I began to grasp that scripture and tradition were only the fruit of human experience. Food for all my senses.

The good that I want, I do not do; the evil I do not want, that I do...

Fruitful as my first learning from experience was, like birth itself there was more to it than bliss and satisfaction. All too soon experience confronted me with the reality St Paul expresses in Romans 7:18-19. 'I can will what is right, but I can not do it. The good that I want, I do not do, the evil I do not want, that I do'. That was all too true for me as a pastor and as a husband and father. What was more it was especially true of my corporate efforts with others to achieve the objects of our faith and to try and realise the coming of God's Kingdom amongst us. In my revolutionary optimism I joined a radical Christian group to make the church do, and not just will, what was right. We reformers found all too quickly that we were as irreformable as the church. In my despair I was introduced to psychoanalysis.

It was not a comfortable introduction, but it did offer me another perspective on learning from experience, and one that took seriously the difficulties I had encountered. The idea that I live and act unconsciously as well as consciously was another shock to my cultural assumptions, another new birth as painful as the first. If there is so much of me that is unknown and its effect upon me and others so unconscious, then there must be compelling reasons for this. In this new language of experience I was confronted with my *defences* against the unknown and unconscious. Defences upon which my very existence depended, or so I believed unconsciously. Despite all I said about wanting the good, my actions revealed a different story. It was no wonder I could not do the good I wanted as there was so much of me that unconsciously depended on something else. My behaviour demonstrated that I was and I am a house divided against itself.

The group's unconscious

As I learnt more about my own unconscious I became aware of the corporate unconscious of the groups of which I was member, my family, parish and community. Realising the power of my own unconscious I recognised the even greater power of a group's unconscious. Groups keep the unknown from being known in order to protect all of us from the many anxieties we fear will overwhelm us were they to be revealed. Groups unconsciously believe in these compelling reasons and suffer much frustration and despair as a consequence.

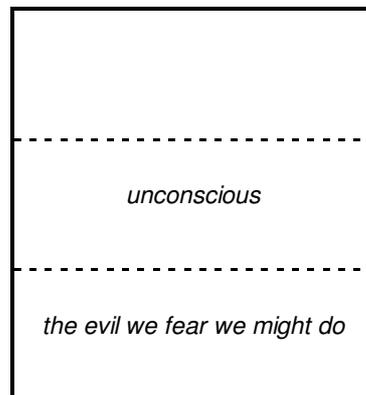
"An ironic feature of the congress was that the theme was about coming together, but the programme accentuated rather than dissolved the differences and made it difficult for people to come together at all. The prevailing atmosphere of the congress was one of chaos and insensitivity." This report from a delegate at the 1st World Congress for Psychotherapy in June 1996 illustrates how the profession

most aware of the unconscious is nevertheless at its mercy when gathered in an intercultural forum for the first time. In order to protect itself from the corporate insensitivity and chaos at the heart of the psychotherapeutic task, the congress embodied and enacted unconsciously what it was most afraid of. Just as in individual therapy the bringing to consciousness is central to the work, so therapists and pastors want to discover how the same can be possible for societies and institutions. In individual therapy client and therapist have to learn from experience to face their insensitivity and chaos, so congresses of therapists and pastors have to learn to face the corporate manifestations of their fears. We can not face what we will not look at, but our behaviour can reveal it to us.

An important part of the work of the Tavistock Institute since the 1950's has been to try and understand what the behaviour of groups reveals about the unconscious fears that dominate them and can prevent them fulfilling their conscious aims and objectives. Staff from the Institute have worked with and studied groups and institutions in industry, politics, religion, education, health and welfare in many different cultural contexts. I tried to apply some of the results of their work to the pre-conference and the following seminar at Ustron.

Traditions: shadows of the past – sources for the future

The purpose of the pre-conference at Ustron was “to work on the theory of communication in an intercultural context and apply it to the work of the following seminar in reality.” We discussed in pairs this objective for our pre-conference and the seminar as the good we wanted to do. Then we spoke of the evil that we feared we might do. To remind ourselves of our discussions we wrote something about the latter on the bottom third of a paper.



We put the word “unconscious” on the second third of the paper. So we related the evil we might do to whatever was unknown and unconscious amongst us. Whatever each of us brought to this meeting and whatever was corporately evoked between us.

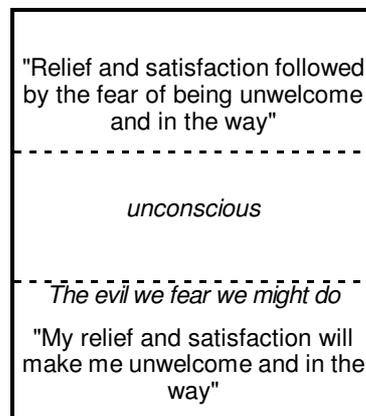
Revealing the ‘unknown’ in group behaviour

In his book *Experiences in Groups*⁴, Wilfred Bion explored how group behaviour reveals the unconscious anxieties which can dominate group life and undermine

the task the group has to complete. As a psychoanalyst he drew upon his experience of working with soldiers who had broken down in the second world war. Their conscious task of fighting was impossible for them and their unconscious took control of their behaviour. He explored with them the nature of the trauma which had caused this to happen. He observed that entering any group exposes us all to memories of the earliest experiences of our lives - to our births - and to the first group we entered. A group which might have consisted of all or any of the following, our mothers, fathers, a midwife, a doctor, siblings and relations.

In the conference we tried to remember from the stories we had been told and with the help of our imagination who had been present at our births, and what traumas and anxieties may have accompanied our entries into our first group. We drew upon our current experiences of entering groups including this conference to identify what causes us most anxiety and uncertainty, to see if there were any connections to our initial experience in as far as we could recall it.

On the way to the conference I had stopped in Prague, where I met a colleague who invited me out for a meal with his Czech guide. As I sat opposite them I was relieved to be with someone I knew and then even more pleased to be offered my first 'feed'. But as the meal continued, I realised that they had planned to eat together to enjoy each other's company, and that I was an intruder, and unwelcome 'birth' into their lives. Although not a surprising revelation it made me aware of the feelings of relief, satisfaction and then fear, which were to dominate *my* unconscious during the coming conference and seminar. We wrote on the first third of our papers something to remind us of these early feelings in our lives, which coming to the conference stirred again. This provided us with an aide memoir linking our earliest anxieties through our unconscious to the evil we feared we might do instead of the good we hoped we would do.



Bion recognised that the more stressful the task a group undertakes and the more unstable the context in which it undertakes that task, the more likely the group is to regress in order to manage the unconscious anxieties provoked by the task. This regression can be so powerful that it will completely undermine the work and the aims of the group. Although I had made no connection at the time, my personal clues to this regression were to be feelings of relief and satisfaction as a prelude to my getting in the way of the task when I had no conscious wish to do so.

Towards the end of the seminar this happened in a most dramatic way. The day before we had visited Auschwitz and we returned heavy with our emotional reactions to what we had seen and heard. During the tour the German and English speaking parties were separated, but at one point we met each other again and I

recall the sense of relief and satisfaction I felt to see our colleagues and to know that they too were surviving this trauma. In an emotional service that evening we were able to express some of these feelings, albeit with more sentiment than serious thought. On the following morning the lecturer explained how the Jews had kept alive the memory of the Holocaust in their diaries and writings and in the retelling of the stories.⁵ As I listened it occurred to me that they did this in order to stay in touch with their *unconscious*, and with the buried fears which would still affect their lives. They were facing the reality that being born into the human race is as dangerous and evil as the Holocaust reveals it to be. If ever the memory was lost, once again humanity would be at the mercy of the most destructive forces within our unconscious. Someone asked the lecturer what help this knowledge was to us. He replied that it was no help. We human beings are poor pupils and we learn very little from history as current ethnic cleansings bare witness. We can not learn to be better from the tragedies of our past, but we can take the memories of those tragedies with us as symbols for today and tomorrow. The more we forget and the more we bury in our unconscious, the more evil we stock pile to destroy the good we want to do and to feed the evil we will do.

It seemed to me that we needed all the time left to us in the conference to gather our memories of these events in order not to forget them. Soon we would be in other familiar places without each other's help and support to keep alive the memories of Ustron. However, our need to forget and to bury proved stronger. As a group we avoided assembling for our last plenary together for as long as we could. Then we sat patiently as our leaders discussed how we might apply our faith to our experience of the seminar. To help us they offered to give examples from their work. The first example was of a crisis service for the suicidal. I think this subject, introduced in a thoughtful and unemotional way, ignited my sense of crisis within the group itself. At the end of the morning one person described what then happened as the group being on the verge of suicide. Whatever our unconscious needs were, I could stand it no longer, and so I intervened before the second example could be given. I said we had the most vivid and fearful examples amongst us and needed all the time left to share them with one another. However in doing this I had stopped an Indian woman colleague from giving her example. All hell broke loose as first she agreed with me, and then was admonished for not taking her turn. Disagreements about how to proceed multiplied and the group was paralysed in conflict. Realising how my anxiety had fuelled this battle and defeated my object in intervening, I was urged to do something to put it right. As I stood up to try I saw how hopeless the task was. So I remained standing feeling very awkward, ashamed and in the way.

Afterwards it occurred to me that I was like the 'poor pupil' sent to stand in the corner of the class. I wonder now if that was the way we as a group embodied and remembered the reality of our humanity, which we had confronted in Ustron. We are all poor pupils and we will defeat ourselves if ever we forget that truth in our pursuit of wisdom and expertise. The lecture had been my most satisfying 'meal' of the seminar, and the following plenary exposed me to my dread of being the wrong person in the wrong place and doing the wrong thing.

I wonder now if all of us learnt a little more about being the wrong people, in the wrong place and doing the wrong things. After all, that was the tragedy for the Jews, the gypsies, and the homosexuals in Europe in the 1930's and 40's, and is still the tragedy for many people somewhere in the world today. We must keep that knowledge alive in us whenever our fear makes us want to burn and bury the evidence and whenever the ashes start slipping through our fingers.

References

- ¹ The first European Conference in Pastoral Care and Counselling was held in Eisenach in then East Germany in 1977. Since then a European Conference has been held every four years organised by the European Committee for PCC. International Congresses have been organised by the International Council for PCC every four years since the first Congress in Edinburgh in 1979.
- ² St. John 3:1-8. The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus reminds me of the 'new births' I have experienced at intercultural events.
- ³ The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations is the leading centre for the study and practice of Kleinian and Object Relations psychoanalysis in the United Kingdom.
- ⁴ Bion, W. (1961) *Experiences in Groups*, London: Tavistock Publications. Bion describes regression in groups by the term *Basic Assumption* group activity. He saw how groups began to behave in ways that assumed a very different objective than the one they publicly proclaimed. This unstated objective appeared to him to be more fundamental (and so basic) than the task itself. The examples of what Bion meant by basic assumption activity are the behaviour of the delegates at the 1st World Congress on Psychotherapy, and our behaviour in the final plenary at Ustron (cf. the end of this article). What was more remarkable to Bion was the unconsciousness of groups to this change in their behaviour. He noted three different forms of basic assumption activity, and identified the social institutions which manage these assumptions on behalf of society as a whole and in order that society can get on with its tasks unencumbered by the anxieties which basic assumption activity embodies. These are:
 - *Fight and Flight*: The group engages in battles within or external to itself, and/or it runs away from conflict. The *military* provide the institutional embodiment of this basic assumption.
 - *Dependency*: The group is unrealistically dependent upon an individual or idea which can not possibly sustain the trust being placed in it. The *churches* and the *health services* embody this basic assumption.
 - *Pairing*: The group allows a pair of people to take control of the group and everyone else waits expectantly for them to bring something important to birth to save or fulfil the groups expectations. The *monarchy* embodies this basic assumption.As in individual therapy Bion would not challenge the defences of the group as revealed in the basic assumption activity, but from his knowledge of the group's task and context, he would try to help the group identify the anxiety which was responsible for the basic assumption activity. He would explore his own feelings and behaviour as evidence for the group's anxieties and as an encouragement to others to do the same. He found that the recognition of the unconscious anxiety by even one member was sufficient to begin the redirection of the group towards its task and the harnessing the power of the basic assumption activity for rather than against the task.
- ⁵ The lecture was given by Jacek Leociak (see the following article in this workbook).

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- Houston, G. (1993) *Being and Belonging*, Chichester: Wiley. - Explores the experience of an international group at an imaginary residential meeting to study group behaviour, drawing upon a variety of psychological models.
- Reed, B. (1978) *The Dynamics of Religion*, London, Darton: Longman and Todd. - Explores Bion's theories in relation to the work and behaviour of religious congregations and the place of worship in helping to manage the congregation's unconscious anxieties.

Appendix

The following are excerpts from oral contributions during the last, rather tension filled “Intercultural Forum”, to which John Foskett refers in his text. Each contribution shows an individual way of interpreting the events; thus, along with the interpretation given by John Foskett, they bear witness to the complexity and to the manifold aspects of intercultural interaction.

I. S.-J. (Hungary):

...This is a dynamic group process. If the leaders offer something, and all agree to do it, and then the process is being stopped, it boils from within.

G.J. (Germany):

It is my impression that we are now dealing with how we treated one another. That was the source of interference. You (*speaker is referring to the female facilitators of the plenary session*) proposed to enter a dialogue, i.e. to present two models from two different cultures. That was a proposal made by women. And you, as a man, went in (*unrest in the plenary*) – please, let me finish – (*more unrest*). For me as a woman it was quite easy to understand how a woman from the Indian culture would immediately put her interests last, when she heard that this might be disturbing for others.

S.P. (Iceland):

Perhaps I now understand a little bit better why one cannot really help people who are suffering. I felt offended when N. was not able to contribute her story. When she finally had the opportunity to speak, she did not want to anymore. And since then we have been talking for twenty minutes. Her story would have been much shorter. But we are dealing with another story here as well: J. asked whether we could begin with the plenary session fifteen minutes earlier. And now I think, that maybe the first story we heard was a bit too long, and maybe this offended J. But if we only talk about what is happening here, then we can never help those who feel offended.

After a lengthy discussion the plenary finally divided itself into groups, and then met for a conclusive plenary, talking about the insights gained in the small groups:

P. H. (England):

We ended up with a very useful discussion about the place of magic in Indonesia. I think it is useful because I think it deals with the intercultural problems when you try to understand what is going on. In the discussion it became apparent that magic is part of traditional culture in Indonesia. But one church says: Magic is of Satan. The difficulty is that that tells you nothing, it simply is labelling. And in fact, in my view, what is going on (also here in our group) is a series of levels of language. And the problem of understanding *that* is, that you have to know what the assumptions are and where the person is coming from. And that is one of the problems we face in this group. Every now and again I do not understand. The trouble is: I understand the language, but – I’m damned if I understand what we’re on about! Isn’t it, that my cultural assumptions, when I am here, are usually English. And every now and again I realise: those are not the cultural assumptions of the Germans. But what I do is: I go and slap Klaus. And I say to him: Klaus, what on earth does all this mean? Some people here cannot, for their own cultural reasons – and linguistic reasons – do that. And this is my analysis what happened at the very beginning of this intercultural session: If you break rules of a group,

and you do not know – it is very difficult to recover the situation. It will happen – and we need to think about what we do when it does happen.

Ch. K. (Ghana):

In our discussion group, we started examining what happened when N. was called again to speak - and she refused. I was saying that culturally I would have done the same thing. And I was trying to explain that, if there is any action or behaviour which would cause division and confusion between people, then our endeavour is to withdraw and not contribute to it. But one European friend in our group did say: No, in his case, he would fight for his rights.

So this was all cultural, and we need to understand one another. And I feel that John was a person who was offended by our not coming (*to the plenary-session in time*). But I am thinking that he, too, was acting culturally.