Cultural Homelessness: A challenge to theory and practice[1]

by David Henderson

There are many ways of approaching the phenomena of migration and social and cultural mobility. Castles and Miller observe that, "forms of migrations are more and more diversified."[i] Urry argues that, "sociology should concentrate on different kinds of mobilities and not on society."[ii]

Hoersting and Jenkins introduced the concept of cultural homelessness. They use this to describe the experience of persons, who have lived in multiple cultural frameworks before the age of 14:

> [They] live in a framework that may include experiences, feelings, and thoughts that do not belong to any specific cultural reference group… they lack a cultural home. They may experience a strong yearning to 'go home,' but home is no one place.[iii]

[1] Talk given at Encounters, Traditions, Developments: Analysis at the Cultural Crossroads: 3rd European Conference on Analytical Psychology, 27-30 August, 2015, Trieste, Italy.

The concepts of “third culture” and Third Culture Kids were coined by Ruth Hill and John Useems in the late 1950s. Pollock and van Reken use this definition:

> A Third Culture Kid is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture. The TCK frequently builds relationships to all the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK’s life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background.[iv]

Norma McCaig, herself a TCK, coined the term 'global nomad' in 1984. The terms are normally taken to be equivalent. Schaetti makes the important observation that “once a global nomad, always a global nomad.”[v] Vivero and Jenkins suggest that:

> understanding the developmental hazards of multicultural experience has become increasingly important as the world’s population becomes more geographically mobile and inclined to procreate across ethnic lines… Culturally homeless

> individuals appear to have distinctive patterns of experiences that differ from those of specific ethnic minorities, immigrants, and others who are culturally different from their environs.[vi]

An important feature of this sort of background, it seems to me, is that the person has been an outsider from conception. He or she has never had the experience of being unselfconsciously a part of a social group. There has not been the normal experience of gradual emergence from the collective. They were not part of a collective from the start. This resonates with the observation that they do not have "full ownership" on any culture. The lack of the experience of having been unconsciously embedded in a coherent cultural and linguistic matrix has consequences for how we might conceptualise their ego development. I want to develop the idea that these people have multiple egos, because their early experience was nurtured and shaped in a multilingual, multicultural matrix.

The notion of the mother tongue is an important concept for thinking about the organisation of early experience. Yildiz writes that:

> The sounds of this language can stir something deep down inside a person; this is the language of primary attachments, the language in which one first says and becomes "I." It is the language that signifies belonging and reaffirms it.[vii]

The idea of the mother tongue is an idea with a history and its adoption has consequences. It privileges a monolingual paradigm. Yildiz explains this history largely in political and sociological terms, while hinting at its psychological implications. Yildiz says:

> … a monolingual paradigm, which first emerged in late-eighteenth century Europe, has functioned to obscure from view the widespread nature of multilingualism… monolingualism is much more than a simple quantitative term designating the presence of just one language. Instead, it constitutes a key structuring principle that organizes the entire range of modern social life, from the construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities to the formation of disciplines and institutions as well as of the imagined collectives such as cultures and nations. According to this paradigm, individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one "true"

> language only, their "mother tongue," and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture and nation.[viii]

Amati-Mehler, Argentieri and Canestri develop this further:

> There are probably many reasons for this repression of the phenomenon of multilingualism. Perhaps an archaic need for security leads us to believe that there is only one language – our own. Scholastic institutions have certainly played their part: a "frontal," "unidirectional" form of teaching consisting of listening and repeating, has prevailed exclusively for a long time and has tended to conceal, if not to literally eliminate, heterogeneous linguistic realities so far as the language and the language models of the person (and social class) who teaches are concerned… According to this model political institutions must be tailored to fit individual ethnic unities, each identified by one specific language: the nation that was "una d'arme, di lingua e d'altare" (of one army, of one language, and of one faith).[ix]

I would suggest that the presupposition in psychoanalytic thinking that one ego is the norm is a logical consequence of these intellectual and political forces. Echoing the words of Yildiz, in psychoanalysis "an exclusive, clearly demarcated ego" is a sign of health. Vivero and Jenkins suggest that:

> Culturally homeless children are likely to have a different concept of what *primary language* means; for these children a mixture of two or three languages may constitute their primary language.[x]

But I think that the important thing here is the gap between the languages, between the identities or egos. An uncultivated, uncultured space, if you like.

A therapist who is working with a normative theory of psychological development, attachment, psychopathology, psychic structure or the analytic process is in danger of failing to recognize a fundamental aspect of these persons' lives. The therapist may be tempted to diagnose the patient as borderline, an as-if personality, psychotic, autistic, or even having multiple personality disorder. While there

may well be aspects of the personality that are consonant with these descriptions, these diagnoses may constitute a category mistake. An existential fact is being interpreted as a psychological deficit.

The gap between egos is a deficit, if you like, but it is not the result of splitting, repression or dissociation, or even of unconsciousness since the culturally homeless client is likely to be extremely attuned to these gaps. Vivero and Jenkins comment that these persons possess:

> Cognitive flexibility, more independent thinking, multiple problem-solving strategies, the ability to adapt to constantly changing social environments, acute social perception [and]… richer cognitive resources.[xi]

Indeed the status of these gaps may be their prime preoccupation and burden. But it is a deeply shameful topic and so the client will be wary about whom he or she discloses this to. If the therapist interprets this situation, along the lines of single-ego psychology it is likely to increase the despair of the client because they may feel they have to collude with or surrender to the therapist's cultural norms in order to maintain the relationship. It may feel like an impossible task

to educate the therapist about an entirely different experience of the world.

Culturally homeless clients often identify themselves by what they are not, rather than by what they are. Imagine your client was born in Mozambique of British expat parents. In the home the parents spoke English, Portuguese and Tsonga, all with high degrees of fluency. The client's prenatal, preverbal and early life was saturated with the three languages and cultures. The languages and affective dominants of the cultures formed distinct structures in the child's psychesoma. As Freud said the ego is first and foremost a body ego. My contention is that these three cultural, linguistic structures actually contribute to the evolution of three phenomenologically distinct ego states or subjectivities.

One way to think about this is using the concept of hybridity. To my mind this is not very satisfactory as it implies a kind of fusion or mingling of identities, which I want to maintain are distinct. One can also think in term of multicultural identity, but this implies a kind of patchwork, where the parts hang together.

But the client's experience, in this case, is that he or she is not English, not Portuguese, not Tsonga. Furthermore these egos or subjectivities operate independently. They may be at different stages of development. One may be literate and sophisticated, another may be infantile or adolescent. But they are all in a profound way culturally incompetent. As Pollock and van Reken note: "The TCK frequently builds relationships to all the cultures, while not having full ownership in any." This can lay down a bedrock of grief, confusion, shame and anger. According to Vivero and Jenkins the: "Three core experiences of cultural homelessness are rejection, confusion, and isolation."[xii]

It is essential I think to remember what Schaetti says: "Once a global nomad, always a global nomad." In other words this is not a condition that is subject to treatment. It is not something that one can recover from. It is not something that can be fixed. In fact it is precisely the restless search for a home that stands in the way of psychic development. Only by giving up the search for a home, for the mother tongue, will the culturally homeless person stand a chance. The chance to make a life. And, if very lucky, for the self to lead the way in the evolution of a highly idiosyncratic form of life that is a workable

resolution of the existential dilemma represented by this type of homelessness. Vivero and Jenkins state that: “By definition, the individuals involved are distinguished by their uniqueness.”[xiii]

This echoes Jung’s words:

> … the patient’s difficulty consists precisely in the fact that his individual problem cannot be fitted without friction into a collective norm; it requires a solution of an individual conflict if the whole of his personality is to remain viable. No rational solution can do justice to this task, and there is absolutely no collective norm that could replace an individual solution without loss.[xiv]

If we think of the self as the potential for human personality we might find it useful to think of these clients as having multiple ego–self axes. Each ego is manifesting a different potential for human personality. The state of play on one ego-self axis will not necessarily tell you much about the state of play on another ego-self axis. There may be very different issues at stake on each axis.

It may also be useful to imagine a different set of internal objects related to each linguistic, cultural complex or identity. A middle-aged man who grew up in several places in the Congo and the US and now lives in a small town in Texas, but travels regularly to Mozambique for work – sending facebook messages from airports around the world - responded to my query about dreaming in different languages. I'll quote quite extensively from his letter:

> One of the frequent questions that I get from people who know my background and ability to get by in several languages is "do you dream in other languages?" and of course the answer is yes.
>
> I don't see that as unusual, it seems natural to me that anybody who actually speaks and, perhaps more to the point, has the ability to think in another language would from time to time dream in that language.
>
> It has occurred to me that in every instance that I can remember my dream in the other language I invariably speak the correct language for the person that I am addressing. You

know how in dreams sometimes you are able to do the impossible such as fly, suddenly change locations, walk through walls or there are improbable situations? Why do I never address say an American in French? I suppose the easiest explanation is simply that a certain language is strongly associated with my subconscious memories and associations with that person. So why is that rule held inviolate while I can dream that there is a talking goat in my workshop? ...don't go psychoanalyzing that one!

I also often had dreams about my good friend Kizanga...there was Lingala, some Tshiluba and some Swahili in those dreams. I have not had one of those in quite a while and that may be because Kizanga died back in 2010. We were always going somewhere...which is what we did a lot of in our real life together.

Now I occasionally dream about interacting with my Mozambican firefighters and we speak Portuguese of course. I have only had three or four of these dreams, all in the last two years, which I relate to my increased vocabulary and

> proficiency with the Portuguese language.
>
> Nothing too dramatic to add to your research there but I have always found those dreams to be powerful ones and I tend to remember them when I wake up. I also was struck by the fact that I always seem to use the correct language for the setting.

I am *also* struck by the fact that he uses the appropriate language when addressing people in his dreams. For me this would add weight to the argument that there are clusters of internal object-relations associated with different languages. Does he have distinct egos or subjectivities or complexes that are structured by Lingala, Tchiluba, Swahili, French, Portuguese and, of course, American?

Could we, in Bion's sense, view the organizing dynamism of each of these linguistic, cultural structures as different vertices? Does each linguistic, cultural complex act as an alpha function to digest the world for the infant?

Regression is an important aspect of any therapy. The challenge of how to understand and position himself or herself in relation to these

regressions will be complex for the therapist of a culturally homeless client. The therapist has at their disposal all of the usual theories for thinking about regression drawing on object-relations theory. There may be regression on the part of any one of the egos in relation to its own particular mother, in response to its own defensive or developmental needs.

The therapist however may also feel that the client has disappeared. They may be inclined then to think in terms of psychosis, autism, dissociation or some sort of attack on linking. While any of these may apply, I am suggesting another possibility in relation to the culturally homeless client. The client may simply have entered into the gap or space between egos or identities. This could be a space without content, but not necessarily without consciousness. Because it is familiar to the client it may also be a state without anxiety. This could be quite alarming and disturbing for a therapist working on the basis of a one-ego psychology. They may feel that the situation is dangerous or that it requires a strong intervention to jolt the person back into “reality.”

However this is precisely what is not needed. In a way, nothing is needed. This is a state that just is. What is needed is for the client to be recognized and accepted as someone for whom this sort of state of being is a fact of life.

I think that Bion's injunction to approach the session without memory or desire is particularly important as the psychic environment of these clients is complex. You never know which language world you will find yourself in today – or you may be between worlds. What is often wanted is a lengthy therapy that serves as a benign background to the client's slow process of digesting affects and experimenting with life styles. As in any therapy it is often through listening to his or her own speech that the client becomes encultured and cultivates a way of being in the world.

As we are in Trieste, the city of melancholy, I'll close with a poem by Alex Graham James that conveys the peculiar melancholy of the culturally homeless person.

Mock Funeral

There was no funeral.

No flowers.

No ceremony.

No one had died.

No weeping or wailing.

Just in my heart.

I can't…

But I did anyway,

and nobody knew I couldn't.

I don't want to…

But nobody else said they didn't.

So I put down my panic

and picked up my luggage

and got on the plane.

There was no funeral.

[i] Castles, S. and M.J. Miller (2003), *The Age of Migration*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, cited in Agnieszka Trabka, (2014), 'Being chameleon. The influence of multiple migration in childhood on identity construction,' *Studia Migracyjne – Przedglad Polonijny,* Rok XL, z.3(153), p. 88

[ii] Urry, J. (2000), *Sociology beyond societies: Mobilities for the twenty-first century*, London: Routledge, cited by Trabka, p. 87

[iii] Hoersting, Raquel C. and Sharon Rae Jenkins (2011), 'No place to call home: Cultural homelessness, self-esteem and cross-cultural identities,' *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35: 17-30

[iv] Pollock, D.C. and R.E. van Reken (2009), *Third Culture Kids: Growing up among worlds*, Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, p. 13

[v] Schaetti, Barbara F. (), 'Global Nomad, Third Culture Kid, Adult Third Culture Kid, Third Culture Adult: What Do They All Mean?', http://www.figt.org/global_nomads

[vi] Vivero, Veronica Navarrete and Sharon Rae Jenkins (1999), 'Existential Hazards of the Multicultural Individual: Defining and Understanding "Cultural Homelessness,"' *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 7

[vii] Yildiz, p. 204-5

[viii] Yildiz, p.

[ix] Amati-Meher, Jacqueline, Simona Argentieri and Jorge Canestri (1993), *The Babel of the Unconscious: Mother Tongue and Foreign Languages in the Psychoanalytic Dimension*, Madison, CT: International Universities Press, pp. xxviii-xix

[x] Vivero and Jenkins, p. 18

[xi] Vivero and Jenkins, p. 21

[xii] Vivero and Jenkins, p. 13

[xiii] Vivero and Jenkins, p. 12

[xiv] Jung, CW8 142