

The IFP 1979 – 1994

Preliminary remark:

At present, journals seem to be adopting more and more of a negative stance towards “narratives”. That does not, however, deter me from choosing the first person for my contribution to a chronicle about the IF(M)P. Apart from anything else, relating a story is almost certainly the first-choice way of saying what has to be said – and certainly the most appropriate – whenever it is a matter of the “psyche”. So, I take it that when we chroniclers put our observations on the record our readers expect to share in our subjective reminiscences.

Now, reporting on happenings experienced at first hand always means focussing on a particular perspective, which also entails concentrating on a rather more limited field. It is equally inevitable that the account is going to be tinged with the personal colouring of the raconteur (which, for psychotherapists, is a self-evident part of everyday experience).

My recollections of the IFMP:

It was at the 1979 congress in Amsterdam that I was elected to the Board upon the recommendation of the retiring president, Prof. P.B. Schneider (Lausanne), where I was entrusted with the task of succeeding Dr. Heinrich Fierz (Zurich) as treasurer. It had been three years before that that I had attended my first IFMP congress, held in Paris, where there had been much debate about the “processus psychothérapeutique” throughout the whole of an unbearably hot summer week.

My primary interests remained what they had been up until then through the activities of the SAGP (the Swiss Medical Society for Psychotherapy), where I had been a board member from 1967 to 1976, namely, the fundamentals of what happens in the psychotherapeutic situation as such – irrespective of any particular school. So I was thus also very much interested in the congress theme of the “psychotherapeutic process”.

It was the same interest for what primarily happens in practice that was at the centre of my attention for the subject of “research and training” (the topic of the 1979 congress). That also applied particularly to the varying cultural sensitivities and experiences, i.e. to psychic realities, that cannot all be constrained within a single canon propounded by specialists and insiders of “one size fits all”.

Even during the period when I was the federation’s treasurer I could not escape noticing that our members, all of whom were, after all, practicing doctors of medicine, had clearly different perceptions of psychotherapy and thus also varying views of our international federation. So, when I attended the first congress held outside of Europe, in Rio de Janeiro in 1982, which, moreover, was dedicated to the theme of “psychotherapy and culture”, I emerged with these initial impressions very much reinforced.

My wife and I travelled to Brazil as members of a group organised by colleagues from France and we were to spend another two weeks in their company touring that huge country once the

congress was over. It was what struck me most instantaneously about that congress right at its outset that is still most vivid in my memory, namely that out of some 2500 participants there were only a few hundred “like us”. We had never set foot on a foreign continent before and what we experienced at first hand and for the first time was the sensation of being in a minority, along with the other Europeans (as well as the North Americans and Australians) – and that at a gathering of specialists. I can also remember how embarrassing it felt when European or North American speakers had the guile to address the packed congress like schoolteachers disseminating the truth about the human psyche. I admit that I was surprised myself that I soon found it more interesting to hear about various other approaches and therapeutic techniques that were unfamiliar to us – and the successes achieved with them – and to watch the films that were shown to illustrate them.

What I experienced in Rio brought the recognition home to me that psychotherapy is surely bound to be an impossible undertaking if it tries to get by without a reference to the particular cultural background whose outlook provides the landmarks within which patient and therapist manage to understand one another. At the same time, however, there was no abatement in my interest for the fundamental occurrence in the process of meaningful communication, which has to be empirically irrefutable and free from dogma. What that also meant was that my earlier interest in the plurality of schools and methods now took a further step into the multiplicity of perspectives as experienced by various peoples and cultures. In this new guise, my old passion thus became the driving force that motivated me to my active commitment within the IFMP.

The next congress, which was held in 1985, could also be summed up as first and foremost a search for contacts in a mixed environment. This time it was not with a cultural world of which I had had little prior knowledge in the geographical sense, but with political and social otherness on the territory of Europe itself. I believe the idea first came from our President, Dr. Finn Magnussen, to hold the 1985 congress in one of the so-called people’s republics of Eastern Europe, and the former Yugoslavia was an evident candidate, given that we had a number of members there. The congress theme had a very progressive bent, namely “Health for All by the Year 2000”. This was taken to mean a psycho-hygienic objective that was very much stage-managed top-down and probably also prescribed from the top – especially in the light of national scourges, such as alcoholism and the like, that the authorities had vowed to eradicate. The congress as planned bore virtually no trace of psychotherapy as we understood it, but that did not prevent many speakers from talking freely about psychotherapy from their individual viewpoints. My feeling was that the congress in Opatija was “well-intentioned” but disappointing when judged against what I expected of a genuine worldwide forum. My recollections would have been pretty bleak, had it not been for numerous contacts with outsiders in the setting of marginal events and had there not been a number of chance casual encounters and conversations.

In the meantime, the longest-lasting effects of Opatija included the initial “conspiracies” regarding the next congress scheduled for 1988. Switzerland was to be the host, and at the same time it was certainly no matter of chance that the need was voiced to return more intensively to “probing the depths” of psychotherapeutic activity. The upshot of these preliminary talks was that Lausanne was chosen as the venue and Prof. Marcel Burner and myself were entrusted with the organisation. The subject we chose was “Training in Medical Psychotherapy - Culture and Theory”. We believed that comparing the various ideas on this subject from around the world would also help uncover the underlying orientation in each instance, and that could then open up a debate. By restricting the theme to training, it was also our wish to facilitate a correspondingly more authentic broadening of participants’ horizons and to provide an optimum platform for comparisons with the concomitant pooling of experience and exchange of views. Finally, the limitation to medical psychotherapy was coupled with the expectation of being able to find ways of discovering the living bridges to all the rest of medicine and to the psychological dimension that is present in every doctor’s surgery or hospital. Taken as a whole, our project was rather demanding – perhaps even too demanding for an international congress. My view is that we succeeded on at least one score in Lausanne, namely that of strengthening the international emphases of our gatherings once again and, through that, of directly experiencing reciprocal interest (“inter-esse”) for one another in our very diversity. I think back, for instance, to the massive response that Prof. Bin Kimura (Kyoto) triggered with his lecture on the divergent “meaning of language”.

“Psychotherapeutic health care”, the theme chosen three years later for the 1991 congress in Hanover, represented a renewed attempt to avoid limiting this pragmatic topic solely to our European situation, but to shed light on local specificities in other parts of the globe, such as Africa.

It was in 1994, at the congress in Seoul, that I experienced the most incisive intensification and, at the same time, the greatest fulfilment of my motivation within the IFP (the constraining “M” (medical) had been eliminated by then), and this was cloaked in an explicitly polarised form with the title “Psychotherapy East and West”. What had been little more than a marginal subject at early congresses (Opatija, Lausanne and Hanover), namely the search for dialogue between the Orient and the Occident, both moulded by tradition but with divergent worlds of past and present experience, became the essence of the congress. The gathering made it possible for participants from here and from there to arrive at a more differentiated perception of what, from their perspective, was the Other, especially since our hosts, our most loyal Asiatic colleagues, very much welcomed the opportunity of casting the limelight on their perception and took the whole undertaking very seriously. Something that up until then had only succeeded in art and literature, and scarcely at all in religion and politics, was attempted here through the one factor that bonded us, namely our experience of the provision of psychotherapy. It even managed to produce a number of authentic echoes too, even if admittedly only a small circle was involved.

My clear personal view as I look back is that the coming together of different worlds in Korea was much more clearly profiled and thus created a much more lasting effect than the first endeavour I had witnessed in South America (Rio, 1982). If that can indeed be taken to be the case and if my perception is not too much coloured by the passing of time, then, as I look back, I think that I could truly say that I had lived through a particularly interesting epoch of international and trans-cultural cooperation. My reminiscences then help me realise once again how and why my motivation came to wane in subsequent years and finally vanished altogether. It was increasingly my impression that the interest for the psychically alive element in psychotherapy was disappearing under a shroud of superficial, technical and specialist necessities, and when I was even asked my opinion on an “International Psychotherapeutic Order” along the lines of the US “Guideline”, I knew that the time had come to leave the Board.

The pull of different cultures is now gathering a new and rather radical impetus, and the quip that nothing ages faster than the latest news becomes part of life’s – often comforting – experience as one continues to put on the years.

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