

"A good traveler has no fixed plan, and is not intent on arriving." - Lao Tzu

## **Trainer Self Discovery**

### **My Cross Cultural Experience with Positive Psychotherapy**

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Multicultural seminars and workshops are challenging and growth experiences for trainers.

As a trainer I was taught communication skills: verbal, non-verbal, para-verbal, and also to be attentive to different sensations, to "feel" what is happening in the group, with people: hearing, touching, and seeing. I learnt how to interpret all the information received from the outside world – from the training room and trainees, and I was pretty sure that it would be the same in other cultures like it is in my country, but it was not true and when I realized this, my own process of learning and self discovery started.

Until 2009 my experience with other cultures was in Europe. Sometimes it was difficult to make myself understood using the same skills I used in my country, to be sensitive and perceptive to people. This pushed me to adapt and to find new ways to link myself with the groups.

During my training abroad I realized that in Europe it is somehow easier because I often understood some of the words; personal and social space and limits were the same and I could use this information to establish relationships. People's faces were similar as in my country and I could differentiate them quickly and remember their names. When I met Chinese groups the first time I realized that it would provide me with the opportunity to grow and to know myself better, in a way which I had not found anywhere else. The culture shock was huge. Nothing was like home: different faces, unfamiliar names, unrecognizable words, different non-verbal language to name a few. It was my personal "earthquake" which gave me a lot of information about my unconscious self (see Johary window).

On the other hand I discovered that there are some similarities between trainees from my country, from different European countries and from China, similarities which comforted me, let me feel myself “at home”. All of the people I worked with are human beings, with their own history and feelings. Respecting them, being there for them (in a “here and now” process) is the same wherever you are. Using the rule for psychotherapy – to adapt your techniques to the client, not the client to your techniques - is a rule which works in different countries and cultures. Let them teach you (this is what we do with our clients, because they are experts in their history and solution oriented process) is also a process which works all over the world.

I remember the question we used in Positive Psychotherapy: *What all people have in common and on which they differ?* Transcultural experience is one which spurs me on not only to think about the question and the answer, but also to feel them, to experience them.

After working with groups of trainees in Positive Psychotherapy in Turkey, Kosovo and China I try to bring together all the elements of my self-discovery during these experiences.

### **1. Balancing the Focus on Content and Process**

How to balance the focus on content and process was a question for me when I prepared my presentations and programs for the seminars abroad. Would the English language, which is not my native one, nor my trainees, be a barrier for focusing on process? Will having a translator block the emotional pathway between trainees and me? How will I perceive the group process during training when I don't know the language and having a translator between me and the group? Also body language is different than in my culture.

I used some different techniques to understand the process and to be process oriented:

- look at the distance different little groups used, when they work together, in order to assess their closeness, to see what social distance means for them
- stop the learning process from time to time, to ask what is happening in the group, what are their feelings, how they see the group process – and then try to link what they said with what I saw
- show them the process, not only talk about it, even if this means to talk about my feelings sometimes (positive and negative) during training

- be attentive during the coffee breaks, how noisy they are (more noise means more interactions)
- see how many people eat together during the lunch break
- looking at the group and speaking with the group, not at the group, was another technique I used (even if I didn't understand their language and people didn't understand English sometimes, there was another pathway of understanding – the emotional one).

All of the above made me more creative and spontaneous; focus myself more on what's happening outside vs. what's happening inside. In this manner I forgot about my anxiety of teaching in a different language, of speaking not very good English and of being abroad alone. All these challenges helped me become more authentic and “here and now” with my trainees.

## **2. Working on Trainer's Capabilities and Key Conflict**

During the trainings abroad I realized it was easier to react in a balanced way to negative feedback and to aggressive reactions and questions from the group. In the Romanian language I feel sometimes I am anxious to follow the group process, that negative feedback sometimes unbalances me, and I am afraid that I'll lose the group if I let them speak openly about their feelings linked with a specific topic. In this manner I sometimes blocked the group process.

Using the English language I found myself less obedient, less polite and more honest, in a balanced way. In terms of Positive Psychotherapy I worked on my Key Conflict (honesty – politeness) and on my Basic Conflict between love/acceptance and obedience, better in English than in the Romanian language.

I remembered a story about an Asian airline company:

*„Early one morning in August 1997, Korean Air Flight 801 was heading for a landing at Guam Airport. There was a spate of heavy weather – which wouldn't have been a problem in itself. But the airport's guidance system was down, and the pilot was dog-tired, having been awake for 19 hours straight. Even though he'd landed at this airport many times in the past, he forgot that there was a big hill blocking the approach to the runway. He flew the plane right into it, killing 228 people.*

*That was one of eight crashes over 20 years for Korean Air, which at the time held the worst safety record of any airline, as award-winning sociologist and writer Malcolm Gladwell relates in his recent book “Outliers”. The consultant who came in to analyse the problem found a surprising reason for it: the Koreans' cultural tendency*

*to be extremely deferential to their superiors (PPT capabilities: obedience, politeness, honesty). Both the first officer and the flight engineer had recognised the danger signs, but they couldn't bring themselves to confront the pilot directly or take control of the plane.*

*The consultant's analysis drew on the work of Geert Hofstede, a Dutch psychologist who spent many years analyzing business culture around the globe, assigning different countries a "power-distance index" (PDI) based on how much their citizens defer to those in power. Americans, having a low PDI, are accustomed to speaking frankly to superiors as the occasion demands. A study of the airline industry revealed that South Korea has the second highest PDI of any country in the world.*

*The problem went away when the consultant required everyone in Korean Air's cockpits to speak English. Without the deferential forms of address used in Korean – useful as they may be in other contexts – the crew was able to speak more directly, and as a result, Korean Air went on to achieve one of the best safety records of any airline. The takeaway, according to Gladwell, is that "cultural legacies matter – that they are powerful and pervasive and that they persist." And, he adds, "when we ignore that fact, planes crash."*

It seems being more focused on "HOW" to say something (in English), being more self-oriented, being more self-aware, helped the communication process in other ways, than communication techniques in the Romanian language helped me before.

### **3. Failures and Mistakes Bring Us Closer than Successes**

Some years ago I read a book by Jeffrey Kottler and Jon Carlson ("*Bad Therapy: Master Therapists Share Their Worst Failures*" - 2002) and I was impressed by some of their ideas:

*"Therapists have a long history to invent ways to disown their misjudgments and mistakes (...) We ascribe negative outcomes to circumstances out of our control (...) In moments of honesty, or when our guards are down, all of us we are haunted by those we couldn't help (...)*

*(...) We remember the earliest years of our own training in which we were exposed to the famous "Gloria" tape wherein the three most prominent practitioners of their day – Fritz Perl, Albert Ellis and Carl Rogers – all worked with the same client. However bizarrely divergent their approaches were, they all looked pretty effective*

*to us. It wasn't so much what they did that was impressive – it was their poise and confidence.*

*Rather than having the desired effect of bolstering our commitment to the field and to improving our conceptual mastery, we left the class despondent and discouraged. How could we ever become good enough in this new profession to help people with anything near the degree of mastery of these experts? They were calm and self-assured, ready to face anything the client might present. They had all the answers (even if they were all different)..."*

I am not in the same category with these three gurus of psychotherapy. As a less experienced trainer in psychotherapy I just tried to test and to find out what works and what doesn't work for teaching the psychotherapy process. I also tried to remember what was important for me when I was a student. I realized that for people in the groups I am a model (like my trainers were during my own training). I also realized that a model of authentic psychotherapist means a model of a human being, with strengths and weaknesses, with emotions and cognitions. Even if it was difficult for me to show my weaknesses and to accept my mistakes and lack of information, I did it (and I realized afterwards that I am stronger).

- I told them about my own basic conflicts and how I worked with them during self-discovery
- I recognized when I had no answers to their questions or when their questions were so smart I'd never thought about them!
- I showed and discussed with them about my own emotions during the training (when I blushed – because sometimes I felt ashamed, when I made mistakes – and I felt guilty etc.)
- I talked with them about my own defense mechanisms, when I used a defense mechanism and was aware of it. (I am sure I was not always aware of them all the time)

I discovered that in the end of this process I am more authentic and stronger than before. What is more important is that I am more self reflective and aware about my own feelings and resistances.

In the end I remembered a saying from one of Hamid Peseschkian's workshops, organized in Istanbul at the 5<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Positive Psychotherapy (2010): "*I am not perfect! I am just good enough!*" This gave me:

- the hope that I could improve myself all my life,
- the courage to involve myself in, and to learn from, new situations,
- the courage to let me make mistakes and to accept and speak about them,
- the curiosity to see what "good enough" means about myself and be more self-reflective.

I am thankful to all those people who provided me the challenges and the opportunities to grow as psychotherapist and as human being! Thank you all!

## References

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