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Intercultural exchange

A discovery of being different

topics:

- *concepts of culture in social sciences and in family therapy*
- *a narrative and constructionist approach to intercultural pastoral care and therapy*
- *the attitude of “not knowing” as a prerequisite in intercultural encounter*

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Personal experience as a South African

The earliest story of my life that I can remember is a birthday story. It must have been either my third or fourth birthday, I am not sure. On that birthday I received as birthday present from my parents a box with a few toy cars in it. I remember that I was overjoyed and that my first intention was to show this wonderful present to my best friend. We lived on a farm and my best and only playmate at the time was Daniel, a black boy, a little older than me. He and his parents lived on the farm and they were our servants.

So, I ran outside to show my present to Daniel. I remember that he was sitting on a little bench in a room in the backyard. Proudly I showed him the cars. He looked and admired, and then after a while, chose the two most beautiful ones and gently pushed them on their wheels, underneath his bench, backwards. With this act, he said to me without words: “I’ll take these, thank you!” The rest I do not really remember. There must have been a commotion, but I got my cars back. Perhaps my parents intervened. The fact is that I got the cars back.

This is a personal little story from my childhood and I would like to use it as a basis of reflection on the South African society.

1. The story of South Africa is one of involvement and even enmeshment of black and white people. Like the little boy who ran to share his birthday joy with his best friend, most people in South Africa would be able to tell stories of how they shared moments of joy and sorrow with someone of another race.

Black and white South Africa don’t exist as two completely separated and isolated worlds. Although the apartheid policy was a form of social engineering which forced people apart in different neighbourhoods, different schools, different churches, etc., it couldn’t stop people’s involvement with each other. Economical realities forced

people towards each other, at least in the work situation. And today South Africa is very rapidly changing towards a totally integrated society – a process which started gradually long before the laws of segregation were repealed.

2. A second point of reflection on my childhood story: As in Daniel and my relationship, most South Africans grew up with definitive and even rigid role distinctions and expectations. Although Daniel was my friend, he knew and I knew that he was the servant and I was the boss. And because of historical reasons all the bosses are white and all servants are black in the South African community. Therefore we grew up with the stereotype that a person's colour equals his/her value and status in society. When people are framed into these roles because of stereotypes which developed in our minds from childhood, one cannot easily get rid of such presuppositions. I must admit that within the South African context, it is up to this day not easy for me not to put myself in the boss-role when communicating with a black person. I think that I and many other South Africans try hard, but find it still an effort, a struggle to become free from the roles inflicted on us through our upbringing.

3. These are structures of society with a long history. The roles into which Daniel and myself fitted so easily from childhood, were the inheritance of generations before us and the way in which they structured society. The way in which the South African society developed was not the result of a criminal government which one day sat down and made a list of vicious laws. It developed through centuries and what the Nationalist government wrote in the law books from 1948, was only the legalising of social practice through many years. The development of this legalisation process represents indeed the deepest point of inhuman and unchristian discriminatory practices. But the fact is that it is deeply rooted in the history of our community.

4. This story represents most probably also a difference between the African and Western experience of personal property. According to the western capitalistic mind, personal belongings and property are individualistically earned. The African, on the other hand, has primarily a communalistic mind. The riches which were developed on African soil by western industries and capital, are seen as the corporate riches of all the people. Prosperity and poverty must be shared by all. That is why issues such as the private ownership of land and the rights of inhabitant workers on farms are the most difficult ones to handle in the negotiation processes.

It is against this background of personal bias, a history of social injustices, and conflicting cultural expectations in the South African context, that I would like to try and contribute to the development of theory which can be of value in our praxis of intercultural interaction, especially in the field of pastoral family therapy.

Approaches to culture in the social sciences and in family therapy

In recent literature, a number of different possible approaches to intercultural therapy were described:

The essentialist view

According to this view (Krause 1995:364) cultural differences are considered to be much like other differences, i.e. differences based on gender and age. Culture is seen as an overwhelming influence which determines the individual's behaviour and thought. According to this view, the individual does not really operate as an agent constructing and making choices about his/her own life.

The essentialist definition of culture would have us think about culture as one great organism in which all parts are connected to all other parts. You have to take either the whole lot or none of it, for only in this way could culture have the iron hold on individuals required to form and mould their bodies and their minds. If, however, we combine a generative notion of culture with an interactive one then it becomes possible not only to consider some cultural differences more important than others but also to talk about them cross-culturally (Krause 1995:365-6).

The universalistic view

The universalist approach (Falicov 1995:373) takes the position that persons and families of different cultures are more alike than different. This school of thought argues that there are basic similarities which are to be found in all cultures, for instance the concept that all children need love and discipline and that parenting always involves a combination of nurturing and control.

The problem with this view is that the perception of what is considered to be normative, may be local knowledge or beliefs based on a certain cultural experience. It also follows that adherents of this position have little use for training in cultural differences.

The particularistic view

This position is the opposite of the universalistic one (Falicov 1995:374). According to this approach persons and families of different cultures are more different than alike and no generalisations are possible. The uniqueness of each family is stressed and often idiosyncrasies of a certain family are referred to as "a culture unto itself". As was said by Falicov (1995:374): "In the particularist position, then, the word *culture* is tied to the internal beliefs of each particular family rather than to the connection between the family and the broader sociocultural context."

As is the case with the universalist view, this approach also doesn't regard cultural training as very important, because the family's interior, which is always unique, is held solely responsible for all of the family's distress.

In discussing this view, Inga-Britt Krause (1995:364) calls it: culture as an idiom of differences. The popular use of the word "culture" shows a preoccupation with diversity, choice and identity. "Culture becomes an idiom for the expression of all kinds of individual differences and appears to encompass everything." (Krause 1995:364)

The ethnic-focused approach

According to this position families differ, but the diversity is primarily due to the factor of ethnicity (Falicov 1995:374). The focus here is on thought patterns, behaviours, feelings, customs, and rituals that stem from belonging to a particular cultural group. This school of thought would see culture as a symbolic expression, and "a

symbol is some form of fixed sensory sign to which meanings has been arbitrarily attached. Persons within a cultural tradition share common understandings. Those outside this symbol system take great risks in inferring the meanings of symbols from the outside of their own system” (Augsburger 1986:61).

In this position there is a real danger in oversystematising and stereotyping the notion of shared meanings. It might be assumed that ethno-groupings are more homogeneous and stable than they actually are. We are actually talking here of an epistemological error: “...clients are seen as their culture, not as themselves” Bateson (1979:30) warns also that “The map is not the territory, and the name is not the thing named.”

Ethnic values and identity are influenced by various factors. There are variables within the group (education, social class, religion, etc.) and then there are the phenomena of cultural evolution and the effect of influences stimulated by contact with the dominant culture. Perhaps the most important limitation is the assumption that the observer, the person who describes the other culture, can be objective and has no effect on the conclusions being made about the group observed.

A narrative approach to intercultural pastoral therapy

Over and against these four approaches, I want to propose the narrative model of intercultural understanding and communication.

The narrative approach implies that the therapist places him or herself in a not-knowing position. And that position calls for “...a kind of conversational questioning that leaves room for the client’s story as told by the client in the client’s own words, unchallenged by preconceived therapeutic knowing” (Boyd 1995:220). “The process of therapy is not to reveal the truth or to impose a reality, but to explore through conversation, through languaging, realities that are compatible with a particular client’s unique tendency to attribute meaning and explanation in his or her own life” (Goolishian and Anderson 1987:536).

In spite of the well intended and well phrased theories introduced by Augsburger (1986) in his good book, concepts like *interpathy* and *transsppection*¹ are too much coloured by a knowing position and do not reveal the same epistemological position to be found in the not-knowing position of the narrative approach. The idea that a therapist is capable of moving over to persons of the other culture in a process of transsppection, is already arrogant and knowing. It reveals something of an asymmetrical communication, of a messianic role in stead of a partnership role. It consists of a movement initiated from here to there, while the narrative approach wants to experience the sensation of being drawn into the other's world, of being drawn over the threshold of a cultural difference.

The narrative approach to therapy is clearly and in detail described by authors like Anderson and Goolishian (1988) and Michael White (1995). Anderson and Goolishian (according to Boyd 1995:221) describe the therapeutic conversation as “...a slowly evolving and detailed, concrete, individual life story stimulated by the therapist's position of not-knowing and the therapist's curiosity to learn.” Seen from this point of view, intercultural therapy seems no longer a complex and rather impossible task, as long as the therapist is honestly willing to learn from the person from the other culture. “The kenotic pattern of Philippians 2:25ff describes the Christ-conversation and makes clear that our position must be one of service rather than domination or social control. A stance of agape-listening places the pastoral conver-

sation in the realm of mutual co-authoring of a new story for the one in need of healing by valuing the unique reality of the other while continually striving for a stance of openness and humility” (Boyd 1995:221).

The “tools” which fit this approach to therapy are: responsive-active listening; a not-knowing position; conversational questions. The aim, as in all therapy, is change, but change within this perspective can be defined as “...the evolution of new meaning, new narrative identity, and new self-agency.” (Boyd 1995:220). The narrative approach has a capacity to “re-relate” events in the context of new meaning. We can refer to this kind of therapy as “being in language”.²

When working in this school of thought, it becomes increasingly difficult to view culture on the basis of the previously mentioned approaches. Culture must be seen as a much more immediate and ongoing process and not as something static which is handed down unaltered from generation to generation. The broad definition which Falicov (1995:375) gives, is perhaps one which fits into this paradigm: “...those sets of shared world views, meanings and adaptive behaviours derived from simultaneous membership and participation in a multiplicity of contexts, such as rural, urban or suburban setting; language, age, gender, cohort, family configuration, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, socioeconomic status, employment, education, occupation, sexual orientation, political ideology; migration and stage of acculturation.”

When the combinations of “simultaneous memberships” and “participation in multiple contexts” are seriously taken into account, the groups that emerge are much more “fluid, unpredictable and shifting, than the groups defined by using an ethnic-focused approach” (Falicov 1995:376). It thus becomes much more difficult to make generalisations about culture groups and much more necessary to take on a not-knowing position.

In discussing the phenomena of cultures, cultural similarities and differences, Falicov (1995:376) refers to two important concepts:

Cultural Borderlands, a concept which refers to the overlapping zones of difference and similarity within and between cultures. This gives rise to internal inconsistencies and conflicts. On the other hand, it is the borderlands that offer possibilities of connectedness. Falicov (1995:376) refers to the poet, Gloria Anzaldua who describes the “new mestiza” (a woman of mixed Indian and Spanish ancestry born in die USA): She “copes by developing a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality.”

Ecological Niche refers to the combination of multiple contexts and partial cultural locations. We can think of a family narrative which encompasses multiple contexts rather than a single label (Mormon, African, Afrikaner, Boer). The philosophy here is to emphasise large categories – a philosophy that supports inclusiveness and a diversified unity.

With these concepts in mind, I again want to strongly argue the not-knowing position of the narrative approach as the only acceptable approach in an intercultural therapeutic situation. I agree with the approach and words of Dyche and Zayas (1995:389): “We argue that one should begin cross-cultural therapy with minimal assumptions, and that one way to learn about a culture is from the client. This argument seeks to balance the cognitive model of preparation with a process-oriented approach by exploring two therapist attitudes: cultural naiveté and respectful curiosity.”

The ideal is for therapists to be participant-observers. Rather than working with historically constructed descriptions only, the therapist should learn from a present and current cultural community (Falicov 1995:385). As is shown by Goolishian and Anderson (1992:27), all human systems are linguistic systems and are best being described from inside by those participating in it, than by so called objective observers.

Narrative pastoral counselling: a social constructionist approach

Narrative therapy can be described as the rewriting of history and auto-biography (Boyd 1996:215). And this rewriting takes place through the mutual conversational co-creation of new stories. This is a view of pastoral counselling which takes seriously our “radical embeddedness in history and language.” “Such a view takes for granted the creative and creating power of language. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the God who is active in history is also active in language. Consider the powerful *dhabar* of the Old Testament creation narratives and the *logos* of John's gospel and the early Church Fathers” (Boyd 1996:215).

To focus on conversation in this way directs our attention away from the inner dynamics of the individual psyche or events in the external world (Boyd 1995:216). Instead, we are more free to be attentive to *words in their speaking*, words we create and by which we are created.

With reference to an article by Gergen (1985), Boyd (1996:218) summarises the social construction orientation as follows:

- a) what we take to be experience of the world does not in itself dictate the terms by which the world is understood,
- b) the terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, produced of historically situated interchanges among people,
- c) the degree to which a given form of understanding prevails or is sustained across time is not fundamentally dependent on the empirical validity of the perspective in question, but on the vicissitudes of social processes (e.g., communication, negotiation, conflict, rhetoric), and
- d) forms of negotiated understanding are of critical significance in social life, as they are integrally connected with many other activities in which people engage.

To take a narrative approach is to look for a “negotiated understanding”. When a new negotiated understanding is reached, a new narrative has been constructed. By taking this approach, culture is no longer seen as a determining factor, but as an interesting “borderland” from where new “ecological niches” can be developed. Then human beings become inventors of and inventions of culture. The prerequisite is of course that we take on the risks of the borderlands and give ourselves for intercultural interaction. As Augsburg (1986:25-26) puts it: “This change comes from encounter, contact, and interaction, not from programmatic education or social engineering. It occurs on the boundary, not in the cultural enclave. ... The capacity not only to ‘believe’ the second culture but to come to understand it both cognitively (‘thinking with’) and affectively (‘feeling with’) is necessary before one enters cross-cultural counselling.”

The way we interpret our world, the rights and wrongs of our life, the good and bad, are all products of our social (and therefore cultural) embeddedness. “There is no recounting of the history of a country ... apart from a narrative loaded with interpre-

tations of interpretations which are by-products of human relationships.” (Boyd 1995:218).

The South African context

Although things have changed much for the better during the past few years, the poem by a black South African, Oswald Mtshali, still describes the situation in our country:

WALLS

*Man is
a great wall builder
The Berlin Wall
The Wailing Wall of Jerusalem
But the wall
most impregnable
Has a moat
flowing with fright
around his heart*

*A wall without windows
for the spirit to breeze through*

*A wall
without a door
for love to walk in.*

Oswald Mtshali, Soweto poet

These walls of fear are part and parcel of the South African scene and history. The following story shows how in an ironic, but tragic way, it shapes our lives (Malan 1990:226): “This is a parable of fear obscuring fear that occurred a long time ago, in a small town called Bulwer, in 1906 – the year of the Bambatha rebellion, the last Zulu uprising. Bulwer lay close to Zulu territory, and white farmers in the district feared the local Zulus might join Bambatha’s rebel army and butcher their masters in bed. So the whites called a meeting and formulated a plan of action: if the Zulus rose, all whites would rush to Bulwer and barricade themselves inside the stone courthouse.

A few days later, someone cried wolf, and the whites panicked. They loaded their guns and children onto wagons and abandoned their farms, leaving meals on the tables and leaving cows un milked in the barns. They barricaded themselves inside the courthouse, loaded their guns, posted lookouts, and sat back to await the barbarians. By and by, they saw dust in the distance. Peering out through chinks in the barricade, the whites beheld a vision from their worst nightmares – a horde of Zulus approaching on foot. The crowd halted a few hundred yards away. A deputation detached itself and approached the courthouse. The Zulus knocked on the door. The wary whites opened a window, expecting to hear an ultimatum. Instead, the black men said ‘Why have you forsaken us? We see there is a terrible danger coming, because our masters have fled into this fort, and we are frightened, for we don’t know what it

is. So we came to ask if we could also come inside, to be under the protection of our masters' guns.' ”

Stories like this one which tell of misunderstandings and fear between cultural groups in Africa are actually very common. Language and other cultural differences are part of our community. To communicate across these borders is not always easy, but it remains fascinating. For those among us who are willing to listen and willing to be drawn into the stories of others, new worlds of understanding emerge almost daily. The difficulties sometimes bring us to the verge of despair, but with a narrative, not-knowing attitude we can make growing progress in the “borderlands” and develop new “ecological niches” where being different can be experienced as the most fulfilling part of existence. This is the joy of becoming part of someone else's story - like it is to know the joy of fish in the story of the old Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu (as quoted by Rosenbaum and Dyckman 1995:41):

*Chuang Tzu and Hui Tzu
were crossing Hao river
By the dam.
Chuang said:
"See how free
The fishes leap and dart:
That is their happiness."
Hui replied:
"Since you are not a fish
How do you know
What makes fishes happy?"
Chuang said:
"Since you are not I
How can you possibly know
That I do not know
What makes fishes happy?"
Hui argued:
"If I, not being you,
Cannot know what you know
It follows that you
Not being a fish
Cannot know what they know."
Chuang said:
"Wait a minute!
Let us get back
To the original question.
What you asked me was
'How do you know
What makes fishes happy?'
From the terms of your question
You evidently know I know
What makes fishes happy.
"I know the joy of fishes
In the river
Through my own joy, as I go walking
Along the same river."*

Notes

- ¹ "Transspeciation is an effort to put oneself into the head (not shoes) of another person... Transspeciation differs from analytical 'understanding.' Transspeciation differs also from 'empathy.' Empathy is a projection of feelings between two persons with one epistemology. Transspeciation is a trans-epistemological process which tries to *experience* a foreign belief, a foreign assumption, a foreign perspective, feelings in a foreign context, and consequences of feelings in a foreign context, as if these have become one's own." (Maruyama et al., cited by Augsburg 1986:30)
- ² Anderson and Goolishian (1988: 378) use concepts like "language", "in language", and "language-ing" to refer to the process of the social creation of the intersubjective realities that we temporally share with each other.

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