

WEBINAR SEPT 29, 2019

Refugees and Immigrants: How Can Psychoanalysis Contribute?

Adriana Prengler

The United Nations recently reported that in 2019 almost seventy-one million people around the world were displaced from their homes by natural disasters, war, or for political or religious reasons. These waves of emigration are what have created the new political realities the world is dealing with today. On one side, there are the nationalistic tendencies of many who are worried about defending their borders and on the other side, there are those defending the rights of displaced people.

Emigration is a complex process involving the loss of place, of personal history, of feelings of identity and belonging, of culture, of language, of everyday life. It is an uprooting from our land, from our loved ones, our family and friends, our work. It often leaves deep psychic wounds and scars that remain for a lifetime.

Of all these aspects, perhaps one of the most difficult is the loss of identity. There is the feeling of no longer being the same person as the one who left the place of origin. By emigrating we become a stranger not only to others, but to ourselves, since one does not recognize oneself in the same way in the new place.

Another aspect that confirms the fate of the immigrant as a foreigner for life is the language of childhood. It is not by chance that we refer to our native language as the "mother tongue". Language is the link with the mother of childhood, with our historical roots and our identity.

The verbal and nonverbal communication that allowed a first bond with the mother - the primordial other - is partially lost with the migration. The difference in language remains as a gap. This means that the immigrant can never take for granted what seems to be obvious and automatic for the natives of the new place. For the immigrant, many new words will not have the same meaning, cultural reference, emotional significance that they have for the people who grew up with those words and references. As much as the new language is learned, it will be spoken in most

cases, with an accent, and the immigrant will be recognized by it as a foreigner every time he/she says something. The handling of languages, both the language of origin and the adopted one, will reflect the degree of identity and adaptation to the new place.

As psychoanalysts we understand the pain of immigrants and refugees around the world and we wish we could contribute to their lives and in some way relieve their suffering. We want to think together of ways in which we, as psychoanalysts, can contribute to this world tragedy unfolding before our eyes.

Naturally, and unfortunately, many of our psychoanalytic colleagues have been caught up in the same tide of forced exile or voluntary but compelled emigration. When our colleagues look for a new home, they search for countries that will welcome their psychoanalytic skills and allow them to carry on their work.

Maybe our offer for help can begin among our own, with our own psychoanalyst colleagues who are becoming immigrants. These are the members from our IPA societies and candidates from our IPA institutes who are going through these difficult experiences of emigration.

Belonging to an international association gives us an identity, a feeling that we could go anywhere and continue to belong. But is this something that really happens in our psychoanalytic societies? How do we welcome foreign analysts into our societies? How do we welcome foreign candidates into our institutes?

As mental health professionals, it is part of our task to extend our psychoanalytic interests beyond the walls of our offices and immerse ourselves, within our means, in the problems that afflict humanity, always aware that we are part of the community and part of the world. Our Webinar today has been titled: Refugees and Immigrants: How Can Psychoanalysis Contribute?

In which way can we help immigrants? And in which way we can help our own psychoanalyst colleagues who have become immigrants?

In 2017 Stefano Bolognini, then-President of the IPA, called for the creation of an

IPA committee to research and better understand the challenges that psychoanalysts and candidates face when emigrating from their former homes to their new home countries. The committee was mandated to study the legal conditions members need to meet in order to re-establish their practices and examine the opportunities available for re-integration into a psychoanalytic society belonging to the IPA. The work of this committee is to provide information that will assist in making the emigration experience a little less traumatic for our colleagues. It can take a long time to reinsert oneself in a new place and this committee aims to help facilitate that process as quickly and as smoothly as possible.

The IPA Psychoanalyst Emigration and Relocation Committee (PERC) was strongly supported by the new administration of President Virginia Ungar and Vice-President Sergio Nick. The committee gathers information that it receives from members and candidates who have already had to emigrate. It organizes this information in a way that can be used by other emigrating members and candidates in similar situations, to help them to learn the various rules for applying to IPA societies and institutes in their new home countries, and also about requirements for working legally in the new country (or state) to which they have moved. In this way we help emigrating analysts to use the experience of others, and in doing so save time and effort.

We would like to welcome well-trained IPA members coming from other regions as resources bringing new perspectives, fresh ideas, and creativity rather than perceiving them as competitors and intruders. This committee expects its work will also help to reduce the number of members who leave the IPA membership, and candidates who prematurely end their psychoanalytic training, because they need to emigrate and don't know how to get re-established and re-inserted into a new IPA society/institute.

We want to invite our societies and institutes to consider this problem and create rules and structures with generosity and openness to immigrant and refugee IPA analysts from around the world. We want to welcome them, invite them to belong, and open our minds to receive the new ideas they bring from their different cultures and different trainings. While it is not uncommon to feel threatened by that which is foreign, we need to remember that we can also be enriched by our differences.

We have the privilege of being part of an international association and if we can welcome our own immigrant members and candidates into our component societies, we will have managed to add another substantial benefit to our IPA membership.

Fortunately, we share a common language, the psychoanalytic language, and in some ways, this allows us to feel at home wherever we go. Beyond that we want to open our doors to our displaced colleagues, welcome them to their new home, and carry on with our shared work.