

*Alessandra Manzoni*

Two important concepts arising from the Marsala Workshop organised by Ruvolo and Profita, and from Kurt Husemann's paper presented at the IAGP Congress in Rome in August 2009 caught my attention in a particular way.

Ruvolo and Profita have underlined that the participants in the large group were expressing feelings of loss of identity and of belonging stimulated by the physical location. Husemann has identified the trauma and the difficulty in elaborating it as founder and holder of the identity itself.

In the works of these three colleagues many more suggestions and hints are present, but I have pinpointed these ones because they seem to me to be useful in my therapeutic work with immigrants, particularly with illegal ones (*sans papiers*), who experience many more difficulties in being accepted and participating in the new culture than the legal immigrants.

It is a very demanding and awesome task to try to enter into the collective of a new culture or society and we cannot but admire the results that immigrants often attain.

We see that they solve this undertaking in different ways. One is a satisfactory integration into the new life group. Another is an exclusive participation with their original ethnic grouping in which they can attempt to replicate the cultural situation of the country of origin or they can use this as a support during the difficult task of integration. Others maintain a condition of personal isolation sometimes sufficiently adapted but often based on homesickness for the native country, and on the myth of being able to return home. Many people who are unable to find a way to integrate and participate in the new life can develop pathologies of varying degrees.

The immigration trauma is always present, even if it is relative only to the original journey of migration. But often it is preceded by the 'trauma' related to the decision to migrate, which is not always the preferred choice of the migrant. But even before that moment there are often other traumas due to social or family situation from which the immigrant comes.

When finally arrived the process of adaptation to the new country often takes place through both minor and major traumas.

The immigrant, the illegal immigrant, arrives at a consultation with the physician when the unease has evolved into physical disease and when this disease cannot be modified by any physical diagnosis or therapy he is then sent to the psychologist (which means psychotherapist) or to the psychiatrist.

At this point and in this contact we can begin to identify the strength of the problem of the cultural differences.

However the patient's symbols or representations can be very different from the ones of the therapist. What Devereux calls the 'ethnic unconscious' puts itself between the two different cultures. The therapist cannot reach a good understanding of what is really happening to the patient because the therapist finds himself faced with values, meanings and internal (cultural and psychical) references that are not modifiable and some times not even reachable.

The therapeutic requests are often magical, which obviously create disappointment and give place to something similar to another trauma that strengthen the strong sense of being a victim.

There is a similarity between the facts evidenced by Ruvolo and Profita during the Marsala Workshop and the work of therapy with illegal immigrants. The large group can be assimilated into the new culture or society but where they are likely to come up against strong urges towards disintegration and loss of identity.

Therapy on offer either from the public or private services should propose a more suitable acceptance of their needs. But usually the therapeutic setting cannot satisfy all the requests (magical, miraculous, to recuperate/heal/recover the identity and so on), not even their basic needs of being listened to.

It is often impossible to compel the patient to work with the individual type of involvement that in our countries is usually considered therapeutic. We are always centred on a one to one therapy while the 'outsider' often comes from cultures where the family and social group is the focus of the diagnostic and therapeutic interest.

Thus the relationship with the migrant has to be created from a new base. It always starts from our ignorance and curiosity of the mental and cultural world of the 'patient'.

I think that what we could offer to the migrant must be discovered by him through our capacity to listen and to wait for the slow discovery of his personal and cultural characteristics.

If the services which are available and usable by the migrant, can learn to accept him, but at the same time be able to accept the loss of contact with him, to be searched and forgotten by him, then it is possible to find with him his own way of entering into contact with our different realities.

Meeting and being involved in a variety of human interaction within the social contest and within the public healing institutions can bring about episodes of comprehension and acceptance that can give the immigrant the opportunity of starting to feel himself accepted and understood.

He finds himself in a puzzle where he must gradually find the key.

Perhaps this search without an exact knowledge organizes his own way to know and to adapt positively to the new society. Perhaps in this way the new culture can gradually be experienced as a less traumatic process, less strange, and domineering.

Especially for many very sick patients but also for many subjects with different kinds of adaptation problems, this possibility to move into a net of acceptance and assistance which does not ask and does not impose, can become the main road for a gradual involvement and realization of the possibilities to integrate in a personal and rich way.

In the Marsala Workshop the function of accepting realized in the median groups as places where the 'fragmentation' felt in the large group could be elaborated and overcome, became evident.

The difficulties felt inside the large group in the cloister where certain symbols (e.g. the palm, the geraniums) appeared to stimulate a 'mystical' reaction which could in the migratory reality be assimilated to sectarian participation to groups, churches, etc. which often are able to capture the uncertainty of identity of the subject. The construction of a net of opportunities, of places and people from which to be accepted can slowly give place to a reciprocal relationship. This favours the personal development of individual but elaborated and integrated personal projects.