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***Cultural Diversity in Couple and Family Psychoanalysis***

**Psychoanalysis and Australian Aboriginal couples  
and families in Central Australia: the family storyline**

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**Summary**

The aim of this paper is to highlight the important role psychoanalysis might play in the repair of Aboriginal families in central Australia broken by the traumatic legacies of colonization. It is argued that to do this modifications to traditional psychoanalytical approaches to couples and families are needed that take into account the history and current circumstances of Aboriginal people. The traditional Aboriginal family is very different to Anglo-Australian nuclear families. For example family kinship is the cornerstone of the worldview of Aboriginal people and seen to be the crucible for psychological health, continuity, change and transformation. Related to this, it is also critical to the collaborative provision of psychoanalytically based couple and family therapy that there is a clear understanding of both the intergenerational (vertical) links and the nature of community (horizontal) links that impact on indigenous couples and families. The author also considers how such couples and families can be strengthened through the development of bi-cultural partnerships using a psychoanalytic understanding of trauma and tools of relatedness, deep listening, holding and dreaming together. Specific reference is made to the

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psychoanalytic work of CASSE (Creating A Safe and Supportive Environment) in central Australia which through such partnerships is attempting to provide the necessary *foundations* on which the provision of psychoanalytically based couples and family therapy can be built.

**Keywords:** psychoanalytic, Aboriginal, culture, families, couples, linkage.

**Résumé.** *La Psychanalyse et les couples et familles aborigènes en Australie Centrale: le roman familial*

L'objectif de cette communication est de mettre en évidence le rôle important que la psychanalyse peut jouer dans le soin des familles autochtones en Australie centrale, brisé par l'héritage traumatique de la colonisation. Elle vise également, à mettre l'accent sur les adaptations nécessaires, aux approches psychanalytiques traditionnelles pour les couples et les familles en tenant compte de l'histoire et la situation actuelle des peuples autochtones. La parenté de famille est donc la pierre angulaire du monde des autochtones et un creuset de transformation, de continuité, de changement et de santé psychologique. La famille autochtone traditionnelle est très différente de familles nucléaires anglo-australien. Par conséquent, le dispositif concerté de psychothérapie comprenant le couple et famille se doit d'avoir une compréhension claire des deux liens (horizontales) entre les générations et la nature de la Communauté (vertical) que ces couples et ces familles ont à leur propre culture. L'auteur se questionne sur les moyens qu'on pourrait nouer avec à ces couples et ces familles par l'intermédiaire de partenariats sur le plan culturel en utilisant l'approche psychanalytique des traumatismes qui fait appel à une écoute spécifique tel que le "holding" et la rêverie commune. Je fais référence aux travaux de CASSE (création d'un environnement sécuritaire et favorable) dans le centre de l'Australie, qui s'efforce de fournir les bases nécessaires sur lequel s'édifient la disposition de l'approche psychothérapique des couples et de la thérapie familiale psychanalytique.

**Mots-clés:** psychanalytique, autochtone, la culture, des familles, des couples, des liens.

**Resumen.** *Psicoanálisis y parejas y familias Aborígenes australianas en Australia Central*

El objetivo de este trabajo es poner de relieve la importancia del psicoanálisis en la reparación de las familias aborígenes en Australia central, proceso complejo por el traumático legado de la colonización. Otro objetivo del trabajo es el de hacer hincapié en las modificaciones necesarias a los enfoques psicoanalíticos tradicionales con parejas y familias teniendo en cuenta la historia y circunstancias actuales del pueblo Aborigen. El parentesco familiar es la piedra angular del mundo de los aborígenes y un crisol de transformación, continuidad, cambio y salud psicológica. La familia aborígen tradicional es muy diferente a las familias nucleares anglo-australianas. Por lo tanto, la disposición colaborativa de la pareja y la familia basada en la teoría psicoanalítica depende de poder comprender tanto los vínculos intergeneracionales (horizontales) como la naturaleza de la comunidad (vertical) de los enlaces que las parejas indígenas y familias tienen a su cultura. Además se considera cómo el terapeuta psicoanalítico puede ofrecer formas de fortalecimiento de parejas y familias a través del desarrollo de asociaciones que respeten su cultura, los modos de posibilitar la comprensión psicoanalítica del trauma y ofrecer herramientas de relación, con una escucha profunda, sosteniendo y soñando juntos. Me refiero a la obra

psicoanalítica de CASSE (creación de una caja de seguridad y ambiente) en Australia central que intenta sentar las bases necesarias que permiten construir recursos psicoanalíticos basados en terapia de pareja y familia.

*Palabras claves:* psicoanálisis, aborígenes, cultura, familias, parejas, vinculación.



*Photo by Pamela Nathan, 2017-Uluru*

## Introduction

Attempts to develop collaboratively the provision of psychoanalytically based couple and family theory is highly dependent on understanding both the intergenerational (vertical) links and the nature of community (horizontal) links that indigenous couples and families have with their culture. This paper represents a brief contribution to help understand the nature of these links for Aboriginal couples and families in Central Australia. It seeks to consider the history and current context of Aboriginal couples and families. In doing so, it attempts to draw attention to cultural differences and to the cultural ruptures that have disturbed traditional Aboriginal family life. It aims to highlight the important role psychoanalysis can play in the repair of broken families sustaining colonial legacies of intergenerational, rampant domestic violence and the loss of the generations to prisons, despair and death. I will refer specifically to the work of CASSE (Creating A Safe and Supportive Environment), a psychoanalytic not-for-profit organization, to show how psychoanalytic tools can inform work with families in a culturally congruent way, determined and directed by the people themselves. The role of Aboriginal men in couples and families will be a particular focus. As fathers their role has been eroded as a result of colonization whereby their traditional roles diminished. This has also led to substance misuse which has adversely impacted on a generation who have spent many years in jail or who have died violently. CASSE has developed a

number of programs, including the Men's Tjilirra Movement (MTM) and the Men's Shed research and has delivered programs to address violence, which strengthens the role of these men as fathers, strengthens the transmission of cultural knowledge, mitigate violence and therefore assists in the integration of family life.

Family life is the cornerstone of the world of Aboriginal people and their crucible for psychological health, continuity, change and transformation. In this article, I also want to consider how to strengthen couples and families through developing partnerships in culturally safe ways and using the psychoanalytic tools of relatedness, deep listening, holding and dreaming together.

### **The traumatic context**

It is only in recent times that Australia has recognized the mental health needs of Indigenous people. It is only in recent times that Australia recognizes the trauma suffered by the Aboriginal people in their daily, ordinary lives. Aboriginal people have sustained intergenerational trauma which has impacted dramatically on the couple and family life. Aboriginal people live in a post-colonial world of gross inequality, poverty, suffering, violence, homicide, suicide, assaults, domestic violence; a 60.000 year old civilization staggering into the twenty-first century, challenged first by colonialism (genocide and traditional dispossession) and then by modernity and, more recently, again by government and army intervention. Successive governments promulgating the policies of assimilation developed missions, settlements and stolen generations of children, under the guise of protection. In July-August 2007, the Federal Government enacted the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill, in the name of protecting children from abuse, giving the Federal Government wide control over Aboriginal lands, families, and community services; and the Indigenous Affairs Minister total control over Indigenous community governance. Sometimes referred to as the "stabbing capital of the world", Alice Springs has high rates of violent crimes such as domestic assault, murder and suicide. Aboriginal people are significantly overrepresented in crime statistics and the jails, reflecting longstanding trauma, and social turmoil and oppression. Aboriginal women comprise the highest proportion of victims of domestic violence. Curiously, mental health statistics have not been collected but Aboriginal people live in a borderline world of undiagnosed mass depression and generational trauma.

### **Walytja- family**

In central Australia there are at least a dozen different language groups and despite massive ruptures in cultural being, cultural difference is apparent in traditions, beliefs, practices, relationships and meanings; and if not always apparent are present. CASSE has been primarily working with the Pintupi and Luritja people on the remote communities west of Alice Springs.

Kinship and the family, *walytja* are central cornerstones of the world of the Pintupi people. The notion of self and identity is a shared one with others, with kin. Kinship is the idiom of social relatedness (Vaarzon-Morel, 2017). Knowing how one is “linked” to kin and country is of the utmost importance to a person’s sense of identity, belonging and cultural heritage (Vaarzon-Morel, 2017). Today, the family is a source of strength and a source of “worry” and “trouble” - “jealousing”, “humbug”, fights, domestic violence, lawless youth and addictions.

The traditional cultural kinship systems are radically different to the Anglo-Australian nuclear family systems (Vaarzon-Morel, 2017). I will mention a few key differences. In the cultural kinship system the Pintupi, like the Arrernte, call their mother’s sister, “mother” and their father’s brother “father” (Vaarzon-Morel, 2017) and these mothers and fathers can take on the role of parenting, giving rise to different attachment figures who can have maternal and paternal roles. Maturation and separation from the mother (but a joining with the men “standing up as a man”) is central to the initiation ceremonies for males. Traditionally young boys were ceremonially relocated into the new residential arrangement of living in an *Ingkintja* or *Jangkayi*, as the males place some distance away from the parent’s camp site (Lechleitner *et al.*, 2017, p. 9). A “proper” marriage is in accord with the “proper” classificatory skin relations for that person. There are also “avoidance” relationships and strict protocols which apply for example to mother-in-laws and son-in-laws and father-in-laws and son-in-laws. A senior Aboriginal man said to me recently: “There is no such thing as the family barbecue!”. Close kin can include the extended family and those who reside in the home and share resources and responsibilities.

Today, the people speak about the erosion of traditions which are practised and held “in memory” only by some. The initiated men return to the family home-*ngurru*. Many marriages are not “proper” marriages and skin relations are “mixed up”. The displaced role of men as hunters and Law-men, along with substance usage and gaol time, have impacted on the transmission of cultural knowledge and strong father-son relations. These changes have impacted on the cohesion of couple and family life. The people recognise these changes and losses and speak of “lawlessness”, “troubles” and “changing civics”. In the different marriages of more or less traditional worlds, there can be different subjective realities and the differences can create interferences to object relations and intersubjective relations.

### **Traditional cultural context**

Aboriginal place, or “country”, is a network of sacred places linked by paths walked by ancestral beings of the Dreaming or *Tjukurrpa* (honoring the Aboriginal preference, in the words of Green, 2012, p. 177, not to be translated) and these paths are continually walked by living people who own and take care of them. Song lines form a narrative history. Each person has a relationship with country and with each other through the Dreaming stories. Country is replete with meaning and the matrix of meaning designates

the movements of ancestral beings and the journeys of those today journeying and conducting ritual practice.

With the Pintupi people there is an emphasis on relatedness (Myers, 1991, p. 63), autonomy and “looking after”; the country holds, looks after, grows up and in turn, is held and looked after. The people and the landscape are from the *Tjukurrpa*. The world is divided into what is visible, seen and real (*Mularpa*) by virtue of what is witnessable and the *Tjukurrpa* (dreaming) (Myers, 1991, p. 49).

The *Tjukurrpa* provides the fundamental source of identity and place. It is timeless and unchanging and erases the historical, unifying the past and present in one eternity. Human action is not considered the causal result of contemporary creations or choices but is informed by the *Tjukurrpa*. It is an order of mythological ancestors to which all is subordinated and the events of the visible world are reflections and representations of an ontological prior set of events.

*Waltjya*, family, namely relatedness, the self in relation to others, is a key principle of the social order, and Pintupi people see and feel themselves to be related to kin (Myers, 1991, p. 109). There is *no self without kin*. One becomes complete and autonomous only through sustaining relations with others. The identity of self is embedded in mutual relations with others and with the *Tjukurrpa* and “one’s story”. The being of people visibly transforms and relations are strengthened, when they are visiting or back on country, revisiting the ancestors and songlines.

*Space* and the orientation of themselves and events in space is very important to Pintupi people (Myers, 1991, p. 54). Geographical location, where events occurred punctuate any narrative and sacred spaces and places entail stories and movements of ancestral beings. In the desert, the dreaming tracks and song lines crisscross the land and the narratives of ancestralized beings are memorialized in the topography of the land rendering sacred sites.

There is a culturing of space because *home*, temporary as it maybe, is on country. The temporary or nomadic nature of the camp belie the underlying permanence and significance of country. Both temporary camp and enduring country are *ngurra*- home where one belongs with family. There is ownership and narrative of “named place” (Myers, 1991, p. 91) - “that’s his story” - and with it are sacred objects and boards. The land, their space, is however a continuous entity, that is, no fences, but there are owners and custodians, in a way, yours and mine, to the land. One’s own country, *ngurru walytja*, is a place of security (Myers, 1991, p. 151).

With respect to cultural transmission, there is generational succession, governed by cultural protocol, and the elders “give” the knowledge to the young men, with an emphasis on giving and legitimacy in receivership (Myers, 1991, p. 152). The transmission of knowledge is considered a vital responsibility. Knowledge is “given” which is held in side his stomach with his spirit *kurrumpa*. This inherited knowledge is localized and given according to seniority. If there is danger or conflict or trouble there is a return to country; to the knowledge base, for protection. The cultural knowledge is highly valued and who owns it and who can speak for it, is treated with great respect.



The *emotional world* takes place in the stomach where the spirit is located. *Kulininpa* is the word for thinking, hearing and understanding (Myers, 1991, p. 107). The organ of thought is the ear. *Ramarama* indicates a deafness and a not knowing or insanity (Myers, 1991, p. 108). There is only one word in Luritja for mental illness. The emotional world is inextricably linked to the *Tjukurrpa* and to country. Sorrow is for example evoked “in memory” of the ancestors which can be heralded at times of ceremony or ritual. There are physical demonstrations of emotions, aggression and sorry business, with cutting on the chest or stoning the head drawing blood in grief. Aliveness and celebration is evoked by being on country, holding country and dancing on country. Feeling happy is described as a rising of the spirit (Myers, 1991, p. 111).

*Holding, kanyininpa*, Myers says, is a key cultural value, derived from ritual ceremony and links walytja, ngurru and *tjukurrpa* (Myers, 1991, p. 207). *Kanyininpa* is holding, looking after, caring, nurturing, caring –at time of law but for everyone there are holding men and the country holds.

One can now understand the catastrophic effects of colonialism on the cultural life of the Pintupi marked by dispossession and the incursions and displacements of settlement life and the cattle stations. One can now understand the losses sustained by Aboriginal people. Cultural life has been severely eroded but it has survived and currently is being feverishly revived before the old people die with the stories and song. One can see marked differences between the Aboriginal and western modern worlds. One can see the different notions and significances of self, place, couple, family and home. One can also see a nexus between Aboriginal and psychoanalytic worlds in the importance of place, holding, relatedness, narrative, sacredness, potential spaces, and dreaming.

Colonization has had a drastic impact on the coherence of traditional family life, on kinship systems and proper marriages along skin lines and male traditional roles have been highjacked leading to broken and chaotic families marked by generational conflict about couples, the constitution of proper couples and more.

### **Creating A Safe Supportive Environment (CASSE)**

CASSE with its psychoanalytic orientation is dedicated to changing minds and saving lives. CASSE has collaborated and partnered with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations, remote communities and stakeholders, developing some key projects determined by the Aboriginal people in Central Australia. The psychic world of the red Centre is one of generational trauma in a post-colonial world traversing a racial divide.

I have been working in central Australia for over thirty years and the relations I formed then, both with Aboriginal and Whitefellah people, enabled me to re-establish working relations with people, in a different capacity, from sociologist to psychologist/ psychotherapist. I had been working with a very senior Aboriginal man thirty years ago and a health organization which has grown into a large one. I returned to existing family/kin relationships, bi-cultural knowledge (traditional culture, country and the colonial past and legacies) and therefore some credibility. I will now describe briefly two

emergent collaborative projects facilitated by CASSE which attempt to strengthen men in their roles as husbands and fathers and strengthen families. Psychoanalytic principles and practice have informed these projects holding the cultural ruptures and racial divide which impact on family function and cohesion.

## **The Clinical experience: Community based couple and family oriented psychoanalysis**

### ***The Men's Tjilirra Movement***

Given the role of father's in families and CASSE's interest in strengthening families, one of our key programs, The Men's Tjilirra Movement (MTM) facilitates the cultural revival of making traditional tools, symbolic of tools for living, strengthening the relations between the generations of men and affirming the Grandfather's Law. The tools are 60.000 years old and are used for hunting, Law and ceremonial rituals including boomerangs, shields and spears. Colonial legacies have created significant losses for the men as providers, protectors and fathers. There are many youth at risk of suicide, delinquency and substance addiction. There is family breakdown. CASSE works with five remote communities west of Alice Springs- Kiwikurra and Kintore - *Walanguru* near the WA border, Mt Liebig - *Watiyawanu* and Haasts Bluff, *Ikuntji* and Papunya. The MTM strengthens family relations, empowering the men, facilitating them to be fathers and Law men and giving the young men knowledge, a sense of place and belonging and strengthens the spirit; a psychic home.



*Map of the western desert*

Our MTM team of ngangkari, traditional healers, and a program manager who is a Whitefella initiated man and a Whitefella cultural advisor and translator, deliver the program the Aboriginal way, in language. The Whitefellahs on the team have longstanding relations of fifteen years with the people. They are not strangers. They are known to the people in kin, place and songline. They know the "hurting hearts" of the people and they share in their sorry business. Their consulting room is on country, along



songlines and waterholes. They work, for example, talking “sideways” with different family members along gender lines. For example, if there is a suicidal youth, they will talk to different family members about his/her state of mind, alone, so as not to “shame” the youth, then take the youth out on country, his country, with uncle or grandfather if they can. They then go “level” with the family groupings. They encourage the youth to look after the old people, the grandfathers. They are mindful of avoidance relationships. They know about the “troubles” of families and they work with the men who have committed domestic violence and take them out on country. Some of these men do not talk and beat the wood to make the tools beating out their feelings on the tool. Some of the men talk and tell their story and commit to changing their ways. I supervise the MTM team and talk about the importance of presencing, holding, listening and talking together, representing and telling stories of trauma and healing.



*Photo by CASSE Preparing for Pulapa (ceremony)  
 Amunturrngu (Mt Liebig)*

### ***Kurruna Mwarre Ingkintja - Good Spirit Male Place***

CASSE has also partnered with the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (CAAC), the large Aboriginal health organisation in Alice Springs, for five years and developed a research project called. The project aimed to develop a unique Aboriginal Men’s Shed Model, along cultural lines, to empower men to find their voices and live authentically. The project was determined at the community level and with participatory action from the community.

CASSE has developed a fifteen-week Mentalisation Violence Program and piloted this program twice with twenty-five mandated male offenders, many who are repeat offenders who have not previously received treatment. In our violence program, the clinical staff have lived in Alice Springs for years and know the families and the context. An Aboriginal cultural man works alongside who speaks in three traditional languages. This

man is also the researcher on the Men's Shed project and is the son of the man I worked with thirty years ago.

Different cultural understandings of the causes of violence were integrated and included in the group program manual such as traditional notions of "payback" which are ritualised forms of vengeance for crimes committed, or traditional beliefs of sorcery such as "boning" or the breakdown of 'proper marriage skin' relationships. Traditional notions of an Aboriginal "strong" man, father, family kinship and cultural life form the foundation of the program. Supervisory and dynamic discussions ensue in the clinical and cultural group.

The men formed a leadership group, and spoke strongly to the Aboriginal researcher about their mental and emotional health needs and dream for a place. They felt they had not only been perpetrators but also witnesses and victims to violence. The men talked powerfully from the heart and strongly for the need for a place where they can talk, heal together and live in two worlds. The humanity of the men is striking. Their emotional needs are great and they recognise their psychological needs. This recognition is striking and unrecognised by the wider public domain. They say they hide their feelings that "they hurt, they bleed they have pain", "all suffering", feel "degraded and scorned", "disempowered", "lost", "devalued" and "unrecognised", seen as "violent losers" and more. They want a safe place and space to talk together where they can "straighten up" explore, grow, "get their minds back on recovery", "give them a voice", "share stories", "support each other" and heal together "straightening out the ones behind us". One man spoke of "dashed hopes" and how important it is to talk about this dynamic in their lives! They recognise the importance of an Aboriginal identity first and foremost to secure confidence, "strengthen the spirit", "walk tall" and achieve psychological change to be good fathers.

We have held forums, mentored, supervised, developed booklets and presented in international and national forums promoting dialogue about the need for recognition of the racial and cultural divide, of trauma and losses and the need for programs which promote couple and family integration.

## Linkages

CASSE has embraced Link Theory as a helpful means of understanding Aboriginal couples and families. In this regard we find Scharff's definition of the link, «the way that each person's immersion in culture forms an essential part of their linkage to society» (Scharff, 2017, p. 221) particularly helpful. He continues to say that through the links «we contribute to all who interact with us (...) Each person is embedded in history, culture and relations just as these dimensions are affected by the person's internal unconscious world» (Scharff, 2017, p. 222).

CASSE has *privileged cultural experiences* and differences and recognizes the containing and creative possibilities it provides. Culture is essential for survival, for the sacred and the profane and for a sense of belonging, having a place and an identity. The

language of the soul is both emotional, relational and cultural. Relationships are saturated with cultural meaning and transferences are necessarily cultural because the interpersonal experiences, the internalised objects, sense of self and relational patterns are culturally shaped and socially constructed. In the words of Bion, the container comprises cultural beliefs and ideas.

CASSE has also *privileged the reality of race*, the racial divide and racial relations recognizing the powerful transferences of people and communities to the colonial past and living present and the realities of inequality and power differentials. In the work, one never forgets the past of conquest, dispossession, murder, stolen generations and more recently, the Intervention in any encounter or event. And if one forgets one is reminded. I will now describe some aspects of the living trauma, legacies of colonization, of Aboriginal people: stolen generation and broken families.

### **Stolen generation - they took the children away**

Government policies required the forcible removal of people from their ancestral homes to settlements and missions. They also required “half-caste” children from their parents in order to “civilize” them. As Keogh (2014) says «all of these policies and practices had a devastating effect on the primary emotional attachments of Aboriginal people, as well as on their other social and spiritual (“Country” and “Dreaming”) connections and ultimately on their sense of identity» (p. 252). Colonization created massive disturbances to the psychological well-being of Aboriginal people and to the fundamental cornerstones of their world, particularly law, culture and families. Many of these issues were highlighted in the “Bringing Them Home Report” (1997).

Many of these issues are encountered in the work of CASSE today. The living trauma can be suddenly communicated in casual conversation, meetings, workshops and the past of the stolen generations has an immediate living presence. I will describe a couple of personal disclosures and pleas, amongst so many heard and received that I encountered in the course of my CASSE work, you might say casually or as sudden breakouts but they were loaded with meaning and pain and typify the wounded lives of the stolen generation. An analytic stance was enabling, holding and transforming.

### **Contemporary stolen generation**

At a meeting with CASSE at *Ntaria* with some Aboriginal members of Congress and elders in the community in 2013, some Aboriginal women sitting huddled in the corner, finding their voice, began to speak about a child FACSIA (Family and Child Services) had taken, and how they, the women, had returned the child to the grieving mother. Stolen generation! They were angry. Another woman said she had looked after so many children herself. She quietly said: “They’re *hurting* if they are not with their mothers. They want to be with them!”. Another woman went on to say in an anguished voice,

“The mother wanted to be with her son and the son wanted to be with his mother”. This woman acknowledged the drinking and the drugs but also the humanity of her people. The woman looked at me beseechingly. My younger assistant said later she nearly cried. The grief was palpable. CASSE was ready to be a link, to be real, to feel the humanity of the mother and the toxicity for the mother of FACSIA. The mother knew this because we were also in the presence of elders and she knew CASSE work.

### **No language**

W.T., the Chair of Congress, at the end of a recent CASSE/Congress meeting, voluntarily said, with a searing simplicity, that he was taken away with his brother, a charismatic leader who had recently died, and with whom I had worked with years ago. He slowly said: “We were sent north because we were the darkies and the light ones were sent south. There were eight of us. We were all split up. I found my way back to my people and country. I still have the anger. I try to use it constructively. I’ve worked with Aboriginal organizations and channeled it. But I don’t have the language”. In the context of his own mourning, his knowledge that I knew his brother and that he was in the presence of therapists from CASSE, W.T. was able to name and share his profound pain of his broken family and his painful past.

### **Trauma not violence**

At the end of a meeting, a psychologist working with *Ingkintja*, the Men’s Health Clinic, a Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (CAAC), said to me “I finally realize that violence is linked to trauma. I now get CASSE’s message! The boy we look after, well, after all these years, he is finally talking about his trauma. He saw two kids burn alive in a car accident”. He continued: “Have you talked to X? (another psychologist). There is a kid in juvenile justice whose mother has killed another woman two weeks ago - glassed her - and he found his uncle hanging from a tree and his Dad is in jail”.

### **The role of CASSE in providing psychoanalytically based interventions**

The therapeutic tools of psychoanalytic practice have not only informed the work of CASSE but been instrumental in thinking about trauma, cultural ruptures, relationships, couples, families, linkages and transformations. In relation to *walytje*, one may invoke attachment theory (aside from different attachment figures) object relations and the intersubjective or relational field and link theory. It is more worthwhile to briefly mention what has been the most salient and holistic that is not specific to thinking about the family in Anglo-Australian terms but to working with Aboriginal people in remote areas whose families are the domain of trauma, trouble and strength. What is clear is that the

cultural and racial divide, in the context of trauma, needs to be privileged when thinking about *walytje*, for identity, emotions, roles and responsibilities, understandings, meanings, separation, maturation and relations are radically different for Aboriginal people. Deep listening, presencing and being in communication, in short is required with a recognition of the 'hurting hearts' and then storied untold maybe told and storyline the land in new dreamings and new songlines.

The consulting room (usually a non-traditional one - the consulting room maybe under a tree, or in the clinic) is often the place of *trauma*, which is repeated and worked through over time in the safety of the consulting room and in the relationship with the therapist. The re-ignition of trauma can be raging and fiery. I think Volkan (1999, p. 36) sheds light here on the specificity of trauma with his notion of 'chosen trauma'. Chosen trauma refers to an intergenerational process of the narration of humiliating events, of mental representations that have led to drastic losses and feelings of hatred and helplessness for a powerless and victimised group of people, which have not been metabolized, mourned or reversed. A chosen trauma may remain dormant in a group's memory, in a family's memory, which may become retriggered in times of stress or repeated similar humiliations/losses from the associated past, and can be inflamed in the present. There is a time collapse, which can strike suddenly. The trauma is evident in the family breakdown, domestic violence, suicide and more.

Members of families usually present in crisis. They are often silent about the nature of the crisis. They can be filled with shame and fear. Psychoanalytic tools can help to presence, bear witness, hold, symbolize, name, represent, mediate and transform the crisis. Family work often involves multiple agencies. One may more frequently than not, see one member of a dyad or family only. The woman may fear "payback" and family members together may experience too much shame to sit together. The parents maybe the aunties or uncles. There may also be avoidance relations which come into play. Nonetheless, one works with the family in mind as there is no self without kin. Silence and breaking the silence often pends not being a stranger and sensitivities to cultural differences. Long term relationships and a knowledge of transgenerational trauma and lived experience of the bi-cultural world facilitates presentation and engagement. Aboriginal people are naturally oral story-tellers but narration maybe halting as words may not fill the void nor represent the wounds and language may hold different notions of pain. As for myself, when I see traditional owners in my consulting room, wherever it might be, I introduce myself in relation to my kin in Alice Springs and the work I have done, so they know I know, that I have a place and that I am not a stranger to the story of their hurting hearts. I will now refer briefly to a case I have supervised in a remote area.

### *Case 1*

A woman called M finally presented to the clinic having made a referral months before but she seemed to "hide" when the therapist visited. She didn't declare that she had killed her husband and been in jail for four years. She didn't declare that the day before she had been raped. She had four children and she was concerned about their safety. When released from jail she was very



concerned about “payback” (ritual vengeance by her husband’s family). She felt no one trusted her and that she was not good enough. Her family were on another community. She felt continually obligated to her sister-in-law who humbugs’ her (demanding money and goods) due to the crime committed. Her sister-in-law acts on behalf of her mother, the mother-in-law of M. She was binge-drinking and had a fight with her sister-in-law. She really wanted to hurt her but managed to walk away. She believes his family won’t let her forget her past. Her marital situation was domestic violence but at the time she couldn’t talk about it as she was too scared. She was suicidal then. Now she worries about what people think about her. She cannot connect with her children who were looked after by aunts and uncles when she was incarcerated and they “ran amuck”. She is on anti-depressants for depression.

My supervisee did not know how to proceed. I asked her how she felt. She reported feeling overwhelmed and incompetent. From a psychoanalytic perspective I wondered about M feeling in a deadened state of helplessness, the fear of her own violence, her internal murderousness, her persecutory anxiety, about the potential for suicidality, about being victim to rape but perhaps also perpetrator, about the manic-depressive cycle of drinking and about her capacity to be a good mother. Culturally, one might wonder about the tension of on-going “payback” and the “rights” of the victim family to demand obligations. A family meeting with the mother-in-law is not possible due to avoidance relations. A family meeting with the children at the outset could be premature and shame the mother. Engagement is very delicate and needs a recognition of both the psychoanalytic and the cultural. The objective was to facilitate the telling of her story, to help her find the words to talk, represent and to mourn. Parenting her children, who lost a father to murder and a mother to jail, depression and binge-drinking, can only be problematic and the focus on attachment and good parenting can only be imperative. Nonetheless, caretaking by aunts and uncles is equivalent to mothering and so attachment issues need to be considered from a cultural vantage-point. Facilitating the mourning story of injury and loss and the need for repair presents as a therapeutic intervention but one nonetheless may not be achievable.

### **Psychoanalytic concepts essential to working with indigenous families**

*Transference and countertransference*, are essential for the therapist or analyst. Melanie Klein (1952, cited in Joseph, 1985, p. 61) said that in unravelling the details of the transference, entailing a deep listening, it is important to think in terms of the total situations transferred from the past into the present as well as emotions, defences and object relations. The total situation includes everything the patient brings into the therapeutic relationship (Joseph, 1985, p. 62). Processing projective identifications, a concept introduced by Melanie Klein in 1946 (Joseph, 1988, p. 138), are essential in this process as they can be critical communications. Nine predominant countertransference’s became emergent in the CASSE work albeit they are often experienced in a dynamic or entwined. There is depression, rage, helplessness, threat and danger, humiliation, shame, guilt, isolation (insider-outsider), and howling grief. I have felt all of these feelings on more than one occasion, indeed if not many, intensely and sometimes for days. Families and couples in the Centre, regularly experience and endure the tumult of these feelings. The *interpretation/s* of different states of mind, dynamics, unconscious processes in the transference-countertransference configurations manifest in the “here and now” and/ or in dreams and dream-work is essential to the psychoanalytic work of insight and healing.

Attention, Ogden (1997, p. 719) says is given to what feels most alive, most immediate and most real in the work.

The psychoanalytic notions of *holding* explicated by Bion and Winnicott on container-contained and Ogden (2004) on dreaming and waking are essential to hold the fiery repetitions, emotional storms and pain experienced in family and social breakdown. Winnicott (1990, pp. 52-54) speaks of “primary maternal preoccupation”, generated in a holding experience, which safeguards and enables, a going-on-being and early experiences of aliveness, insulating the infant from the disruptions. It provides, in the words of Winnicott (1990, p. 54) a “continuity in being”, a temporal continuity in the self-experience of what is felt, remembered and expected. Of course, trauma penetrates the shield of continuity and leaves it violently ruptured. Without continuity, Winnicott says «the personality develops on the basis of reactions of environmental impingements and not on existence» (1990, p. 54). The holding of M and her life of traumatic catastrophe and chaos is essential for her and her family. The MTM attempts to provide a facilitating environment that can provide a continuity in cultural being, in the face of violent colonial ruptures, and therefore subjective being; as we have seen there are different patterns of holding in *walytje*.

Bion’s notion of the *container and the contained* (Bion, 1963, p. 3) refer to alive processes in dynamic interaction and not static things. Ogden describes the container, an apparatus for thinking, as the capacity for the unconscious psychological work of dreaming (coming-into-being) which is facilitated by the capacity for rêverie (Ogden, 2004, p. 1356). The contained, Ogden says, (Ogden, 2004, p. 1356) is a living process, which in health, forever changes; in ill-health it remains stultified in a veritable prison of sameness. The central psychoanalytic concern from Bion’s perspective is the dynamic interaction between the contained involving the thoughts and feelings derived from lived experience and the container, entailing the capacity for dreaming and thinking those thoughts (Ogden, 2004, p. 1359). Growth of the contained, can be manifest when a past experience, for the patient, takes on an emotional significance that it had not previously held (Ogden, 2004, p. 1358). As Martin Jugadai says: “Making tjilirra is special-it is the spirit of our grandfather inside you”.

*Transitional or Potential space*, the general term Winnicott (Ogden, 1985, p. 128) refers to an intermediate area of experiencing. It is in the space between the inner and outer world, which is also the space between people - the transitional space - that intimate relationships and creativity occur. Specific forms of potential space include the play space, the area of the transitional object and phenomena, the analytic space, the area of cultural experience, and the area of creativity. The MTM provides a potential space for the disaffected youth, for the men who have been displaced and a safe space to talk stories of truth about family “troubles”.



*Photo by CASSE - men working on Tjilirra*

*Psychological change and growth* is achieved by paying attention to the dialectical interplay of three different modes of generating experience - paranoid-schizoid, depressive, and the autistic-contiguous (Ogden, 1988, p. 17). Family breakdown, domestic violence and suicide can exemplify the paranoid-schizoid mode, the world of danger, threat and fear. The making of the traditional shield is symbolic of the protective shield against persecutory anxiety. “Sorry business” and ceremonial life can engender the depressive mode of mourning, concern and repair and family life can be strengthened. The sensory touching of sacred objects by the MTM generates a live connection with the grandfathers and the ancestral beings of the *Tjukurrpa*.

There was a near suicide of a young man in one of the remote communities. The MTM helped facilitate a *pularpa* - a community ceremony - for the well-being of the community - to support the family - to strengthen the spirit –to enable them to “carry on”. It was the first time in ten years the community had had a community ceremony where a number of significant family groups came together. One of the country headmen explained about the importance of the *tjilirra*: “If we do not have these we have no language, no culture. We have nothing. We are nothing. It’s our history. A part of us”.



*Photo by CASSE Preparing for Pularpa (ceremony)- Amunturrngu (Mt Liebig)*

## **The emergent-applied psychoanalytic practice in the bi-cultural field**

Maintaining an analytic stance and mind with the tools described above, has been essential to the therapeutic practice of CASSE working with men, couples, families, communities and collaborative partnerships and this work is equivalent in many ways to the work of the consulting room. What has become emergent is that CASSE is seen as a trusted organization. The fact that the significant funding is from a known Australian family has been appreciated by Aboriginal people in the way of “looking after” their families, facilitating independence and empowerment. I here draw on the work of Enrique Pichon-Rivière, as it can very usefully elucidate the important nature and the requisite requirements of applying psychoanalysis in bi-cultural situations.

Aboriginal people now recognize CASSE as a trusted container which can hold the good and bad, bear the pain and deposit trust in the other (Pichon-Rivière, 2017, p. 177). CASSE therapists, in maintaining an analytic stance, between subject and object, can function as third link or “el vinculo” and can engender a spiral process, breaking the existing experiences and catalyze change (Scharff *et al.*, 2017). Psychoanalysis in the Centre was treated with initial suspicion and pejorative stereotyping by psychology professionals and both Aboriginal and Whitefellahs. My standard response in the early days was “we are not here to put you on the couch”.

Interestingly the role of the therapist as an authentic agent is central to working with Aboriginal people. They know we can bear their deposits, good and bad, that that our attitude is one of unscrupulous depositories (Pichon-Rivière, 2017, p. 177) and know we attempt to grasp their communications (Pichon-Rivière, 2017, p. 177) (which is at the core of the analytic situation), taking responsibility for it, understanding their anxieties of loss and their fears of annihilation. They know we hear their stories, which have a temporal dimension (Scharff *et al.*, 2017, p. 129) and respond to them with spontaneous, real receptivity and interpretations if needed in the “here-and-now-with-me”. (Scharff *et al.*, 2017, p. 127). The role as Pichon-Rivière says, is becoming part of the interpretation vector (Pichon-Rivière, 2017, p. 177) and therefore part of transformational change “ahead-and-somewhere-else” (the future) (Scharff *et al.*, 2017, p. 129).

On my last visit to the Centre, at a conference, for example, I received an outside call from a very distressed stockman who had fathered a young youth who had suicided the day before and I then proceeded to presence the distress and loss of two other men, attending the conference, who had loved this youth. These men have now organized a workshop for the stockmen on suicide with CASSE, to break the silence on suicide, the silent killer of youth. Nearly every family has experienced the death of a loved one to suicide. They know we hold a frame of reference that considers, challenges, contextualizes and feels the vertical and horizontal linkages and that we can join with the internal links of the individual and group in their external worlds. They know we understand the changing configurations of the role of men over time and the challenges they face in assuming new positions in the family. We attend to the links and note, bear witness to, presence and digest, the unconscious transgenerational transmissions, the



pathological, the silenced, the denied, the omissions, the repeated that connect people to life partners, family, community and society and attempt to facilitate growth by co-creating new links in mourning and remembrance, representation and recognition.

The stolen generation vignettes, described above, for example, which chronicle the internal world of the stolen generation, which developed in the psychic interaction of the internal group (Scharff *et al.*, 2017, p. 129) are not readily communicated. The conspiracy of silence (Scharff *et al.*, 2017, p. 129) was disturbed and spoken. They were communicated, relationships deepened and it is likely that the immediacy of these interactions with these men, mothers, and psychologist facilitated changes in their internal and external worlds. Shifts in psychological professional thinking from different theoretical training are also not readily achieved. Psychoanalytic psychotherapy consists of the spiral process (Scharff *et al.*, 2017, p. 129) that aims to elucidate the problems that stem from the sources of cultural assumptions and personal anxieties and whilst these encounters described above do not constitute an analytic therapy, the seemingly momentary disclosures and supervisory sessions, herald an analytic stance and communication, and new links and new cultural assumptions of family life can be engendered.

## Conclusion

Applied psychoanalysis with couples and families in Aboriginal central Australia requires both a radical departure and yet a radical anchoring in psychoanalytic practice. Consideration to the vertical linkages of ‘there and then’ of the other, of the traditional world of Aboriginal people, traditional culture and the cultural ruptures sustained, to the horizontal linkages of the “here and now” of their daily life of inequality, the racial divide, their intergenerational trauma in a post-colonial world, their psychic world of “hurting hearts”, can form a third link and transform the therapeutic country songlines of the mind of the therapist and treatment. The recognition of the manifest symptoms, so-called of broken families, may lead a way forward to truth telling, and voices being heard, strengthening the cornerstone of psychological health - good object relations. But the linkages - historical, cultural, social and political - must be recognized as a latent area in the therapeutic field; if not pathology may be the continuing legacy and wounding pain maybe denied. A future “ahead and somewhere else”, new dreaming, however, can be forged and the changing configurations of family life can be facilitated, held, understood and become emergent in new treatment modalities in the bi-cultural field, such as demonstrated by the work of CASSE.

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