

WHEN THE CRADLE AND THE CULTURE HURT

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by Ann Heathcote (BSc CTA) & Manon Plouffe (Dip. Hum. Sc.)

Rock-a-bye, baby
In the treetop
When the wind blows
The cradle will rock
When the bough breaks
The cradle will fall
And down will come baby
Cradle and all

Baby is drowsing
Cosy and fair
Mother sits near
In her rocking chair
Forward and back
The cradle she swings
And though baby sleeps
He hears what she sings

(author unknown)

The cradle is a “place where something originates or is nurtured during its early life” (Collins English Dictionary, 2005). It is also the place where we begin to learn about our culture. The above lullaby seems to suggest one mechanism for this “and though baby sleeps He hears what she sings”.

We all have a culture. Sometimes more than one. Culture is defined in the Collins English Dictionary (2005) as:

“The total range of activities and ideas of a group of people with shared traditions, which are transmitted and reinforced by members of the group.” (p. 408)

From our early beginnings, we are all steeped in culture, first of all transmitted through our families, and later through mainstream institutions such as schools, churches, social services, work places, etc. This is how White and White describe it:

“The symbiotic confines of the mother-child world will expand to the mother-father-child triad and then to the larger family community and on to the immediate neighborhood community. The extensions will continue until, ultimately, the individual is part of a larger cultural system, or

possibly several cultural systems simultaneously” (White & White, 1975, p.12).

In her short article entitled “The Culture Cradle” Marta Vago (1977) states that cultural scripting heavily influences even our earliest sensory experiences of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. She considers the degree of nurturance and protection in child-rearing to be culturally-determined. She suggests that such scripting may well underlie elements of national character e.g. adaptation and overadaptation.

Culture informs parenting and parents (and/or caregivers) impart the culture through different types of script message i.e. program, injunctions, permissions, counter-injunctions (Goulding & Goulding, 1979). White and White (1975) explore the ways in which culture is a transmitter of script, they state:

“Within the family crucible, the newborn is forged, with the scripted messages of the culture being passed along. The script for the new individual also includes the scars imposed on his parents in their child-rearing experiences”. (p.17)

and:

“Cultural scripting is that set of reinforcements or limitations established by the Parent values embodied in the institutions of a culture”. (p.12)

Culture is transmitted via our scripting and in turn our cultural scripting determines the longevity and conveyance of culture down the generations. White and White (1975) suggest that “the scars” imposed on our parents are also passed down generationally, via our scripts. Similarly, Cornell (2007) quotes a powerful visual metaphor “transgenerational haunting” to communicate how culture can weigh heavily on successive generations. And this quote from Karl Marx also captures the ‘transgenerational’ and ‘haunting’ aspects of our culture:

“The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living”.

[Karl Marx 1818-83: *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1985]
(Oxford Dictionary of Phrase, Saying, & Quotation, 2006)

What is the purpose of culture? Culture is essential for our survival and for our sense of belonging and identity. It is about how we live with, belong, and ‘fit in’ (Hargaden & Sills, 2002) with this group of people. It involves consensus decisions regarding acceptable behaviour and thinking, evolving out of the history and traditions of this particular group. It is equivalent to parenting on a societal scale. Shivanath and Hiremath (2003) describe how we develop a ‘group self’ through belonging to a particular group:

“The function of culture is a means of group survival through developing a sense of ‘group self’ versus ‘the other’. A sense of self through

belonging to a group is imparted through religion, social mores, rituals, festivals, language, modes of dress, etc” (p.169).

In Shivanath and Hiremath’s quote we start to understand how through the development of a ‘group self’ there will inevitably also develop a sense of ‘the other’, i.e. an increasing awareness of where we fit in the ‘pecking order’ within the wider community and who belongs in the ‘us and them’, ‘friend or foe’ and ‘goodies and badies’ piles. Hargaden and Sills (2002) suggest that when mainstream institutions mirror our own set of values, beliefs and experiences, then we experience a sense of inclusion, and our sense of identity is mirrored back to us by the culture. However, if these institutions “fail to reflect the existence, values or experiences of a particular group then those who are excluded will inevitably feel alienated”. (p. 97)

This is one of the ways in which our culture may hurt us i.e. if it conveys a sense that our group is the ‘in’ group and that anyone not in the ‘in’ group is inferior (or superior) in some way. Roberts (1983) considers this to be the most basic cultural message humans receive. He suggests that all cultures value certain persons more than others, and that this creates the problem of supremacy. He states:

“It matters little whether a person is a part of the ‘superior group’ or not, the culture provides a distorted message about individual human value to which the person must adapt”. (p.253).

In similar vein, Salters (2006) states:

“It is also crucially important to remember that while belonging to the ‘superior’ dominant group carries significant advantages in terms of health, education and social and personal power, any system based on oppression impacts negatively on both oppressed and oppressor”. (p. 156)

And, Jacobs (1990) explores the concept of nationalism, characterized by “national or subgroup consciousness” where one group is promoted above all others. He states:

“... the nationalist is existentially locked into an ‘I’m OK, You’re OK, They’re Not OK’ position relative to self, one’s own group, and another group (+, +, -)”. (p. 222)

What would happen if all cultures, through parenting, conveyed a sense that there are many groups which ‘ours’ is just one of, and if they conveyed this message with a quality of ‘vive la difference’?

Our experiences in the cradle, at the hands of our parents/caregivers, as they convey and apply the dictates of our culture, although well-intentioned, can clearly hurt us. To hurt, in this context, means to cause:

“Physical, moral, or mental pain or suffering.”
(Collins English Dictionary, 2005)

Here is a summary of some of the ways culture, via the cradle, can hurt us:

- Through critical, harsh and violent parenting e.g. some Irish Catholic families as they 'beat' in the required "servility of the Irish" (Joyce, 1992).
- Bringing up children to believe they are superior to others e.g. white supremacists (Roberts, 1983; Jacobs, 1990; & Naughton & Tudor, 2006).
- Bringing up children to believe they are inferior to others e.g. some black children in dominant white cultures; immigrant children living in the UK.
- Bringing up children to hate other groups in society e.g. white Africans children in apartheid South Africa brought up to hate and disdain black South Africans.
- Rejecting (and killing) young people who go against their culture e.g. young Asian women who fall in love with someone from a different culture.
- Through mutilating children's bodies in the name of culture e.g. ear-rings on baby girls; male and female circumcision; force-feeding daughters.

There are many more. Significantly in this regard, Pearl Drego (1983) states:

"The Cultural Parent [more on this below] contains the conscious and unconscious boundaries of acceptable behavior, whether or not what is acceptable is harmful or helpful to the individual". (p. 226)

Is there hope for us as individuals, for our communities, and for the future of the world? Here are some suggestions for analysing and treating cultural scripting put forward by a number of TA theorists:

In terms of mass change, White and White (1975) suggest that substantial changes can only come about as a result of large movements in the scripting culture. However, they add that:

"Individuals may be strong enough to buck the system (anti-script), to supportively choose alternatives (therapy), or to adventure bravely along new paths (avant garde)". (p.20)

Drego (1983) describes how the study of a culture's 'personality' can be used as an effective tool for cultural and social change. She uses the concept of group culture, as developed by Berne (1963), which is based on his Parent Adult Child ego state model of individual personality. She locates the cultural personality within the individual person and calls this the person's Cultural Parent. The Cultural Parent is introjected into and lived out by an individual living within that culture. It is diagrammed, by Drego, as three ellipses in the Parent ego state. She summarizes the three aspects of the Cultural Parent as follows:

"... the etiquette, Parent-type contents of a culture are the transmitted designs for thinking, behaving and valuing in a particular society; the technicality, or, Adult-type contents consist of the actual organization of the material and social life of a particular human group; the character, Child-type contents include socially programmed ways of feeling, handling biological needs, emotional expressions, especially compliance and rebellion". (p. 225)

Drego emphasizes how the concept of the Cultural Parent allows for identification of the Parent, Adult and Child of a community and for members of a community to become aware of how cultural ways of behaving “affect the psycho-social dynamics of oppression within the community and in relation to oppressor groups” (p. 225). She adds:

“For the process of social transformation the contents and energy distribution within the Cultural Parent are to be identified and changed”.
(p. 225)

Roberts (1975) emphasizes that if the therapist is cognizant of cultural injunctions they will be better able to treat the whole person – individual, relational and social. He highlights that treatment of cultural scripting calls for redecisions in all three ego states. And he states that cultural, ethnic, sexual, family, social class and provincial scripts interlock with a person’s personal life scripts, and that both must be dealt with to achieve autonomy. In his 1983 article entitled “Cultural Scripts: The Problem of Supremacy”, Roberts suggests a therapeutic intervention which involves inviting people to confront themselves with the question: “Am I willing to believe that I and all people are equal?” and then to notice and examine what they experience and what occurs in their thinking, as a way of heightening awareness regarding the issue of supremacy and its impact on each individual.

In the context of racism, Batts (1982) acknowledges changes in the American national consciousness following the civil rights movement, where a major outcome was that people of different races learned new “Adult” data about each other. Batts (1982) draws a distinction between “old fashioned” racism prominent before the 1960’s and “modern” racism thereafter. She sees personal level white racism as a cultural script and uses the concept of contamination to understand these differences in expressions of prejudice. She suggests that through awareness raising most Americans have learned enough new Adult data to confront their Parent-Adult contaminations (“old fashioned” racism) e.g. “Blacks should be segregated, they are different”. However, she emphasizes the importance of also addressing contaminations of the Adult by the Child ego state (“modern” racism), to identify and change dysfunctional early decisions people have made about themselves and/or persons from other races.

In her article, “Simunye-Sibaningi: We are One – We are Many” (2006), Diane Salters describes how she uses various TA concepts, e.g. The OK Kraal (adapted from Ernst, 1971); cultural scripting (White & White, 1975); the Cultural Parent (Drego, 1983); and individual boundary distortions (Roberts, 1975), in diversity workshops in South Africa. She finds:

“... transactional analysis concepts provide a safe, relatively unthreatening, clear, and structured basis for examining personal and group fear, prejudices, perceptions, allegiances, and mistrust while simultaneously creating opportunities for contact, empathy, appreciation and trust”. (P. 153)

Naughton and Tudor (2006), in their article “Being White”, encourage white practitioners to reflect on and engage with their own color and cultural identity. They write:

“By having little or no conscious awareness of what it means to be white, white people have little or no concept of positive white identity. Thus, white people unconsciously and consciously act out the dynamics and relations of assumed privilege and, at the same time, an incipient guilt and anxiety about white involvement in exploitation and racism.” (p. 161)

They emphasize that it is essential for white therapists to engage with the personal, psychological and political aspects and implications of their white identity “in order to help (and not hinder) both white and black clients to explore their identity and other issues”. (p. 161)

So, our identities, our self constructs and how we define ourselves in our world emerges directly from the culture, or cultures, to which we belong. Each culture will invariably come with its own form of oppression, which impacts its members and the narratives they create about themselves and others. As these narratives unfold into the realm of consciousness, we believe that a process of grief and mourning has to take place in order to make space for new stories to emerge.

This experiential workshop will focus on how to deal with the pain and hurt imposed on us by our culture. The small group exercises we plan to present are aimed at raising participants awareness regarding how their culture and cradle both helped and hurt them. Then through visualisation and grief work, based on the work of Elaine Childs-Gowell (2003), we will suggest a number of ways in which we can grieve and work through (O’Hearne, 1981) the pain of our culture.

“No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite”.

(Nelson Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom, 1994, quoted in Oxford Dictionary of Phrase, Saying, & Quotation, 2006)

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Biography:

Ann Heathcote is a Certified Transactional Analyst (Psychotherapy). She runs The Worsley Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling and also works there herself as a psychotherapist working with adults. Ann is currently a Co-Editor of the Transactional Analysis Journal. She lives and works in Manchester, United Kingdom. Contact: annheathcote@theworsleycentre.co.uk

Manon Plouffe is a Transactional Analysis trainee in the field of psychotherapy. She runs a private practice and works for a National Children's Charity. Manon lives in the UK with her husband and two children. She is originally from Canada. Contact: manon@plouffe.freeserve.co.uk