



Migration

The psychology of the migrant and some therapeutic implications

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Sculpture: Bruno Catalano

Migration

1. What is migration?
2. What is trauma and what is the traumatic impact of migration?
3. What are the factors that contribute to a successful migration?
4. What if the migrant is a child?
5. How does migration impact the sense of identity of the migrant?
6. The 3 phases of the migration process
7. Implications for treatment
8. The ones left behind - movie 'El Ciudadano Ilustre'

Exercise:

A time in your life when you moved from one place to another for the purpose of staying there.

Introduction

- Migration concerns us all
- First migration: Adam and Eve
- Birth as our first personal migration, after birth follows a progressive separation from the first maternal object. (chain of separations/migrations)

Why is there so little attention for migration?

Akhtar's answer to this question (film fragment)

Migration and Trauma – What is migration?

“The action and effect of moving from one country to another for the purpose of settling there.” (Greenberg & Greenberg, 1989)

Migration in the psychological sense



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Types of migrations

- 'Expats' : can we see them as 'real' migrants?
- Visible vs. invisible migrants (Akhtar)
- Forced vs. voluntary migrations
- Sedentary migration= 'to leave a place so as to be able to remain in the same place' (Greenberg & Greenberg, 1989)

Migration and Trauma – What is trauma?

Classical definition:

An acute and painful event occurring over a short period of time which produces psychological collapse due to its overwhelming character and intensity.

Is it possible for trauma to take place in different ways than this?

Cumulative trauma

Not the *event* itself, but its *particular circumstances* and its *meaning*

Does migration have a traumatic impact?

What are the factors that contribute to the traumatic impact of migration?

- Previous experiences with the loss of loved ones
- Previous experiences with separations (Akhtar: migration as the 3rd individuation)
- Family of origin (close bonds, strong loyalties vs schizoid types)
- Capacity to deal with guilt (Mexican patient with cc)
- Quality of internal objects to tolerate loneliness
- Temperament/character of the migrant (adventure seeker vs. homey)
- How stable is the relationship between the partners or family members that migrate?
- What are the possibilities to re-store work or to start working (validation of diploma's, language impediments, etc.)

What are the factors that contribute to the traumatic impact of migration? (continuation)

- Was the migration forced or voluntary?
- Has there been enough time to prepare the migration?
- Is going back an option?
- Is it possible to keep contact with the country left behind?
- How similar/different are the 2 countries?

When the migrant is a child...

“Children are very flexible, they adapt easily to change”

BUT...

- Powerlessness (the decision to leave is made without them)
- Fortunately they often migrate with their significant others, however:
- the significant others often become (temporarily) unavailable (example: depressive mother)
- Mother's sense of 'personal confidence' can severely diminish leaving the child without containment for his own anxieties and fears.
- Loss of other significant others (teacher, friends, extended family) that sometimes were buffers to existing adverse family environments.
- Loss of non-human objects (toys, home, own bed, park, etc.)

Conclusion: children experience many losses, while being dependent on significant others who are often less available.

Identity and migration

- A part of the own identity has to be given up
- The more the two countries differ, the more the migrant will have to give up
- Many losses
- Being able to deal with loss and to mourn these losses is crucial

Identity and migration (continuation)

- The identity goes through a 're-organization' or 'transformation'
- Akhtar: 'a third individuation'.
- Just as for the child and the adolescent , for the migrant this also applies:

The quality of the relationships left behind will determine the degree of difficulty experienced during separation

Migrant

Fear

Sadness

Pain

Nostalgia



Expectations

Wishes

Hopes

Dissociation and splitting to protect himself

Identity and migration (continuation)

Self and object representations

Akhtar, 1995

From:

Love or Hate

Close by or Far away

Yesterday or Tomorrow

Mine or Yours

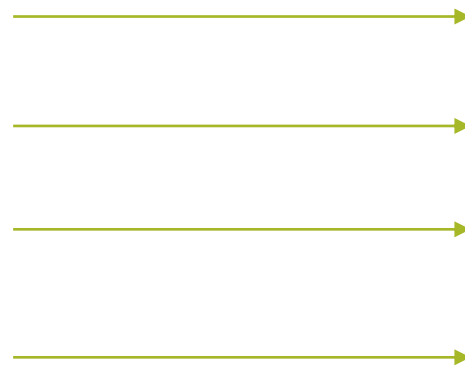
To:

Ambivalence

Optimal distance

Today

Ours



Migration process (summary):

Greenberg & Greenberg, 1989

Phase 1: intense pain about what has been lost, fear of the unknown, deep sense of loneliness, powerlessness and anxiety. This leads to disorganization and primitive defenses.

Phase 2: sadness over what has been lost, the migrant starts to tolerate split-off and/or denied feelings that were unbearable in the previous phase. He can start to tolerate the pain a bit better and little by little elements of his new environment are being integrated.

Phase 3: The past doesn't feel anymore as a 'lost paradise' (end of idealization) and so the past stands no longer in the way of having a meaningful present.

Result: mourning of the loss of own country is done (as far as this is possible!), 2 cultures (old and new) are being integrated without having to give up one of the two, enriching of the self and a 'revised' identity.

Long term effects of (multiple) migration:

Migration leaves behind a long-lasting vulnerability for future life-events.

'No way back' : even when the migrant returns it is never as if he had never left.

Implications for treatment:

1. **Not to be mistaken with attachment pathology:** people with a secure attachment-style may react strongly (high anxiety) to new life-events due to the vulnerability resulting from migration.
2. **Not to be mistaken with BPO:** disturbed sense of own identity and presence of primitive defense mechanisms (splitting) as a reaction to migration and not as a symptom of a borderline personality structure.

Psychotherapeutic implications

Patients with migration issues go through a normal, to be expected initial phase where their sense of identity is temporally impaired (who am I?). They experience tremendous pain about all that has been left behind and about the difficulties that they encounter in their new environment. This often leads to a regressive step back in their psychological functioning, characterized by the use of primitive defense mechanisms (like splitting).

This has implications for treatment. In treatment migrants need our help to integrate what has been split off. Only then can the migrant regain a sense of identity *and* a more realistic view of the country that he has left behind and of the country where he is now.

The ones left behind

Movie 'El Ciudadano Ilustre'('The Distinguished Citizen'), M. Chon en G. Duprat, 2016.

Fragment 1: 'City mayor's welcome speech'



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Fragment 2 : 'Titi, my best friend'



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Fragment 3 : 'Lecture'



Kunst staat los van ethiek of moraal.

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Fragment 4 : 'Last lecture in Salas/ grave visit'



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