

A prismatic Balint group in Kuwait

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This report refers to a Balint group seminar in Kuwait. A prismatic group method with its concentration on sensual-metaphoric mood processes is particularly suited to the Arabic mentality by allowing individual depictions of certain experiences to unfold in their sociocultural context. The significance of prismatic conflict defocusing, sensual resonance and free fantasies is outlined in this report. This method of working appears to be particularly helpful in working through traumatic fixations resulting from violence.

Balint groups in the Muslim cultural region meet with particular difficulties if they are not able to adapt to the specific sociocultural characteristics of the respective country. I have been able to gather corresponding experience in Kuwait, Syria and Turkey. A specific method of working that has proved its value in institutional Balint groups, as well as in working through relational conflicts with psychotic and dying patients and those traumatised by violence, showed itself to be particularly useful in such cases. At the centre of this method of working are sensual-metaphoric mood

processes with which subject-centred and group-dynamic processes can be transformed.

Below I describe my experiences in Kuwait. At the invitation of the Social Development Office of Kuwait I was able during the course of a six-day Balint group seminar, consisting of three two-hour sessions daily, to determine to what extent sensual-metaphoric methods of working are understood and accepted by the Kuwaiti group participants. The 15 participants were female psychologists, social workers and nurses. The aim was to work through the traumatic experiences of violence suffered by the patients and clients during the Gulf War and – something I did not expect – by the group members and their relatives. Here it is important to realise that approximately 70% of the families were affected by separation as a result of the Gulf War. Almost a third of the population fled to foreign countries. Those remaining suffered a multitude of threats, shootings, rapes and tortures, with the result that various forms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were frequently found among the population.

In the group, English and Arabic were spoken with simultaneous translation. From the very beginning the “climate” within the group was trusting, warm, cordial and familiar in spite of the fact that some of the group members wore veils for religious reasons.

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Within the framework of the sensual-metaphoric work the male and female participants were also open to individual and family problems. Discussions on the function of faith and the significance of individual suras of the Koran (e.g. during the dying process) played an important role and confirmed the Muslim identity of the group participants. The reduction in critical questioning and the search for individual motivations in the group process were further important preconditions.

The Kuwaiti psychologist Allan Staer¹ describes the Arab mentality in terms of personal identity. He explains how it should be understood to a much greater extent than in our culture as a familial, national and group identity. Arabs grow up as a rule within a framework of unlimited love, with few structural requirements in the first years of their life, before being subsequently supported by authoritarian group structures which are accepted without question. Against this background, the feelings of fear and shame experienced by traumatised patients should be understood above all within their family and national context and approached accordingly from a psychological point of view. The interpretation of transference phenomena and the incorporation of analogies and fables must therefore seek a framework that encompasses the subject. In Kuwait I therefore kept more puristically than in our culture to a concept that allows sensual-metaphoric processing channels where subject and conflict fixations can be defocused and transformed. Some of the fundamental concepts of this prismatic group work with tortured patients in English are published by A. Drees.²⁻⁴

Prismatic conflict defocusing

In individual and group defocusing processes it can be shown how within the framework of changing mood processes, physical-sensual experiences, tension, and

even painful physical symptoms can be aroused in the participants – seeking expression in the language of images – before melting away again. In a corresponding prismatic training group a symptom such as the stomach troubles of an ulcer patient who is not present, but thematised, can move through the bodies of individual group members. Here it is interesting that the symptoms of the patient who is not present do not have to be stated beforehand, and that the stomach troubles can be experienced by group members who otherwise never suffer from such symptoms. These results, some of which are amazing, can be achieved without anchoring in ritual-spiritual fantasising. The only requirements are to suspend logically construed search movements and targeted emotionality for a time and transform them into physical-sensory modes of experience and indirect figurative forms of communication.

For the Kuwaiti group members it was amazing to experience to what extent a physical-sensual resonance capability can unfold in an individual if he or she renounces customary patterns of thought and emotion which structurally limit his or her perceptions, actions and sensory horizon. Thure von Uexküll⁵ describes the behaviour of medical students who are not familiar either with the scientific language of organic medicine or that of psychological medicine and who therefore in Balint groups may experience feelings of helplessness and perplexity, thus becoming more open and sensitive to the signals given off by psychosomatic patients. We call this method prismatic as we make the polychromy of fantasy-borne mood processes visible as an expression of the multiple layers of a background of experiences in the group process in the same way as white light is split up into its rainbow colours by a glass prism.

The individual's methods of experience,

which are understood and processed in a focusing Western setting as an expression of personality structure, individual history and a specific conflict processing method, can be understood in a defocusing setting as a resonance capability. The willingness to understand physical-sensual experience and the search for figurative-poetic expression as an individual ability to create the experiences and distress of the other individual opens up a view of the overall wealth of cultural experiences, as described by Winnicott⁶ for the potential space. In the potential space, cultural dimensions gain psychotherapeutic relevance. In supervisions, fixed relational blocks can be removed with this orientation.

The alleviation of symptoms of a group member at the very beginning of the seminar in Kuwait serves as an example.

He reported that as a social worker he looked after numerous patients who since the war had suffered from marked depressive and anxiety symptoms, as well as sleep disturbances and lack of drive. He describes the anguish of a woman aged about 50 who witnessed her husband and her 16-year-old nephew being beaten to death with an axe. She could no longer remove from her mind the images of blood, the scene she had witnessed and her paralysing despair. At this point he begins to report hesitatingly in Arabic on his own suffering. For many months he had been suffering from intense stomach pains and sleep disturbances. In his case the reason was the loss of his mother during the war. However, he did not want to talk about this here. His concern was – and now he spoke in English again – to be fit enough to do his job. “My job is my life, you know,” and he added energetically: “You have to know doctor.”

The group reacts with consternation but quickly adjusts to the previously trained sen-

suous and imagination setting. Paralysing, apathetic and nauseating feelings and moods are awakened. A severed bleeding hand dances through a tangle of ships masts “like a dervish with a fluttering tail. The drops of blood dance in tune, colouring the sea”. Headaches and stomach troubles appear. Then follow experiences and images of burning oil fields “which light up a marriage ceremony like candles”. A crowd of people, dancing and convivial music. The mood now opens up to peaceful caravans of camels against the light of the setting sun. Dreamy sea moods and the gently rocking of a baby contrast with grey fields of fog. A huge mosque reaches up to the sky, into the clouds racing by, “like a sword or the bow of a ship”. “On the trip in a nowhere land” laughs a female psychologist, who also works as a teacher of religion.

The social worker takes up the individual mood images and seeks to link them associatively with his own social and family fields of experience. Within the meaning of prismatic self-experience, in which individual utterances are neither dealt with more intensively by group-dynamic processes, nor analysed or interpreted, the group member succeeds in understanding the suffering borne reciprocally between his 50-year-old client and the burden of his own family background, while moderating it within the context of joint sociocultural and religious integration. In the final group session four days later the social worker reports that his stomach troubles disappeared some days before. (“They just flew away.”) However, it was important for him to report that he had found a completely new basis of discussion with his client. He was now more relaxed and could speak to her about family and practical questions.

References

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