

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

Women New Settlers: Groupwork in Resettlement

Psychodrama with Refugee and Immigrant Women living in
Auckland, New Zealand

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements
for the degree of
Master of Philosophy in the School of Social and Cultural Studies
Massey University, Albany Campus

Estelle Mendelsohn
2002

Abstract

This research set out to explore whether psychodramatic groupwork was acceptable and useful for refugee and immigrant women resettling in Auckland, New Zealand. Over eighty sessions have been run by the author and her team, for women from many ethnic backgrounds, predominantly from India, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan.

Psychodramatic groupwork run by a multicultural team which offers therapeutic processes relevant to coping with trauma related to premigration and current events had never been offered in New Zealand.

The feminist research paradigm used incorporated qualitative methodologies and methods based on what the women brought forth in sessions. The group work which also included creative arts therapies, and contributions from the women, was acceptable and useful to many of the women, based on self-report and team observations.

Groupwork for refugee and immigrant women coping with resettlement in New Zealand has rarely been part of policy and service delivery, despite recommendations from United Nations agencies. Gender analysis of government policies is now a requirement for some government departments in New Zealand. There is no such requirement with respect to the Department of Labour which deals with refugee and immigrant women. It is also rare to find such issues addressed in relevant research from non-government sources.

A review of literature from several discourses revealed the importance of including gender-sensitive policies and practice for refugee and immigrant women in resettlement. In particular, feminist research indicated that areas of inequity and invisibility that affect women in wider contexts can have even more damaging effects for these groups of women. As women establish themselves in countries such as New Zealand, changes in legislative contexts related to more human rights for women can produce more equity but also more isolation from their ethnic communities. An ecological context model which incorporated dynamic change was evolved to reflect the many variables involved.

Key informants supported recommendations for women-only therapeutic groups amongst other services for refugees and immigrants and that such services are not overtly linked to mental health organizations..

Further research is recommended in many domains, including exploration of gendered differences at all contextual levels. Further research on groupwork with refugee women who have suffered many traumas and losses is particularly recommended. Research on the similarities for refugee and immigrant women would also contribute to the field. Such research could be concurrent with provision of well-funded groupwork services with adequate infrastructures to support the work.

Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the women of the New Settler groups who were willing to participate in the groups and also to give permission to me to put my interpretation and selection of their narratives into thesis form. In sharing what is usually a private domain, they have enriched my understanding, and I hope that they will do so for others.

The next key contributions came from the team members who still work with me, and who are named and described in the thesis, where their gifts become more evident.

My supervisors were another vital element in creating this thesis. Firstly, I wish to thank Associate Professor Marilyn Waring who never failed to respond to my work in a way that challenged, honoured and extended me but never undermined me. She also encouraged me to bring spontaneity and creativity into an academic process, knowing that the ultimate goal was the far wider one of justice. Secondly, I also wish to thank Carole Adamson, who acted as co-supervisor, with a different style and area of expertise. She particularly focussed on the domain of trauma studies from a wide knowledge base. Neither supervisor ever disappeared into an ivory tower, but kept firmly grounded in the many facets of our lives, with the focus where it needed to be, on writing the thesis. I also wish to thank my clinical supervisor, Dr Mary Lane Dodd, who provided an essential component with many facets.

Without a sponsoring agency, this thesis could not have happened, so I also wish to thank Pat Gilberd, and later Mary Gray, the Directors of Home and Family Society, who saw the possibilities, shared the struggles, and encouraged the Board to sponsor the group. We hope to continue.

My partner, Megan Halbert, provided loving encouragement and lots of practical assistance, a rock of support in many ways without which the project might well have foundered. My family, right down to the grandchildren, also sustained me although they may not have even known it at times.

I wish to acknowledge a large group of friends and colleagues, both in New Zealand and overseas, who assisted me in many ways, from emotional support to the provision of relevant information. In particular, thanks to my 'study buddy' Ruth de Souza, and to Rhiannon Herrick, Maxine Rees and Tony Morrison who gave

inspiration, guidance and practical help. Liz Malcouronne gave me editing assistance with grace and competence.

There are others to whom I am grateful, such as those who funded the provision of the groups and gave assistance in many ways. There are too many to name here, but they deserve acknowledgment.

My son Daniel von Sturmer produced the graphics and patiently transformed the rough drafts into usable diagrams.

Finally I acknowledge the permission given by the Ethics Committee of Massey University to undertake this research.

Preface

If it had been possible, I would have produced a dramatic work using song, dance, visual art works and silence instead of a linear thesis. Such a piece might better convey the sense of dynamic flow with periods of rapid change, shock and confusion which can produce numbing and also strong feelings. I believe that many migrants, and particularly refugees know this process.

When does a thesis really begin? When does a person stop being a refugee? How do I write in a way that brings the stories of women immigrants and refugees alive? Should I even be doing this? What really produces healthy change? These were some of my musings as I began to write, in my sixtieth year, the year of the golden dragon in the Chinese calendar. I began in the context of the Olympic games in Sydney, and finished in the aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York. In that space of time, when we first met with Afghani refugee women, we struggled with the place names: a year later it seemed as if they were on everyone's tongue, and in some quarters there was much more empathy for their situation.

It has been useful to me to see the work we did in the New Settler groups, which is at the heart of this thesis, as a microcosm which reflected the wider world. I hope the more formal introduction will make it evident why there are good theoretical grounds for beginning with aspects of myself as part of that microcosm, making transparent the inevitable power I had to shape the project. My worldview, born out of my history, was an important motivator.

To convey something of that worldview, I went back to when I watched the opening of the Olympic Games in Sydney, on Friday 15th September 2000. I was moved close to tears by the gathering of nations, and the abundance of creative expression, the beauty and hope that was epitomised in the silken Peace banner, white dove flying with an olive branch in its beak; by the line of women bearing the torch on the final approach to the podium, and the moment of glory for Cathy Freeman, a young Aboriginal athlete who lit the final flame. The occasion was marked by many political statements, such as the presence of a representative from East Timor, and North and South Koreans marching together. What optimism there was, what potential for harmony and respect for differences to be a catalyst for long-term creative change. And at the same time, away from the camera, the Aboriginal people remained dispossessed in their own land; international conflicts still raged; innocent people died and the long-

term anguish and trauma was frequently silenced and denied. In terms of feelings, both delight and pain have accompanied me as the thesis has evolved, just as on that evening. In terms of thinking, I continue to hope, and to join those who analyse systems for change. In terms of action, I work for true human rights which include the rights of women.

I was born in 1940, in Melbourne, Australia, a long way from the sites of World War Two. However, during my first five years, my grandfather and two half brothers were imprisoned by the Japanese. All came back scarred in one way or another, emotionally and physically. My Uncle Berrol was killed in France, and that had a devastating effect on my Jewish grandmother, who threatened to disown any other son who went to war. She did become estranged from my father, for many reasons, including his taking a period of war service in Egypt. Sixty years later, as I write this thesis, the long-term effects are still working themselves out in our family. Our experiences are similar to what happened to many families, all over the world. My professional experience in New Zealand and Australia suggests that the topic is slowly coming to the surface but it is still rarely discussed, rarely given significance...a great underground silence. These days I routinely bring it up with clients in my counselling practice and it is often highly significant.

There are positive effects from my family history as well. Social justice has been a major theme in my family, over several generations. Currently, my sister is working in Vietnam, leading a team that is developing services for women and children; my brother was, until recently President of the Australian group of doctors promoting nuclear disarmament, and my cousin and his wife have, as political scientists, published a work on *The Untouchables* in India (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998). For me, however, although I am proud of this tradition, as the eldest female child, I also struggled with the gulf between my father's liberal philosophies espousing equality, and the lived reality where I often felt a second class citizen, and saw my mother treated as such.

My mother's family were Celtic immigrants and although she was often the background figure, she was actually a strong adventurer who was one of the first Australian social workers, and who connected spirituality and the natural world for me. Both parents taught me about the many roles that people have. The same father with whom I struggled also wove magic, through games and stories such as 'little Hallah' - a magical little girl who dived for pearls and could stay under water longer than anyone

else It is no surprise that issues of power and gender have always been at the forefront, particularly as I moved from considering myself a liberal humanist to a feminist.

It took me a while to call myself a feminist, but now it is a way of flagging inequities that are often invisible. For instance, on November 25th, 2001, I sat with my family in a synagogue in Melbourne, to join in the Barmizvah ceremony for my nephew, Joshua. It took place on the International Day against Violence to Women, November 25th, but no-one else seemed aware of that, even though Joshua's maternal grandmother is a holocaust survivor whose narrative story is on video.

My father chose, twice, to marry non-Jewish women, and to move away from his spiritual origins and each family member dealt with the consequences in different ways. My brother is non-religious, but expresses his spirituality through his awe for the universe as a research scientist: he could still sit with his son, who has made the choice to return to Judaism. For me, it was a time of honouring my past, and deepening my connections with the present family. One of the many layers of meaning in this event involved reflections on my personal motivation for the work in the New Settler groups, contributing to a world view of inclusiveness and peace that is very different from the conditions that drove my own ancestors out of Poland: I know from my own family history what transgenerational pain and healing is all about.

I believe that such transgenerational effects contributed to a formative step in the production of this thesis when I was at a Psychodrama conference in Oxford, England, in 1994. At one point, I was in a large group being taken by Anne Schutzenberger, one of the twelve original Directors trained by Moreno, who invented psychodrama. She was over eighty years old and still practising internationally, as trainer and therapist. From her base in Paris she had been deeply involved with survivors of war trauma. Her book on *The Ancestor Syndrome* was recently published (Schutzenberger, 1998).

At this workshop Schutzenberger wished to demonstrate elements of the process of working transgenerationally. She called for survivors of the holocaust who had a dream which was important to them, and who would be willing to work with her. There was silence and no-one moved forward. I thought *I survived because my Jewish great-grandparents on my father's side left Poland, then Berlin, and settled in Australia, and yes, I do have just a fragment of a dream that has troubled me for weeks...* I stepped up.

Anne Schutzenberger assisted me to enact my dream picture, with the aid of others, and we created a tableau of three fishes flapping helplessly on a marble slab, clearly dying and calling for help as I stood by, powerless and bewildered. I recognized the

fish as my children. I didn't act in the dream and I still didn't act then. I became aware that the Director had moved very close to me, and she whispered in my ear *think of the messages from your ancestors*, and suddenly I was moving. I named the fish as Jewish children crying for help from the camps, and I recognised that I must act, but that I simply could not do it alone. I asked for assistance and people in the audience from New Zealand, Japan, Korea, USA, Russia came to help and we rescued the children. I now cried with relief, and so did many of them, men and women, and we stopped the drama there. In the next phase people shared their stories around similar themes: one of these was from the daughter of a holocaust survivor who said she could not have stepped forward, as her story was too big, but could now talk as my work had built a bridge for her. Other survivors of genocide and war, or their children from many parts of the world also shared how the effects continued for decades and how they also sought ways to effect positive change and not be passive bystanders.

As those narratives were told, there was great pain, but also moments for healing and hope, and an illustration of a number of themes- common bonds amid great differences, the futility of war, the inter-generational impact of trauma work, and the power of collective action.

My family gave work and shelter to both immigrants and refugees on our farm in Victoria, Australia, and many family friends came from both backgrounds. One significant and loved figure has just died. Her name was Edith Phillips and she was an Austrian doctor, married to a psychiatrist, both Jewish . Her family had fled from Hitler to find new lives in Australia. Both of their sons are now psychiatrists in Sydney. Apart from Edith's role as a mentor, she also introduced me to the differing effects on men and women refugees as they resettle. Because she was a young mother, she was only able to get restricted work, first as a dietician and later as a medical assistant with the Blood Bank. However, her husband suffered a massive heart attack and died in his forties, and she was left widowed and unable to drive. It was only a few years ago that I found out the depths of trauma of this period, when together we successfully overcame a block for her, as she wrote the family history. Simply sitting with her and interviewing her on tape allowed her to face into this period after thirty years of avoidance.

There have been surprising new personal links as well. For instance, the most significant friendship at Melbourne University, over forty years ago, was with Helen Pavlin, but we had lost contact until 2000, and then I found, to my delight, that she has

been supervising members of QPAST- the Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma. She is, amongst other things, a social worker and a writer who has just published a book of poems called *Through Refugee Eyes* (Pavlin, 2001).

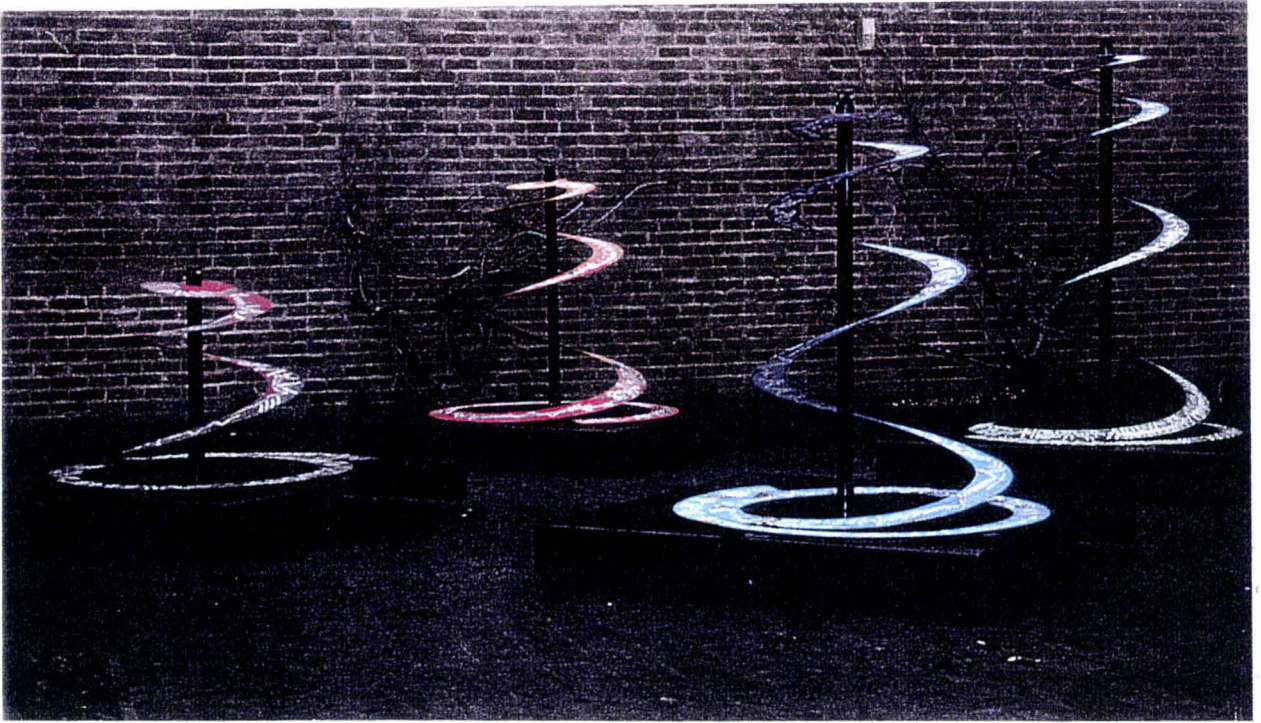
Later in the thesis, I will discuss further the role of the arts, not just creative therapies, in healing trauma and communicating at emotional depth about issues for immigrants and refugees. In my own experience, Helen Schamroth's work does just this. She and I were Playcentre parents, both of us from Melbourne families, adapting with some difficulty to life in New Zealand, the home of our (then) respective husbands. However, it was more than thirty years later that I was inspired by her installation piece called *New World Old Story* drawn in response the listening to the New World Symphony of Dvorak. Her parents were Jewish refugees from Poland, and she wrote of leaving Krakow as a child with tiny diamonds disguised by threads over flowers in her bonnet, a hope for life elsewhere. Her themes of cultural appropriation, the search for home, and an engagement with feminism, are themes we share. The Gallery notes described the piece:

Just as the symphony is in four parts, so is Schamroth's installation, each part representing a significant part of her life. They take the form of spirals, continuous paths, arising out of a Star of David at the base. The postwar years in Europe, drab and dreary, have a grey-brown hue, the colour of foggy anxiety; subsequent years in Australia and New Zealand are represented in equally self-explanatory colours.

Each is layered with pattern: old lace is a symbol for Europe, Gum leaves for Australia, fern leaves for New Zealand, readily identifiable generic signifiers.

They are overlaid with silver hieroglyphs representing a personal narrative but yet a magnum opus for all those who experience the discomfort of displacement and alienation. (Schamroth, Fisher Gallery Pakuranga, Auckland, 1997 .

Her work depicted, with the powerful image of spirals, the dynamic process of life (see next page).



Photograph 1: *New World Old Story*, Helen Schamroth (Fisher Gallery 1997).

As I began to document the outcomes from Oxford, I was inspired by an interview I heard in Australia with an Afghani woman who now lives there¹. Her name is Mahboba Cina, and she had collected some thousands of dollars for children left in refugee camps, working through a friend who is a woman doctor still working in the camps, Dr Nasrin Nadee. Between them they had the commitment and the integrity that persuaded others to contribute, and I am left with yet more questions about how such work can happen before, rather than after, major trauma.

The preface was designed to introduce myself, and to give some of the personal background for undertaking this thesis. It is now time to move on to a wider introduction.

¹ Interview with Mahboba Cina, ABC television, December 24th, 2001.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgments	ii
Preface	iv
Table of Contents	x
List of Photographs	xii
List of Figures	xii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION	4
Part 1: Framing the Thesis	4
Section A: Introduction to the Researcher	4
Section B: Introduction to the Research Question	8
Section C: Choice of an Interpretive Paradigm-methodological issues	10
Section D: Setting the parameters of the thesis	27
Section E: Contextual Models	28
Part 2: Method	31
CHAPTER 3: NEGOTIATING CONTEXTS – illustrative examples for women refugees and immigrants, and their assistants.	38
Introduction	38
Section A: Negotiating borders and frontiers of migration	38
Section B: Negotiating borders and frontiers in the area of trauma studies	44
CHAPTER 4: NEW ZEALAND POLICY AND PRACTICE FOR WOMEN REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS – AN OVERVIEW	53
Introduction	53
Part 1: Current Practice for Immigrants and Refugees	54
Section A: Immigrants	54
Introduction	54
Section B: Refugees	57
Introduction	57
Section C: Asylum Seekers	60
Section D: Resettlement issues - the basic issues for immigrants and refugees....	61
Part 2: Wider Contexts	62
Section A: The Macro Perspective- the Need for Gender Analysis	63

Section B: The Development of Policy on Refugees and Immigrants	65
Section C: The NGO Report and Departmental Response.....	71
Section D: Government Research into refugees and immigrants	76
Section E: Non-Governmental Research.....	83
Section F: A proposal for Family Mental Health Services for Refugees and Immigrants – Isin-Tomic 1999.....	93
Section G: Migrant Research -Two Indian Studies	93
Part 3: Summary and Discussion	95
CHAPTER 5: GROUPWORK WITH REFUGEE AND IMMIGRANT WOMEN .	97
Part 1: Creative Arts Therapies in Groupwork with Refugees and Immigrants....	98
Section A: Working definitions	98
Section B: Art, creative arts therapies and trauma.....	98
Section C: Transcultural application of creative arts therapies	100
Summary and Discussion	104
Part 2: Groupwork with Refugee Women.....	104
Section A: United Nations Policy-United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).....	105
Section B: Groupwork in New Zealand	106
Section C: Groupwork for women refugees in Australia	115
Section D : Groupwork for women in the Phillipines.....	123
Section E: Groupwork for Women in Bosnia.....	126
Section F: Groupwork with refugee women in Denmark	132
Section G: Groupwork for women in South America.....	134
Section H: Groupwork for refugee women in the U.K	136
Summary and Discussion	139
CHAPTER 6: AN INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHODRAMA AS USED IN THE NEW SETTLER GROUP	141
Part 1: Background.....	142
Section A: Personal context.....	142
Section B: Working Definitions of Psychodrama.....	142
Section C: Brief historical context of Psychodrama	143
Part 2: Key terms and Processes of Psychodrama	146
Section A: Role theory	147
Section B: The basic elements of a Psychodrama session	148

Part 3: Psychodramatists working with trauma	151
Section A: Working with Syrian Jewish immigrant women	152
Section B: Psychodramatic Encounters between Jews and Germans	152
Section C: Psychodrama with Cambodian Refugees	154
Section D: Psychodrama with Trauma Survivors- the Therapeutic Spiral model	155
Section E: Dissociation and psychodrama - other approaches	161
Summary	164
Chapter 7: THE NEW SETTLER GROUPS	166
Part 1. Key elements of the New Settler groups	167
Part 2. Group processes	172
Part 3: Content Categories	192
CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	206
Summary of Findings and Discussion	206
Concluding comment	216
References	218
Appendix	232
MASSEY UNIVERSITY	232

List of Photographs

Photograph 1: New World Old Story, Helen Schamroth	ix
Photograph 2. The circle of hands which closed each group session, affirming collective strength and confidentiality	166
Photograph 3. Symbolic strengths, goals and obstacles of group members, placed in sandtrays, at the beginning of a new series of groups	174
Photograph 4. A clay portrayal of a Taleban mullah	180
Photograph 5. A collective symbolic representation of the strengths and resilience reflected in the group.	182
Photograph 6. An Afghani woman's commentary, in poster form	183

List of Figures

Figure 1. Contextual model (adapted from Adamson 1999)	28
Figure 2. The effects of trauma across generations (adapted From Dánieli 1985) ...	31