

ON CULTURE, CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND THERAPY

by Thérèse Woodcock on the work of Margaret Lowenfeld

Psychotherapy or therapy, for me, is about bringing our basic beliefs into consciousness. It is about communicating these beliefs in the presence of another and having these reflected back to us so that we become aware of them. It is about finding new ways to respond to what had become untenable or intolerable; it is about forging new attitudes and discovering new ways of seeing an old situation. However, any meaningful changes that occur could only happen if these changes were to be effected in a manner that made sense to the person seeking change, and integrated into a whole, thus affecting the entire outlook and personality.

Our belief system is made up of our own idiosyncratic formulations about our experiences from the beginning of our life, together with our family ethos/beliefs which is passed onto and selectively absorbed by us through our daily living. There is also the contemporary culture in which the family has its life. These three elements are psychically interwoven into our being and form what we so casually and succinctly refer to as I, Myself, Me. This I, this Me is not, and can never be wholly static - although sometimes it can seem so! - it is by nature dynamic. This does not mean that there are not any areas of belief in our psyche which are fixed, rooted and seemingly unchangeable. The human potential for adaptation, however, seems to have evolved precisely for the kind of contingency for which this fixity of belief becomes an obstacle to our ability to meet the demands life brings. These are the circumstances in which many of the children who are referred to us for help, find themselves; these are the circumstances for which our innate adaptability was evolved to

meet, these are the circumstances for which psychotherapy could be an appropriate response.

It is also my belief that we express ourselves through our actions, our feelings and our thoughts. Sometimes our thoughts are congruent with our feelings, sometimes our reason and our emotions are in conflict. Sometimes our actions reflect how we feel, sometimes not; sometimes our actions are at variance with what we say, sometimes not. These, we think or we feel, express our individuality. But our individuality is inevitably shot through with Cultural assumptions absorbed through our daily living; such assumptions we have taken for granted until they are challenged. (ie What has been considered as the Norm of behaviour in any Culture, is simply a measure of culturally ascribed meanings to these behaviours; the same meanings could be attached to very different behaviours in another cultural context. We are mostly unaware of the cultural assumptions we hold until confronted by different interpretations.)

For example: when our country moves from a state of war to a state of relative peace (I had written this before the events of 11th September), when we emigrate to another country, when we move from city life to reside in a rural community, when we move from our usual milieu to another social setting, when we change professions or change jobs, when we move from school to work, when we first go to school, when our parents split up or remarry or have a different partner (Anthony Clare: *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis*, Chatto & Windus, 2000). Consider also the world of the blind (cf Selma Fraiberg: *Insights from the Blind*. 1977. Souvenir Press.) or that of the deaf or hard of hearing (cf Jonathan Rée: *I See A Voice*. 1999. HarperCollins; Oliver Sacks: *Seeing Voices: a journey into the world of the deaf*. 1989. Picador). cf also the communication theorists like Pearce (1989).

cf also (Quotes from: *Transcultural Counselling*, by Zack Eleftheridou. London. Central Book Publishing. 1994, 1996. p16-17 = ideological roots of counselling, p22-23 = different types of culture: individualistic vs collectivist -> *The Chrysanthemum & the sword*, by Ruth Benedict. 1946. = shame [‘relying on external sanction for good behaviour’ = can be expiated or expunged thru correct behaviour or performing the right ritual by the person feeling the shame] & guilt [based ‘on an internalised conviction of sin’ & can only be forgiven by a

higher authority, as in God, but the guilt remains] cultures: summary in the new Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought, Harper Collins, 3rd ed pbk 1999. p791). These are not exclusively applied within cultures: "no society could dispense either with internalization of NORMS (how otherwise could men influence one another?) or with the systematic surveillance of an individual's conduct by his fellows". Thus individual conscience coexist with laws which regulate social behaviour in both cultural groupings; however, the emphasis would differ [TW]. In the UK, values of autonomy and empowerment, ie the goal of maximising independence is clearly implied in the Statement of Education Needs (SEN).

Today, I would like us to think about how Lowenfeld's theories can inform our thinking about Culture and Therapy, in particular that of Protosystem Thinking, Emotions and Emotional Development, including my views on relationships.

You will remember that Protosystem Thinking is effected through the pattern made by our senses, our sensorial experience. It is global, multidimensional, and simultaneous and these experiences are expressed either through our emotions or our actions and grouped or classified by the similarity of the predominant emotion aroused by each personal experience. Ultimately the ideas generated by this thinking form the basis for our belief systems, which is therefore equally multidimensional and global. Thus the Rationality of our emotions shows us how to value our logical thought, where, to slightly misquote Bettelheim (Bruno) "Reason (is) (BB: must be) guided by an informed heart".

Discussion.

To return to our topic of Culture and Therapy, I would like first, to add to the list of Relationships mentioned in the last lecture, a fourth kind of relationship: Relationships within a community. Before this, I would first like to make a connection between Relationships and Culture. You will remember my suggestion that the one possible root for the human need for relationships, is in a basic need to co-operate in order to survive.

I would now like to try to show how this need for co-operation is expressed through Culture. "Asked whether any single word would serve as a prescription for all one's life, Confucius proposed 'Reciprocity'. Jesus said it in a few more words: 'Do

unto others as you would have them do unto you.” was how Alison Jolly, author of ‘Lucy’s Legacy’ in a review of two books (Tree of Origin: what primate behaviour can tell us about human social evolution, edited by; The Ape and the Sushi Master. Cultural reflections by a primatologist, by) Frans de Waal, began her article. (Article in the London Review of Books, 20 September 2001. p11-12) It seems, from present research knowledge, argued in these two publications, that our primate ancestors and our modern cousins “must . . . have had (in some form or other) three traits shared by all of its present-day descendants: intelligence, co-operation and the rudiments of culture.” the question was then posed “Can an animal community shape its own traditions?” Culture, was defined by Kinji Imanishi, a Japanese primatologist as “socially transmitted adjustable behaviour” in 1953, but it is now suggested that “all the elements are there” for a fundamental relationship between Co-operation and the shaping of cultural tradition’s in a Community.

From the rather narrower point of view of our work, this Community I am referring to is the Community from the point of view of the child growing up. It is usually conceived of as one’s neighbourhood. However, as population and work mobility have become the norm in contemporary Western society (its also on the move in China, and rapid social change has already been noted), with all that is implied by TV, satellite and electronic communications throughout the world, it could be argued that it is necessary to extend the boundaries of this notion of Community. That is, this idea of Community should now encompass the physical, psychological and intellectual expressions and that, apart from the communication media bringing in geographically based Cultural expressions, all our social relations are subject to a variety of models. For instance, because of the lengthening of our life expectancy, all family members are very often active throughout the lifetime of the family in all its states (eg to the changes wrought through divorce & legal acceptance of different types of family configurations (multicultural partnerships, blended families, etc) are added an intergenerational dimension in the picture, with the recent speeding up of change in cultural attitudes further adding to the complexity).

Taking this definition of Community to be our starting point in thinking about the subject of Culture and Therapy, I would like to approach it through some personal observations and some thoughts prompted by my Mosaic cross-cultural research studies (cf Papers in folder).

As usual, let us start with our own personal experiences, yours and mine. Even if we think we do not remember any personal experiences, I expect we do have such experiences. The Cultural element does not have to be exotic; for a contemporary child in this country, it could be simply the difference between the culture at school and that of home. Nor has the effect to be negative, it could often be affirmative.

To give you time to recall a personal experience to share with the group, I will begin by sharing with you, a few of my own. I expect that by the time We finished giving these examples from my own experience, you'll be bursting to share yours too. But before I recount some experiences of my own, I would like to make some preliminary comments to elucidate what I have just said.

An account from me would inevitably have reference to my Cantonese background in a British colonial setting, and all my personal experiences would be situated within a particular period of world history as well as within my own personal and family history and through the various geographical/social/cultural settings my developing life had taken me. it would be equally true of each and everyone of you. Sometime in your life you will have encountered a different set of values from your own. A memory of your feelings of incongruity and/or surprise from an experience maybe a clue to just such an experience. In fact of course, you could have been surprised that Cultural differences did not seem to have caused any misreading of a situation, a misunderstanding in a relationship, or confusion and bewilderment.

At the time I experienced the events that I shall be describing in a moment, I was certainly not aware of the cultural significance. So I shall describe my memory of how I felt at the time. That I can remember these feelings so clearly probably bears witness not only to the huge effect it had on me then, but also at the time, the complete incomprehension of and lack of sympathy for my response both from myself and from others. Hence my continuing need to find a satisfactory explanation.

(1) I remember very clearly my arrival at Heathrow airport over forty years ago. What I remember so clearly was the sight of an English woman on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor. It was a shock. It was all wrong. I had never seen an English woman doing any menial task. Much much later I understood that in my colonial-bred mind, English women do not do menial tasks, this in spite of having read quite a few English novels and studied English history.

(2) I was in for another shock the very first time I went outside where I lived: I could not understand my sense of horror at being SERVED by an Englishman, in shops, on buses or in restaurants. I had only known Englishmen in positions of power. Even the head of the Chinese language and literature department at Hong Kong University was an Englishman, albeit a graduate from Cambridge University. So when I went into a Chinese restaurant and was served by a Chinese waiter, I was doubly at home. At the time, it was generally thought that I was homesick, but I did not feel homesick consciously nor did I know what I would have been homesick for, if indeed it was homesickness.

(3) When I married, I naturally expected my mother-in-law to explain the family style of life and her help in following this. This was not a conscious expectation. (My mother later told me that she did not teach me the ways of homemaking because she thought that my husband's family would not want me to be indoctrinated before I married into his family. She had not explained it to me at all, prior to my question some fifteen years after my marriage.) So it is only in retrospect that I realise how much at cross purposes my mother-in-law and I were. I later realised that in this culture, women were expected to seek support mainly from their own mothers. We can perhaps see that today, the situation is more fluid.

(4) Another example, but perhaps a more subtle one, when our house was unfinished and we were expecting our first child, I was astonished when my parents-in-law offered to house us for two weeks only.

Now, I know that not all in-laws would appear so heartless (especially since they knew that I had no family in this country); it is not their reaction which I want to tell you about; it is my argument to my husband which surprises me still. I said, or perhaps shouted, "Whose

surname will this child bear?" as though it was self-evident that the child is not just MY or even OUR child, but that the child belongs to the FAMILY and it is therefore the responsibility of the FAMILY as a whole to think about its welfare.

Most of my Chinese friends who have known me from childhood, would say that I had a very Western upbringing. My mother certainly followed a very Western regime in my Infancy and beyond. So I, the Conscious Me, certainly did not even think I could have such a thought. (Nor had my mother thought consciously about this either. Furthermore, she was very meticulous in her teaching of her daughters-in-law.) And it's not so much the thought, as how I phrased my argument that gives it the Chinese point of view. It took me many years to see this.

(5) My daughter aged 6 went to visit her English grandparents. On her return, she was sporting a pretty white ribbon in her hair. It was all that I could do. not to snatch it off her head: the feeling was instantaneous and almost overwhelming. Only afterwards, when I was able to reflect upon this, I realised it had something to do with the fact that in Chinese custom, white, specifically a white ribbon, is only worn in the hair upon the death of a parent, in the early weeks of bereavement: it changes to blue for the remainder of the first year.

I have to consciously put aside my feelings whenever I see anyone wearing a white ribbon in her hair.

Perhaps you could add your own anecdotes? Examples.

Moving on to more general issues, let us consider three specific examples of different Cultural solutions to the same problems. From the Lowenfeldian perspective of Protosystem Thinking, we understand the particular importance of our senses and our sensorial experience to our way of organising and making sense of our experience.

(1) Does it make a difference to the infant, if it always slept with its mother (cf Jean Liedloff: The Continuum Concept) or if an infant was put down in its cot to sleep by itself? What do you imagine to be the implications of the difference?

Next, I want to mention the often debated question of nature vs nurture:

(2) What difference does it make to an infant if the mother and the society they live in are ever conscious of developmental milestones or if there is a general acceptance that children will on their own achieve these milestones? (e.g. toilet training/split pants).

(3) Thirdly, I want to bring in the notion of socialisation. Lets take the most fundamental as well as important - the feeding situation, that of attending to our primary need.

In Western society, the way a meal goes seems to be taken directly from the situation of the infant at the mother's breast. that is, the mother provides the milk and the baby sucks the milk. Very soon, however, and in some cases immediately after the baby is born, comes the expert information, that Baby needs x ounces of formulated milk at y weeks, with stepped increments. At such and such an age, Baby will require solids added to its feed, etc. And whether this feeding regimen has been successful is tested on a weighing machine, not just by the look and behaviour of the baby - that is the accepted and scientific method.

Later, when the baby becomes a child: perhaps we can hark back to our own childhoods for a moment, when you were a child, you may remember that your food was apportioned onto your plate and the only question was whether you were going to eat up. Of course, mothers have been known to deviate from this, sometimes to the extreme of cooking different meals for different members of the family. This may or may not have arisen after long and heated battles around food and mealtimes. Are such battles inevitable? On the other hand, it is perhaps still the norm where a parent or the host serves each family member (and guest) with their plateful and everyone waits until the parent or the host asks before further amounts of food is served. This is of course why dining out at a restaurant is a particular treat, because each one can order his or her particular fancy of the moment.

I have the idea that things are different nowadays and that families approach mealtimes in many more diverse ways, and eating habits are largely being determined by the working (or non working) patterns of the parents as well as how many computers or television sets are in the household (eg eating in isolation, at different times for different members of the household).

To return to what to me had been the norm I found in the early years of my being in this country, I don't know whether that of being served at table, seems quite normal to you; to my thinking. it certainly was not normal in a traditional Chinese household, or even a Westernised Chinese household when serving Chinese food. At Chinese restaurants, Chinese people tend to assume that the dishes ordered would be for general consumption. that the dishes would be shared. (The way the sharing is done is quite different from the way i have seen it done by Westerners faced with a table full of food in a Chinese restaurant. which have been ordered by different people.)

From an early age. the Chinese child ate with the family. When they are able to manipulate chopsticks, which is between the ages of three to five. they sit at table. and in varying degrees, are able to make their own choices and try out everything. The Chinese like their children to be chubby, because it shows that they have the means to feed their children well. But this simply leads them to feed the children what they seem to like and the rest, they believe. will follow. That is. the children will be healthy and grow appropriately. (In present day China. due to the One Child Policy as a means of controlling the population, this has unfortunately encouraged a generation of spoilt and fat children.) From the child's point of view of being included as a participant at the dining table, however, the child comes to an early appreciation of its own appetite and learns that its own likes and dislikes are naturally respected.

To understand how this is achieved, it is necessary to go into some detail regarding the setting in which the food is taken. (1) There are no courses (starter, fish course, main course, dessert, savouries) as such. That is, it is not a linear activity where one course follows another in a particular order, nor need one course be consumed by everyone before the next course would be served. There are usually soup and several dishes, all served more

or less simultaneously so no one is particularly put out so can be taken in any order by any individual without transgressing any socials etiquette.

(2) The food is not put into categories, as meat, vegetables etc. (meat is mixed with veg, fish can be mixed with meat). The emphasis is on simultaneous variety, and soup is as likely to be drunk at the end of a meal as at the beginning and can be part of a dish or a meal in itself, as one consisting of a bowl with fish and/or meat, vegetables and noodles or rice in soup.

(3) What's more, people all help themselves to the food they like or need, including filling their own bowls with rice from the pot. This makes it easier for everyone to eat up without fuss. The unspoken rule at table is that we should be aware of not hogging either all the best bits or the entire dish. One certainly has to learn to use one's eyes, because it is also the case that it would be impolite to rummage for the choice bits from the communal plate. Thus mealtimes are occasions for sharing, of being aware of your own needs, and setting them alongside that of others.

For me, the Chinese dining together is a communal democratic process, a constant renewal of our shared community.

At the time of my arrival in this country, mealtimes in an English home forty years ago reminded me of being at school where the position of the teacher was taken by the mother or the host, who remained in charge of nurture. a position in Chinese culture which is indeed that of the Teacher, nurturer of the intellect and mind.

It is only since I have brought up my own family, using both dining customs that I have come to realise the difference in attitude implied by these different logistics at table. Let me elaborate further.

It seems to me that historically, the Western model of feeding is hierarchical: it basically places on the parent or host the responsibility for knowing the needs of everyone round the table: the essence of which is "Mother knows best". The Mother then by implication

becomes (or has been given the power over) the archetypal source of all that nourishes us, continuing the role allotted by nature when we were at her breast.

Historically, the Chinese model delivers to each person round the table, the responsibility of discovering for themselves their own needs. What the parent or host is responsible for is providing sufficient variety for that need to be met. To me, this shared responsibility is the beginning of independence for the child and the first step towards the surrender of the totality of maternal responsibility. It also by implication values the sharing this entails. The recently coined phrase "Come and share a meal" is perhaps not just self-conscious in English, but also showing a shift in this position.

I suppose, what I am trying to convey here is the notion that its not the practice, but the ATTITUDES THAT INFORM THE PRACTICE that are crucial. The Chinese believe that children naturally gain control and, by imitation, learn how to make the natural functions socially acceptable and thereby come into adulthood as a social being. Whereas, the English seem to me to believe in the necessity of training, These two ideas are likely to bring different problems to the care environment and the need for different solutions.

Would people like to share their thoughts on this?

The Meaning of any Communication then maybe is largely dependent on factors which are beyond that of personality and family ethos:

(1) The personal metaphor: Does emphasis on one's family status and role in a culture (eg Chinese) instead of individuality (eg American) make a difference to how a person experiences herself?

(2) The family myth: If there are differences between one's family beliefs and the dominant culture in which the family lives, does it always engender conflict within the child or do children find ways round this?

(3) Continuity of cultural tradition: Example: The issue of arranged marriages is very much a current dilemma, both for the young Asian girls who have been brought up in this country and for the police when issues of child-protection become apparent. This is where the personal problem becomes also society's.

(a) How does culture become manifest in actual behaviour? Examples:

What is recognised as good or bad behaviour?

(1) withdrawn vs good behaviour

(2) passive vs obedient

(b) Do the ways people address each other reflect how we feel about each other?

(1) parents calling their children by their personal names vs parents and children addressing each other by reference to their relationship; professionals calling clients by their first names (political correctness/ friendlier - less formal? But how does this affect your own thinking, or the child's view of you - that you're more on the side of the adults, perhaps).

(2) general vs particular terms for family relationships (English/Chinese), (when does vous become tu?)

(c) What is important in a gesture? (Desmond Morris: Gestures. 1979, London, Cape.)

(1) rude vs polite gestures - meaning and differences:

eg for the Japanese, because respect is paramount, the depth of the bow, which indicates the degree of respect due, is of vital importance

(2) how does one indicate friendliness?

(3) what constitutes hostility?

(4) what constitutes praise or disapproval?

We come now to consideration of the question of adaptation not only from and towards children from immigrant families, but adaptation in general because one of the features of modern Western society is the rapidity of change wrought by technology and the high visibility of cultural differences (& the parameters which define these differences) amongst classes or particular groups of people as well as cultures.

On the other hand, it is important to highlight the subtle ways people would adopt towards the task of adaptation (not forgetting the individual personality): e.g. Chinese families who have adopted Western ways, do so in a way very different from, say, Pakistani families. This raises issues of integration.

Perhaps it is relevant to our thinking about children in the therapeutic context to ask the question:

How would Lowenfeld therapists address the issues of culture in their work with Children? I would suggest that the Lowenfeld approach, an approach which help us attend to the entire context (both internal and external) in which the child lives, is a very good starting point. From the child's point of view, where is an appropriate starting point?

In my view, this point would be: from when conception takes place. The Culture that is to be considered in this context is the total environment, the historical backdrop, of when and where the conception took place. let us take for instance the circumstance of a baby conceived in the heightened atmosphere of a farewell party to the troops during the Second World War, in contrast to one conceived, at a rave in the closing years of the 20th century?

Let us further imagine that both the parents were in their late teens, both mothers are from similar social backgrounds, and end up being single mothers. What difference in terms of the culture of the times, the gap of those particular fifty years might have made, taking into account the global situation. to the emotional feel of that conception, that pregnancy, that birth?

It is with that imagination which I would like you to begin thinking about each child who comes to seek help from you.

A couple of further contrasts for your own consideration:

1. Where and whether a child plays or has its personal time.

At home, where (in the kitchen or in his room)?

At friends'?

At Gran's, by choice or under duress because of necessity?

At childminder's or welcoming neighbour's?

With friends?

By itself?

Doing what? Watching TV, reading, playing computer games, rigging up shows, dressing up, doing nothing and nagging mother or just moping?

2. Where and when a child usually eats.

At home? Out to the local McDonald's? Depends on what's going on with the rest of the family?

When someone remembers? Whenever the child feels like it (fends for itself, on snacks or takes out preprepared meals)?

Regularly with the family as a family? Takes meals in own room whilst watching television or finishing off homework? No regular routine or no idea what is happening most of the time (is that because he is not made aware of what is going on or is it because he is so immersed in his own world, he takes no notice of what's going on round him (ie family culture vs personal choice)?