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CAN PSYCHOTHERAPY CHANGE SOCIETY? REFLECTIONS ON MANY YEARS OF GROUP WORK ON THE POSSIBILITY OF DIALOGUE

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Summary

Beginning with Erich Fromm, psychotherapists have employed theories of psychotherapy in understanding unaccepted courses of social events. Psychotherapy theories are also used for the interpretation of history. The language and methods developed in psychotherapy have dominated many dimensions of social life: social work, education, advertisement, and public relations. Psychotherapy, especially group psychotherapy, has been employed also in solving social and political conflicts. Annual seminars of the Israeli-Polish Mental Health Association included small group meetings of Israeli, Polish, and German mental health professionals. Using theory and methods of psychodynamic psychotherapy, the Association took on the task of working through the burden of the tragedy of Holocaust consequences, which is a goal declared in its statutes. Referring to our own experience in the statutory work of The Israeli-Polish Mental Health Association, we conclude that in spite of a significant impact on the interpersonal level, a change on the social level is invisible.

„Everything you proclaim is acceptable, and the world sincerely and fervently wants you to explain the new truth. They ask you: "Tell us how new knowledge can help us, how to treat neurotic and psychotic patients, [...] eliminate social conflicts, relieve tensions between nations and prevent wars?"

Franz Alexander (1953) [1, page 207]

We associate the interest of psychotherapy in the outside world with changes that have occurred in psychoanalysis. Initially as opposition or supplementation of the Freudian focus on intrapsychic problems; later, the mainstream of psychoanalysis has moved outside the area of the Nazism raging in Germany, to America, mainly the USA. That is where psychotherapists, more or less psychoanalytically, have turned to the possibilities of influencing social problems.

¹ The bases for the study are theses of the lecture presented in three sections (The Other, the Foreign, the Same) at the XIII Conference in psychotherapy, in Krakow, October 20, 2017.

In the United States, the mid-twentieth century was a golden era for psychoanalysis. Not only did analysts run psychiatric hospitals, but American government agencies, Congress, and newspapers consulted them. For example, in 1964, the magazine "Fact" asked 2,400 psychotherapists whether Senator Barry Goldwater, a Republican, was the right candidate for the office of President of the USA. 1,189 declared that Goldwater was "from the psychological point of view not fit to be President" [1, page 203]. And he has indeed lost the election which was held after President Kennedy's death.

The psychotherapeutic thought was becoming ever more popular for various levels of reflection, not only for helping individuals, but also for socio-cultural analysis. Emerging post-war welfare states, introducing liberal social reforms, have benefited from the language and values proposed by the increasingly significant psychotherapeutic discourse. It seems that this resulted in the real influence of psychotherapists (or perhaps rather the proposals conceptualised by them) on the development of social care, education, family law, punishing minors, and so on [2].

Rose [3, page 28] even claims that "psychotherapists managed to colonise various professions by imposing their own vocabulary of images, valuation, and techniques". The triumph of the language and values of the psychotherapeutic world is unquestionable. Therapeutic buzzwords and slogans are present in commercials, TV series and talk shows, and the values of the middle class are permeated by terms from the language of psychotherapy - self-development, contact with yourself, openness, creativity, efficiency. The language of psychotherapy has become one of the main tools for the problematisation of reality [4].

Categories found in thinking about mental life, especially those derived from psychoanalysis, have also penetrated the language of social sciences, and thus the description of group phenomena. This applies in particular to the description of trauma (including historical and cultural), collective memory, collective identity, research on the Holocaust and repressed communities. Aleida Assmann, a well-known researcher of group memory phenomena, wrote about the book by Mitscherlich [5] that "they put the collective German psyche... on the couch for therapy" [6, page 147]. The psychoanalytic method applied to the social material has served Adorno's authoritarian personality theory, and the concepts of trauma and memory of Ankersmit, LaCapra, Caruth and many others. Among the Polish literature, worth mentioning are Joanna Tokarska-Bakir [7], Jan Sowa [8], Grzegorz Niziołek [9], and Andrzej Leder [10].

However, are the techniques of psychotherapy similarly expansive?

For example, group analysis techniques have been used successfully in business and business management for many years and therapeutic techniques for working with the family have penetrated the world of social welfare.

In the second half of the 20th century, psychotherapists, primarily from the psychoanalytic and humanistic fields, proposed the use of group work with politicians in conflict situations, even those involving international conflicts. It was expected that a dialogue similar to that applied in pursuit of the

therapeutic goals achieved in the treatment of people with mental disorders could lead to the resolution of conflicts of a different nature. These proposals did not arouse the interest of politicians.

The idea of using groups of people interested in conflicts between social groups has, however, found a practical application. Founded in 1952 by Foulkes, Abercrombie, and Elias, the London-based Group Analysis Society uses theoretical foundations and methods of treatment developed for the purpose of treating people with mental disorders to resolve conflicts between social groups. The American Psychiatric Association has established a Committee on Psychiatry and Foreign Affairs. The Polish-German Society for Mental Health and the Polish-Israeli Mental Health Society had similar goals of achieving social change.

The use of theories underlying psychotherapy, especially those derived from psychoanalysis, to analyse social events, encourages the use of psychotherapeutic methods for resolving conflict problems, especially of those problems that have their roots in the past. The progress of the Polish-Israeli Mental Health Society (PITZP) in its attempt to resolve the conflict between Israelis and Poles around the trauma of the Holocaust has served for reflection on the negligible effect of such a work, despite its high cost.

Changes in society could be expected as a result of changes either in members of the social group or of the group as a whole. From a theoretical perspective, the alternative is preposterous. The theory, after all, predicts that the group process is parallel to the process of change in the group members. However, it is difficult to imagine a group process aimed at effecting the desired changes if the group is the whole society.

Let's start with the negative hypothesis: one cannot change society using psychotherapy. The theoretical basis for its proposal seems quite strong.

Firstly, every form of therapy, psychotherapy included, is a treatment that depends on theoretical assumptions concerning the essence of health disorders; it cures illnesses or people suffering from health disorders [11, 12]. In this second respect, it is important to connect a health disorder with a single being. This applies not only to people but to all living beings.

It is equally difficult to say how it has come to be that, in relation to societies, people talk about diseases and their treatment (of either the disease or the society). For a physician, notions of illness, health disorders and treatment take on a rhetorical nature, analogical or metaphorical in character, when used in relation to entities other than a suffering person. If this analogy is based on similarity, it may be about dysfunctionality. However, even with evidence of the effectiveness of individual treatment methods, it is doubtful whether one can expect their usefulness to remedy an evil that we recognise as a disability of society. In the case of a metaphor, which, in fact, it seems to be, a "sick society" is a phrase meaning something different than the original concept of a "sick man".

In the second half of the last century, the existence of mental illnesses was questioned in many ways. Sociology developed the deviant theory, necessary for the functioning of the social group as "not

us" in the process of building and sustaining group identity [13]. Anti-psychiatry recognised the concept of mental illness as a product of social culture, aimed at eliminating inconvenient people [14, 15]. This had strong support from philosophy [16]. A few decades later, the application of von Bertalanffy's theory of systems to explain relationships in families in which someone suffers from mental disorders led to the idea that it is the system (a natural social group) which is sick, while only one member is identified as a patient (sufferer) and delegated for treatment [17]. However, it does not follow that the methods of treating people suffering from mental health disorders can effectively lead to changes in society.

The younger of the authors of this paper has doubts about the premises of this reasoning. The language of psychotherapy has been applied to describe social phenomena, and ways of acting (techniques), for example in terms of social assistance, when working with large groups. If so, limiting the use of psychotherapy to treat people suffering from mental disorders is an archaic maintenance of the unjustified domination of medicine.

Secondly, over the course of the last century, psychotherapy recognised that treatment methods should be adapted to the conditions in which they are applied. The focus was initially on the process that takes place between two people, then it expanded to cover groups, then large groups (such as the therapeutic community), then natural family groups, mixed family groups, etc. The methods of psychotherapists' work differ not only as a result of differences in theoretical foundations but also depending on with whom they work (modality). We have not encountered in the literature a description of methods of working with an entire society, although there are descriptions of methods of working with whole communities affected by traumatic events.

But, as holds the younger of us, this is not true, since, for example, in the social sciences, it is postulated (effectively) that historical traumas can be overcome, just as one works with individual traumas. The assumption is that the historical trauma of the joint experience of being a victim is embedded in the collective memory - an indelible trace that affects generations; that cultural repression involves displacement processes and other post-traumatic defences; that, when it is safe, deconstructing myths is possible, healing (because true) stories emerge, and traumatic experiences can be included in the social memory; that it is healing for the society; and that in this process an open society, interested in itself and others, and vulnerable to harm, may emerge.

A few years ago, the younger of us deluded himself that such a process was taking place in Poland, that we were approaching times of social peace, a cooling of emotions, a fading of antagonisms, the raising of very different voices in unison. Today, the younger of us has the feeling that, just as an ant does not know the essence of ant work, so the therapist is helpless in their attempt to understand social processes.

Thirdly, it is difficult to free oneself from personal experiences. At the beginning of the 1990s, Stefan Leder strongly questioned the legitimacy of methods derived from the psychodynamic psychology

of developmental psychotherapy in planning to step in with support for a democratic society, as dreamed of by the older of us during one of the first meetings of the Polish-German Mental Health Society in Gütersloh. Stefan Leder was guided by Karl Marx's conviction of the influence of the laws of history, which were decisive for the course of social events. The younger of us does not discuss the personal experience of the older.

And yet, psychotherapists refer to theories useful in working with the individual and their clinical experience, for dealing with the problems of large groups, societies or even humanity. Especially after the Second World War, those among them who took into account the influence of social conditions in building the foundations of the theoretical way of functioning of individuals attempted to explain the cruelty of this war by reaching for theories on which they based therapy. Erich Fromm [18] is considered the father of this way of thinking. We have mentioned the first bloom of such thinking at the beginning. Antoni Kępiński referred to the theoretical basis of the therapy he used, trying to understand individual behaviours making up the unprecedented horrors of war [19]. Neither Fromm nor Kępiński have suggested that psychotherapy could lead to desirable, beneficial changes in society. Similarly, contemporary, Zaremba [20] refers to Kępiński in an attempt to explain post-war anti-Semitism in Poland, and Andrzej Leder [10] refers to Lacan, seeking an explanation of the complexity of the dynamics of the socio-political processes in the country.

Regardless of the standpoint of the psychotherapeutic theorists regarding the possibility of using essential knowledge about human nature to explain social and historical processes, they generally refrained, like Fromm in *Escape from Freedom* [21], from suggesting that psychotherapy can be used to obtain beneficial changes in the society.

Opposite ideas, postulating the use of psychotherapy to resolve political and social conflicts, are associated with the flourishing of psychotherapy schools in the USA, drawing on humanistic psychology. In Poland, such ideas were first publicised after a study visit to California by Jerzy Mellibruda, Wojciech Eichelberger and Izabela Osuchowska [22]. The use of group work with politicians in conflict situations, even those involving international conflicts, was proposed. It was expected that dialogue such as that applied in pursuit of the therapeutic goals achieved in the treatment of people with mental disorders could lead to the resolution of conflicts of a different nature. These proposals did not arouse the interest of politicians.

In Poland, the peak of interest of psychologists, psychiatrists, and sociologists in such psychotherapy possibilities occurred during the visit of Carl Rogers and his team in the late 1970s. To this day, many well-known figures from the political scene remember the meeting with him and the training in which they took part. They mention these things more or less with disappointment.

At that time, the American Psychiatric Association ran a Committee on Psychiatry and Foreign Affairs, headed by the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan. This committee organised

unofficial negotiations between influential Israelis, Egyptians, and Palestinians. Volkan founded the Centre for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction at the University of Virginia, where he worked, and participated in attempts to solve many international conflicts around the world.

The idea of applying methods developed by psychotherapy, especially in connection with groups, to solve conflicts between social groups, has also found expression in the work on problems distant from the great game of international policy.

It is difficult to trace the history of such use of the theory and practice of group psychodynamic-oriented psychotherapy. In 1986, the older of us participated in group workshops organised annually for psychotherapists during the Christmas season. The workshops were by design places for training through one's own experience. In the small group, of which the Polish therapist was a member, there were also therapists from Denmark, the Netherlands, Israel, Germany, and the United Kingdom. The first meeting, after presentations by the participants, was dominated by the question of the Holocaust and the attitude of Poles and Danes towards the extermination of Jews. None of the group members had been adults at the time when the extermination of European Jews had taken place. The problem was political by nature; four decades earlier, Nazi Germany (though with the participation of collaborators from other nations) murdered, mainly on the territory of the Republic of Poland, six million Jews, citizens of all states occupied by the Third Reich, and citizens of states allied to the Third Reich during the war. Occupied Denmark organised the deportation of Jews, their citizens, to neutral Sweden. None of the participants in the group had in their narrative memory (explicité) the participation in the *Endlösung*, as persecuted, persecutor, protector, or passive witness. For all group members, these were events in which the previous generation, the generation of their parents, filled these roles. However, it cannot be ruled out that the trauma of the Holocaust was also theirs, even though the extermination was not part of their declarative memory. They were certainly the "second generation" of victims, executioners, and witnesses. It is highly probable that attitudes to the Holocaust have been part of their socialisation and have influenced the building of a national group identity. Of course, it cannot be ruled out that the topic appeared in that group as a substitute problem rather than a personal one. We think, however, otherwise; that for the Israeli, the German, the Pole, the Dutchman and the Dane, this was an important issue at the meeting. Societies in which the attendees lived and worked, had delegated to them to confrontation, debate on the possibility of saving Jews from death ("Danes could, Poles could not?") and the responsibility of their ancestors. The workshop at the Foulkes Institute lasted five days. As in the psychodynamic group, the group process also involved approximation and agreement (of course, after having expressed negative emotions). It is impossible to assess whether any individual changes in group members have affected the societies in which they live their daily lives. Neither is it possible to assess the change in the social group that is being sought through changes in its individual members, and not concurrently.

In a book published jointly by Gabriele Ast and William Grear in 2001 [23], on the collective memory of the past and its impact on the mental life of individual members of a social group, Vamik Volkan presented the experience of working with a group of German psychotherapists, founders of the Psychotherapeutic Working Group for Holocaust Victims [Psychotherapeutischer Arbeitskreis für Betroffene des Holocaust, PAKH]. They invited Volkan to help them overcome the difficulties they had encountered in achieving the agreed goal of the PAKH. Three members of this group were from German families. Two were Jewish, non-German, who arrived in the country as teenagers. Volkan met them four times for two-day sessions at semi-annual intervals. He assumed that the purpose of the group work would not be to treat group members but to see the conflict between the identity of a large social group to which the representatives felt they belonged, and individual identity. He referred to previous group meetings with Arab and Israeli representatives. The meeting of the group ended the previously planned symposium "*Koniec milczenia*". The whole cycle took place between 1997 and 1998, at the end of the decade after the reunification of Germany. It was preceded by an unfinished study that Volkan and Ast were conducting on the mutual accusation of the Eastern and Western Germans for the crimes of Nazism. It is interesting that the book in question does not note Günther Ammon's earlier psychoanalytic work for Deutsche Akademie für Psychoanalyse [24], on the responsibility for Nazism, or the work of Klaus Dörner and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziale Psychiatrie [25].

Ammon and Dörner, despite their different attitudes and professional activity, have, we think, influenced on the Polish co-founders of the Polish-Israeli Mental Health Society. All Polish founding members have participated in and attended congresses of the Deutsche Akademie für Psychoanalyse and the World Association for Dynamic Psychiatry; they were also members of the Polish-German Mental Health Society, the participation of which in the creation of the PITZP is difficult to overestimate. The first PITZP symposium in Krakow was tripartite; German members of PNTZP also participated in subsequent Polish-Israeli symposia. In turn, the Israeli PITZP co-founders with a psychoanalytic orientation could even be involved in the work of the PAKH and Volkan. The Society formally established in 2001 has the statutory task of discussing and overhauling the heritage of the Holocaust tragedy and its consequences, a task to be carried out jointly by Poles and Jews [26]. As early as in 1999, during the first seminar of the Society, one of its co-founders, Prof. Dov Aleksandrowicz, said: "To sum up, how can we psychiatrists contribute to the dialogue between the two nations? We are not experts on political processes, but we really know a lot about unconscious processes and distortions of the truth. We also know that coming to the truth can be difficult and painful and resistance may ensue" [27, page 38].

Since the founding of the PITZP, symposia have been one of the main formats of its work. Meetings of small groups, based on the assumptions of group dynamics theory, played an important role. Professionals from Israel and from Poland (initially also from Germany) participated in the groups. Group meetings were important features of the symposia between 2000 and 2009. After this date, they were not

organised anymore, although some members of the Society saw such a need [28, 29]. As early as 2004, Barbara Józefik, Bogdan de Barbaro and Krzysztof Szwejca presented the analysis of emotional and intellectual processes in Polish participants of the dynamic group meetings [30]. At that time, they wrote about the emotional weight carried by the Polish participants:

“The Israelis [...] talked emotionally about their experience of Poland and their own Polish heritage, about the construction of their own identity and the importance of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism for this process. The Polish participants were not prepared for the seminar to take on such a personal character. [...] The problem was what each person should personally do. [...] How can one incorporate the Jewish perspective into the previous thinking about one’s own country and nation?” [30, page 75]. The speeches of the individuals, although during the meeting co-creating a polemical dialogue, were, in fact, an overlay of the “external” voices of all fragments that were present in every participant. Because in each of us there are many voices: a voice demanding the "objective truth", a voice seeking justification and purification, and a voice defending against anything that would violate the myth of a noble Pole. At the same time, each one is trying to satisfy the other. In the authors' opinion, there was a duality of view in the described process, expressed in the adoption of two perspectives. The first is explanatory and, at the same time, deconstructive, while the second is ethical [30, page 78].

In their opinion, "the right to adopt an explanatory perspective is obtained after taking responsibility for the unquestionable evil" [30, page 79].

Difficulties of the group process were further analysed later [31-33]. It has been concluded that the deconstruction of myths important in building the Polish identity, although necessary, faces mounting difficulties. These observations coincide with Volkan's conclusions about the individual's conflict with the identity of the collective representation.

This is similar to Moshe Landau’s interpretation, which, in analysing his own participation in the group process, indicated the difficulty of the participants of the collective representation experience that requires what could be described after Bion as a “catastrophic change” [34].

The experience of the PITZP in the use of psychotherapy seems to indicate that the overhaul (in this case joint work on the consequences of trauma) assessed at the social level, has not led to a significant change. Changes at the interpersonal level are, however, significant, if we take into account the number of close friendships made and the fact that the Society is still active, eight years after the cessation of its small groups activity. The last symposium of the Society took place between March 9 and 10, 2018. It was also attended by delegates from Germany and France, who were interested in the subject. Although the meeting was connected with the 75th anniversary of the liquidation of the Krakow ghetto, and took place in an atmosphere of political tension after the signing of the Act Amending the Institute of National Remembrance in Poland, commonly known as "Holocaust law", the discussion closing the symposium was different than it had been for 19 years. The pain of the trauma of the Holocaust could be

accommodated, and the sense of the Poles' responsibility for active participation in the Holocaust, although clearly along with help and rescue, was able to be expressed freely. Both the Israelis and the Poles accepted without resistance the contribution of the French participant of the meeting in political solutions absolving the French state of responsibility for the participation of the Vichy government in the extermination of the Jews. Those who participated in the meeting and discussion presented an opportunity to change attitudes, about which Barbaro, Józefik, Drożdżowicz, and Sz wajca have written before [33]. However, it is difficult to suppose that such changes could touch the society as a whole.

Group workshops for psychotherapists, focused on the trauma of the Holocaust, are still organised by the Group Analysis Institute as international events. Initially, they have taken place in Cyprus (where, moreover, Volkan was born), and then in various countries, including Poland.

We can neither verify nor disprove the hypothesis about the unsuitability of psychotherapy in bringing about change in society.

We think that, like intra-family loyalties are stronger than the ties between the patient and the therapist, the relationships with one's social group are so important that any alteration could be described after Bion as a disastrous change. We also believe that, despite the resistance to a catastrophic change, confrontation with the burden of the Other and those negative emotions towards others which arise in the process of creating the identity of a group that is culturally separate, is worth confronting one's own emotions. This does not, however, change society as a whole.

Nevertheless, a reverse dependence exists. This is that society and social changes have a serious impact on psychotherapy. Nissim Avissar [35], in analysing the history of psychotherapy in Israel, points to the relationship between the level of social tension and the then proliferating approach by psychotherapists to intrapsychic problems and reduction of their social activity.

Perhaps such a research should be undertaken also in Poland.

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