

# Cultural Differences in psychodrama training; Reflections on the process of practitioner equivalency

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## KEY WORDS

culture, vision, cultural conserve, purpose, values, influence, similarities, differences.

A celebratory lunch unexpectedly led to an exploration of AANZPA's culture and the process of equivalency whereby international psychodramatists can be accepted as AANZPA practitioners. The question arose. How does AANZPA continue to evolve as an organisation, and maintain its purpose, vision, and values as it expands its membership to include international practitioners?

Joining any organisation means meeting certain criteria. What assists new members to integrate into the organisational culture as functioning members?

## Just what is culture and why do differences emerge?

Edgar Schein ascribes culture as *a pattern of **shared basic assumptions** learned by a group as it solved its problems of **external adaptation** and **internal integration** (...) A product of joint learning*. He identifies three levels of culture: **artifacts** (visible), **espoused beliefs and values** (may appear through surveys) and **basic underlying assumptions** (unconscious taken for granted beliefs and values — these are not visible) (1992, p. 16).

Using Schein's three levels of culture within AANZPA, the first element of **artifacts** include the Training and Standards Manual, annual conferences, and organisational structures including the Executive, regional groups, the Board of Examiners and relationships with training campuses. Group structures include practitioners, associate members, affiliates and trainers.

The second element of **espoused beliefs and values** relate to AANZPA's vision of

*...people all over the world expressing themselves relevantly in the ordinary here and now situations in which they live and work. This expression may be in silence,*

*in learning, in building, in negotiating, in teaching, or in play. It is a responsive and creative expression that brings joy to the human spirit that uplifts the soul that makes us feel part of the universe again. (AANZPA, 2020, p.1)*

This implies that the acceptance of new members is an integrative one and generates a sense of belonging.

The third element **basic underlying assumptions** reside within AANZPA's purpose *to promote spontaneity in the Members of the Association and through them the spontaneity, creativity and co-creation of progressive relationships that strengthen the health and well-being of society in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand and in our relationships with those in other countries.* (AANZPA, 2023)

J. L. Moreno identified '...the cultural conserves underlying all forms of creative activities — the alphabet conserve, the numbers conserve, the language conserve, and the musical notations.' (1993, p. 11). In psychodrama we have the methodological conserves including role reversal, doubling, mirroring, and concretisation to promote spontaneity and to generate fresh responses to old and challenging situations.

What cultural differences do trainees and practitioners from other countries notice when they participate in AANZPA events, and what do we as AANZPA members notice?

### How is culture reflected in day-to-day life?

In my recent travels to Asia and Europe, I set about noticing cultural differences and made some discoveries. It was normal in Tangier to see women from villages selling their wares, herbs, and cheeses, directly from the footpaths whereas in London herbs and cheeses were sold by checkout operators in chilled supermarkets. In Malaga Spain, early morning breakfast was crisp churros dipped into milky coffee but in Lisbon, Portugal black coffee with Portuguese custard tarts (pasteis de nata) were on the menu, while in Paris, pastries are sold from boulangerie and patisserie frequently without coffee. London pub lunches had the ubiquitous curry sauce with fish and chips or pies with mashed potato, while Parisian lunch, goat's cheese salad was more usual. These differences make a culture unique, with food as the cultural conserve.

In psychodrama around the world, similarities and differences have become apparent to travelling trainees, and trainers. Conserves have evolved and formed within our own psychodrama culture here in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. I recall early in my training, some dramas might well be several hours long, and evening sessions went deep into the night. Currently classical dramas vary, they might be one and a half-hour long or a three-hour session within a workshop or conference.

## Cultural differences or individual trainer quiriness?

At ASGPP conference in Florida 2017, I was alert to the Board celebration of Trainers with Awards and special recognition at the conference dinner. By contrast, in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, practitioners and TEPs are firmly celebrated at the completion of their training with recognition by the Board and with peers singing songs, and heartfelt speeches. This event can be the most anticipated and celebrated part of AANZPA's annual meeting for most AANZPA members, with graduations front and centre.

This different emphasis largely stems from the way training institutes are formed in the USA where many US TEPs form their own training institutes. This compares with TEPs in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand who have collectivist systems where strong working relationships develop among trainers.

A question arises, at what point in organisations do individual differences between trainers or campuses shape the culture and become conserved? Policies ratified at Annual General Meetings is one source of forming culture, as are the values enacted, and the behaviours of leaders and group members. Policies includes how trainees are accepted into training programmes, the standards of training and requirements for participation and certification of trainees and the standards for trainers and campuses to be accredited.

## Influences in the evolution of international training systems

Moreno began his Training Institute in Beacon, New York State, in 1953 (Treadwell & Kumar, 1982, p. 31). Until his death in 1974, Moreno was the certifying officer for practicing psychodrama. Both American and international trainees flocked to work with him and returned to their own countries to set up psychodrama training systems and Boards of Examiners who certified practitioners and TEP's. In doing so both trainers and the Boards shaped the culture of psychodrama training, as did political, economic, geographic, and social influences from within their own countries. Further trainer influences internationally came from repeated visits and contributions to building relationships and developing training systems.

AANZPA trainers have led training workshops in a wide range of countries and participated in International Conferences including in the USA, Japan, Vietnam, China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, England, and Europe.

Of particular interest to this paper is AANZPA's relationship with the USA and Hungary. Several Hungarian psychodramatists trained with J. L. Moreno in Beacon. Moreno first visited Hungary in 1963, and Zerka Moreno, thirty years later in 1993. Trainers from Australia, Germany, UK, and Eastern

Europe have offered training workshops in Hungary and have influenced the development of psychodrama training.

AANZPA has a long relationship with training in Hungary with Dr G Max Clayton leading training workshops in Budapest in Hungary with repeated visits over 30 years. Chris Hosking travelled and worked there six times. Both Max and Chris led workshops in Pecs, the city where Zankay Andras lived. Zankay Andras came to Aotearoa New Zealand on two occasions. Max's influence is likely significant in the Hungarian training systems particularly in regard to role theory, group work, and spontaneity.

### How does AANZPA include practitioners from other countries?

AANZPA has a process for attaining equivalency when practitioners from other countries come to Australia or Aotearoa New Zealand to practice. Recently PANZ Te Whanganui-a-Tara staff congratulated Zsófi Kigyóssy on becoming an AANZPA practitioner. I was curious to learn more of the process of adapting to AANZPA's culture, I (DJ) asked Zsófi (ZsK) what her experience was going through the equivalency process to become an AANZPA practitioner.

**ZsK:** I gathered all my papers together, everything, I sent the Board of Examiners everything I had; the Hungarian papers, the US papers, my examination with the 12 essays on methodology, sociometry, ethics, statistics, research, related fields, philosophy and history. There was quite an emphasis on developing psychodramatic knowledge in my US training. For example, in 2015 I wrote 15–20 essays, each about a different aspect of psychodrama. Each essay was two or three pages and included both theory and practice.

So, I sent the Board of Examiners everything I wrote, all the hours, all the supervision hours, and all the groups I was running. It was a massive documentation. What amazed me was ... they read it all thoroughly.

I felt the Board was taking my application seriously. I saw their requests were not a bureaucracy, empty words, or window dressing. This was a valuable, thoughtful process. That really motivated me. Until this process was completed, I couldn't call myself a psychodramatist here. I was an ASGPP psychodramatist *but not in Australia or Aotearoa New Zealand. I was a foreigner and I had to explain myself.*

**DJ:** What training had you completed?

**ZsK:** I completed my MA in Psychology in 2009. To be a psychologist in Hungary you need to do personal development. I decided to complete this with psychodrama, even though I really had no idea of what psychodrama was. I completed three days every two months for two years. That was 250

hours. I then studied psychodrama for 160 hours and I became a psychodrama assistant. This meant I could run a group with a practitioner or another assistant.

Then our family moved to the States. My Hungarian trainer, Èva Rapcsányi was very supportive to find psychodramatists in the USA. Through her connections I ended up getting in touch with Adam Blatner and he connected me with Jeffrey Yates and Jean Campbell. They became my primary (Jean Campbell) and secondary trainer (Jeffrey Yates). The American Psychodrama Association was very welcoming and accepted my hours from Hungary. I completed another 400 hours with ASGPP; a professional development group which met for three days, five times a year plus additional workshops. After completing a one day written exam and a practicum, I became an ASGPP psychodramatist, sociometrist, and group therapist.

I started practicing and led a group of 18 people in addiction treatment. I was co-facilitating the group with someone who then went on maternity leave. This meant for a time I was facilitating the group on my own. That was a terrible experience, but I learnt a lot during this period e.g., building the relationships among participants, holding boundaries, and teaching self-care. The people in the group had all kinds of psychopathologies. That was tough. Luckily, I asked another psychodramatist, Michael, if he wanted to join me leading the group. We thrived together running that group.

**DJ:** What was the Board of Examiner's response to your papers?

**ZsK:** The Board noted that my knowledge seemed sufficient for the expectations here and they identified some gaps, like the social and cultural atom. I had done a lot of social atoms, but not a social and cultural atom. So, the role chart of the coping, fragmenting and progressive, that was new to me. I knew it existed, but it hadn't been emphasised in my previous trainings.

I was a bit concerned at the beginning of the process that, "*Oh, I need to prove again what I already proved.*" But it wasn't the case. The Board were really skilled in finding those areas; what was it in my Hungarian and US training that was not emphasised? I found their assessment amazing and really accurate.

So, for me, this was expanding my psychodrama knowledge rather than being frustrated with, "*Oh I have to prove myself again.*"

The Board pointed out three other areas that they thought weren't as thoroughly included in my training, that are important in AANZPA training. These were, the application of the social and cultural atom, putting a theory into practice from the field of group dynamics and running a group with the examiners present. I chose the Focal Conflict Model which

emphasises being aware of the motivating forces and reactive fears in groups for the theory part.

**DJ:** What made you choose that one?

**ZsK:** I thought it would be most applicable in everyday life. I wanted to learn something that would make me a better group leader, and it has. I use it in my groups. This turned out to be very helpful. I had come across it in the US, so I was acquainted with it, but I didn't have deep knowledge and I didn't actively use it. This has shifted my focus from individuals in the group to focus on the group process. My need to meet all the individual needs in the group has lessened and now I focus on reading the group, making an assessment at the time, acting on that, making an assessment at the end of the session, and planning my next session.

**DJ:** What was really challenging to you in the process?

**ZsK:** The most challenging thing was to get my thinking into noticing, identifying, and naming roles.

**DJ:** You're still becoming familiar and becoming practiced at identifying and naming roles?

**ZsK:** Yes. That's still something that doesn't come naturally, and it's still something I feel like I am still learning. I often work with a client and ask, "What would you call this role in you?" We look at these over time. This is also a good way the client and I can measure progress.

**DJ:** What's one shift in your practice as a result of becoming an AANZPA practitioner?

**ZsK:** Oh, Chris Hosking asked me one time, "Okay, if somebody would look in on you from outside to your practitioner room, what would distinguish you from a therapist who is not a psychodramatist?"

That kind of clicked. This sentence has stayed with me and I have become more aware of the psychodramatist in me. I use a lot more action and doubling statements. I'm noticing and naming roles and I'm also pointing out moments of spontaneity, "Oh, you did something new. You are spontaneous." So, using the language and getting off our chairs into action. I am also drawing attention to and concretising the client's somatic responses in the enactments.

**DJ:** Overall, what do you think you have developed during the process?



**ZsK:** Prior to this I didn't have a good eye for reading a group. My focus was on the individuals and I was more familiar with revealing the sociometry of the group and participants warmup to taking on roles of the protagonist, director, auxiliary, or audience member. Now I am more tuned to the group process and the themes emerging in the group.

Overall, it has made my life much easier as I now have a clear identity here as an AANZPA psychodramatist. This has given me a clear entrance. It has also opened the door to my being a psychotherapist and I have now completed my application with the Psychotherapy Board of Aotearoa New Zealand (PBANZ). I used to identify myself as a psychologist. Now I identify myself as a psychodramatist and psychotherapist.

There was one other significant moment just before my practical assessment here. Monique (Zwaan) came to support me. I was very nervous. And she told me, "Hey, they are not here to judge you. They are here for psychodrama. They are here to help you become a psychodramatist in Aotearoa New Zealand and promote psychodrama to others." And just like that, my anxiety dropped. I felt I was part of a team rather than this being in an evaluation. We are here for psychodrama, not to judge you.

It was a newcomer's ceremony. We belonged to the same team. We were colleagues, not judges. I was no longer 'the outsider'. I belonged to this system. Before I was one foot in and one foot out. Now, I was both feet in.

Overall, it was a growing experience, and while it was personal, it was also my professional development.

## There are cultural differences in Aotearoa New Zealand, the USA, and Hungary that stand out

In my conversations with Zsófi, three areas of psychodrama practice stood out as significantly different.

1. Choosing the protagonist
2. An aspect of doubling
3. The focus of supervision

### 1. Choosing the protagonist

In Zsófi's US training groups, group members got themselves on the map during each session by sharing their warm up; how warmed up they are to being a protagonist, a director, an auxiliary, or an audience member on a locogram (action sociogram). Zsófi attributed participants identifying their warmup to a specific role within a drama to a more individualised culture in the US where each person wants to have their say and make sure they have expressed their warm up.

Zsófi noted that both in Hungary and in the US, 99% of protagonist selection is by self-selection or by sociometric selection by the group

members. Following the locogram, the protagonist is either self-chosen or group chooses the protagonist. The director is then chosen in one of several ways based on mutual tele, the protagonist may choose, or the group leader might direct or a group member who is warmed up to directing will do so.

Zsófi told me that in Hungary, trainees self-select as protagonists. The prospective protagonists then set chairs out and identify their area of focus. This is followed by active sociometric selection. In Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand the protagonist is chosen in several ways; the protagonist might emerge from the group as the most warmed up, or be invited by the director, or be chosen through sociometric exploration as in Hungary. The protagonist then might be invited to choose their director from the group members present, or if the group leader is aware of entrenched subgroups, or wants to expand sociometric relationships, they may invite a director to choose their protagonist.

In AANZPA training groups, two significant differences were evident. Firstly, Zsófi noted a more collegial culture is apparent. Secondly, she and I discussed how the protagonist is chosen in a variety of ways. The protagonist might emerge from the group as the most warmed up, or be invited by the trainer, or be chosen through sociometric exploration as in Hungary.

The collegial culture she noticed likely results from trainers beginning groups with either a director-directed warmup or a group-centred warmup. Here, as participants share their warmup relating to their experience, trainers produce interactions. Trainers might invite protagonists to choose their director from the group members present, or if the trainer is aware of entrenched subgroups, or wants to expand sociometric relationships, they may invite a director to choose their protagonist

Within AANZPA it is not unusual for the director to choose a protagonist prior to hearing from everyone. Zsófi found this strange and frustrating for the enactment to begin without everyone expressly knowing her warmup. In this instance she experienced a cultural shock — the director's decision to work with a protagonist appeared to overlook her warmup and had *not* specifically included her response. She was not warmed up to someone else. She had expected the sociometry to reveal everyone's warmup, including hers, before a decision was made.

## 2. An aspect of doubling

In the US, Zsófi and I became aware, the *doubling statement* is differentiated from the function of *the double*. While classical doubling in many countries has the double stand behind and close to one side of the protagonist as they bring out the unspoken thoughts, insights, or feelings of the protagonist to deepen their awareness, Zsófi identified significant differences in who does this and how. Her observation was in the US, group members spontaneously make *doubling* statements, by entering the drama, standing behind the



protagonist with their hand on the protagonist's shoulder, and make a *doubling statement*. They tune into the protagonist's response, then return to the audience, or the role they are in.

What Zsófi saw was similar in all three settings, directors invite the protagonist to choose their double by making a conscious intervention. Zsófi and I agreed that there was a difference between Hungary and Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. In Hungary doubling statements mostly come from the director, and within AANZPA doubling statements are not differentiated from the double.

### 3. The focus of supervision

Here Zsófi's experience reflected that supervision in the US was more action oriented with the focus on the client-therapist relationship. Action included reversing roles with the client, doubling, and mirroring the client. In supervision in Aotearoa New Zealand, Zsófi was aware of the supervision focus being on the emerging role development of the client resulting from her work; identifying fragmenting, coping, and progressive roles with the client, and exploring the client's response to the system they are in and their role development. This assisted her in strengthening the application of her equivalency focus.

Zsófi and I returned to our earlier conversation. We traversed the question — how much was this in fact cultural differences or might this focus be the supervisor tuning into the development of a practitioner?

### Conclusion

AANZPA members experience cultural differences in other countries when they participate in international events as do overseas trainees and trainers who participate in AANZPA events. Some of these differences are significant and reflect different values and underlying assumptions in the development of practitioners. Other differences can be attributed to particular emphasis some trainers may take.

What became apparent to me in the example of practitioner equivalency presented here was that within ASGPP there seems to be an emphasis on the expansion of knowledge and understanding of psychodrama through writing of many essays, compared with AANZPA where methods of identifying, assessing, and making the interventions enabling role development of groups or individual clients can be more dominant. Knowledge and understanding is also valued within AANZPA training through the writing of fewer short papers, a social and cultural atom paper or similar and a thesis.

Other differences were apparent when choosing a protagonist, doubling, and in supervision. The significance of these differences was not so clear to us and could be ascribed to individual differences among trainers.

A challenge for any organisation is to embody its values in the enactment of its processes. In this example of AANZPA equivalency, a personal learning plan was created ensuring the applicant's prior experience was valued, that at the same time, identified learning gaps relevant to the applicant's professional development as she expanded her capacity to notice and identify role development and gained greater ease in attending to group dynamics. While these were requirements, they were presented in ways that the practitioner felt enlivened rather than having to prove her adequacy.

What became apparent is that the complex task of expecting more from a practitioner from another country can be done in a way that stimulates vitality. What significantly helped was this practitioner's warm up to learning, her desire to expand her capacities and to firm up her professional identity.

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