

The 19th International Association of Group Psychotherapy Congress: Reflections and Learnings

*Neil Hucker, Peggy Cook,
Annette Fisher and Kate Cooke*

2015 Congress

Neil Hucker: From all corners of the globe we came to Rovinj on the Croatian Istrian Peninsula, like invading armies and their cultures have done for thousands of years. We came to participate in the 19th International Association of Group Psychotherapy Congress (IAGP), and like other cultures that have come to this place, we contributed and enjoyed the beautiful walled city and the ancient cobblestones.

The congress theme, *Desire and Despair in Times of Crisis*, was infused with reparation and rebuilding after the devastating civil war of the nineties in Croatia, and the very immediate conflict within the IAGP following the precipitous and controversial resignation of the President and the President Elect.

Over four days the daily large group facilitated by different leaders and methods, gradually made overt many of the hidden dynamics that had contributed to the resignations. I was particularly impressed with the leader who applied the principles of active listening in a large group setting. I think this meeting in particular warmed up the organization's members to a healthy catharsis of integration, which progressed to the election of a new executive and the much admired Kate Bradshaw Tavon from Sweden as the new president.

I found the format of the Congress, with on-going daily small groups and a large group, quite integrating for the 400 plus attendees. It is de-conserving to compare and contrast the many different, creative ways that group therapy in general, and psychodrama group therapy in particular, are practised throughout the world. These triennial IAGP congresses do always carry a certain territorial tension between adherents to psychodrama, group analysis and large group analysis, and organizational facilitation. At this point, there is a warm-up to inclusiveness, but there is a counter warm-up to establish a separate international psychodrama organization.

These congresses highlight the amount of group work that is being done throughout the world, and the very violent and often on-going traumatic

damage to people from the warfare waged by political groups. The youth of our Australian culture, as we try through multi-culturalism to create a united nation, contrasts with the many ancient cultures that people bring to this conference, and indeed bring to Australia. Our common humanity and compassion, interest in relationships and the groups we live in, all created a wonderful warm-up to intimacy, which allowed our underlying commonality to be experienced.

The Congress highlighted the more frequent use of pre-planned action warm-ups, rather than leader-facilitated group interactive warm-ups as taught by Max Clayton. I have brought back with me the effectiveness of the group active listening format for large groups or for any group working through a process. My belief in the value and importance of group therapy has been confirmed at this congress, as has the tremendous value of having an AANZPA presence there.

Peggy Cook: I think people were approaching this Congress with some trepidation because the President and President Elect resigned before it. I knew this because it was talked about both online and with my friends who are IAGP members and who were shocked about it. The Congress was called, *Despair and Desire in Times of Crisis*, and it addressed the crisis in the IAGP membership caused by the resignations, and as well as the despair and desire experienced by IAGP members who are directly affected by the wars in Africa and the Middle East,; and by the wars in Croatia and Serbia, which is the region we were in. Nevertheless, the Congress had a most welcoming feel and a positive and supportive energy that encouraged participation and openness. Each day keynote speakers talked about their work in places of great crisis.

Our Experience of Presenting at the Congress

Kate Cooke: I think the group that the four of us ran together, *Applying a Range of Modalities to our Clinical Practice as Psychodramatists*, went well. We aimed to present to an international audience to see if others related to the translation work we are endeavouring to do. Each of us presented our thoughts on aspects of our work in one modality and how that modality links in with psychodramatic concepts. We are interested in the possibility of expanding our thinking and understanding in both the alternate modality and the psychodrama modality. In addition to a few from Australia and New Zealand, at our workshop were those from Panama, Spain and Japan. The four of us presented what we had to say clearly and succinctly. We drew on our spontaneity to present our work and this seemed to have an enlivening effect on participants.

Annie Fisher: It greatly assisted us that our conference session developed through us meeting together for eighteen months. These meetings followed a decision at the 2014 AANZPA Conference to start a peer group of clinicians interested in translating our work so that it could be understood by both psychodramatists and medical professionals.

Kate, as convener of this peer group, assisted us to connect with each other. This aided the emergence of positive tele and shared purposefulness so that we were able to develop our ideas, learn to understand each other's approaches, and gain the confidence necessary to present at the AANZPA conference.

Not only was our session successful, we also developed a successful form of peer review. Following the AANZPA conference workshop, we decided to attend the IAGP conference in Rovinj, Croatia, and to send an abstract for consideration. We were accepted.

Despite some difficulties with the venue and the time being cut to one hour, all went well. Kate was a skilful group leader connecting group members, warming them up to the session and dealing with obstacles that came up.

We had fifteen minutes each to present our respective topics: Peggy on *Transference*; Neil on *Considering the patient in the context of their life, their relationships and their cultural conserve*; Kate on *a Case study of a woman with a personality disorder*; and myself on *Encounter and role reversal: a case study*.

Some people said how grateful and amazed they were by our workshop; loving our spontaneity and clarity. One regarded our presentation as important, as there has been very little focus on translating psychodrama to the medical world. A participant from Panama City went out of his way at a social function, and with tears in his eyes, told me how much he had loved our vitality and valued the passion and love we have for our work. He said, "No sign of burn-out." This encounter touched me deeply and we 'really met' with role reversal. It is this kind of meeting that touches my human spirit and stays as an imbedded memory.

Gleanings from the Congress

Kate: International psychodramatists brought playfulness not just to the conference group, but the community in Rovinj. Leandra Perrotta, a psychodramatist who lives in Sydney half the year and Italy the other half, ran a community trust building activity in the town square one evening. Self-selected people, including me, were asked to close their eyes and move through the crowd who were trees. The trees were to guide us and keep us safe. I experienced that warm, wonderful sense of being held by the large group. It was guided in commentary by the leader and mediated somewhat by the music she played.

Annie: The experience of the Northern Hemisphere is very different for us from Australia or New Zealand in the Southern Hemisphere. There is rawness in the North due to current and past social and political upheavals. A pre-congress workshop entitled, *The Social Unconscious in Clinical Work and Professional Life*, conducted by Earl Hopper, a group analyst, proved to highlight these differences.

Some of the participants were Serbian and Croatian who not so long ago were at war. Many others had experienced war, displacement and political conflict. I was curious to learn about how people can resolve the past following a war. I wanted to know how people learn to live with each other after these atrocities and suffering. Of course there is not a short answer. By being together with 14 participants for two days, I think we all learnt a little more about putting ourselves in each other's shoes and developing compassion, which allows us to have a greater ability to role reverse.

Peggy: A highlight for me included being directed in an Analytic Musical Psychodrama by Ariella Barzel and Monica Tann, from Argentina and Israel, who spoke very little. They encouraged expression with sound and song; in me and in the group. Using our voices without words or few words enabled us as a group to go to a strange state where words were not necessary to communicate.

Kate: Susan Gantt, from America, led a large group using the method of Systems Centred Therapy. This uses subgrouping to contain a system's tendency to chaos, through the method of creating functional boundaries within the group before differentiating. Functional boundaries contain and clarify communication. There is concretization of the subgroups in this method so that functional boundaries can become apparent and there is a commitment to moving on only when each speaker has been heard and understood. There is also a commitment to get to the facts, not opinion or hearsay. This was particularly impressive as there were many secrets and lots of shame and protective defensiveness in the upper levels of the organisation and what was produced via this method was honesty and a release from guilt and shame.

Annie: Attending the same one and a half hour group for the four days of the conference, *Thinking about our work*, was of great assistance to me as a participant in a large congress. This experience created a sense of safety, a place to reflect, and provided an ongoing learning experience. Walter Stone is a psychodynamic psychotherapist. Psychodynamic psychotherapy is a form of depth psychology, the primary focus of which is to reveal the

unconscious content of a client's psyche in an effort to alleviate psychic tension. In this way, it is similar to psychoanalysis. Walter was a wise mentor and I gained a good deal of learning about group dynamics, sibling rivalry and forgiveness.

Walter places particular importance on the effect of relationships between siblings on a person's psychological development. The interesting aspect for my learning was to remind myself of the importance of the positive aspect of sibling relationships.

Back in Australia after the conference, a fifteen year old girl, May, was referred to me for psychotherapy. Her mother had died two years before. Following the first interview, I suggested she come to her next session with her elder sister and brother, as their relationships had become distant since their mother's death. This intervention was a direct result of Walter's workshop. I encouraged the siblings to share their grief, coaching them to listen, and be accepting and gentle with each other.

I gained further understanding about forgiveness through my participation in this workshop. Modern trends talk in terms of behavioural therapy to achieve forgiveness. Walter shared with us that forgiveness can occur when the narcissistic hurts and injuries begin to diminish and one is able to let go of anger and rage. As a psychodramatist I say, "Following social atom repair, progressive roles can emerge and fragmenting roles move into the background. This allows for positive relationships through the learnt ability to develop positive tele."

Several other memorable sessions also moved me. The final sessions for the first three days of the congress were two large groups; one psychodrama and the other analytical. I chose the analytical group. There was an opportunity for debriefing and expression of any matter one wished to bring forward; mostly volatile and passionate contributions. It was both lively and contained. The two mediators made very few interventions. When the group closed it felt like a good end to each day.

Jorge Margolis, from Mexico, worked with soldiers in Guatemala after a civil war. His brief was to assist 3,500 soldiers to return to civilian life. His presentation was a video about the program he conducted. Using leaders from the soldiers, he organised small groups. The participants were encouraged to remember the life they had before the war. They had been farmers and it was very moving observing them recall their pre-war existence as preparation to return to their farm life. The soldiers were also assisted to surrender their firearms. As they had a particularly strong attachment to their guns, the soldiers were treated with great respect and they were assisted to 'lay down their arms' with moving enactments and rituals.

On the last day of the congress there was a Keynote Symposium with *Terror* as the topic. Maria Rita Kehl, from Brazil, shared with us her experience of being a member of a *Truth Commission* following the unexplained disappearance of a number of people in her country. This assignment was not successful. Being a heroic women, she revealed to her audience that she is committed to continue pursuing the truth and finding the bodies of those who have disappeared, as a way of resolving some of the deep political rifts in her country.

I came away from the congress with a deeper sense of connectedness and understanding of international affairs and appreciating being a citizen of the world. The congress opened my mind to my own predigests and expanded my abilities to embrace and address broader worldly concerns.



Annette Fisher is a psychodramatist and TEP. She is a psychodrama trainer with Psychodrama Australia at the Sydney/Canberra Campus and the Adelaide Campus. As an artist, she highly values the creative arts and its contribution to human development. She has a private practice and is a consultant to organisations.



For the last 8 years, I have worked as a qualified psychotherapist. When I worked in education, I fell in love with the psychodrama method and consequently became an accredited role trainer. With role training as an excellent educational tool, I conducted training groups in parenting, team building, and communication skills. Then as I moved into counselling and psychotherapy work, I looked to psychoanalysis for more depth and understanding of the human mind. The combination of psychodramatic and psychodynamic training enables me to work in a clinical setting with individuals and couples. – **Peggy Cook**

Dr Neil Hucker practices as a consultant psychiatrist in private practice in Melbourne and has been a Fellow of the RANZCP since 1983. He is also an AANZPA accredited practicing psychodramatist. He is participating in the translation group because of his long term interest in psychodrama and its application in psychiatry. His special interest is in applying his "renovation therapy" to the difficulties experienced by people diagnosed with personality disorders.



Kate Cooke is expanding her identity as a psychodramatist and increasing her comprehension as a comprehensive nurse. She loves writing, reading, and watching really good dramas on TV. As well, she hauls her old body up the tissu (silks), thru the water, and up rocks attached to a belay. Her goal is to be able to do the splits by the time she is 70.

