

# New Directions in International Psychotherapy\*

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper develops some ideas about international psychotherapy, what it is, what it does, and what it could become. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

**Key words:** international psychology; pluralism; intercultural

## INTRODUCTION

*Nga mihi nui ki a koutou. Tena koutou, tena koutou, kia ora koutou katoa.* [A very warm welcome to you all.] After 33 years spent practicing and teaching psychotherapy, 30 years of living in an international and bicultural marriage, and more than 20 years working abroad, I am convinced that ours is a new field founded on ancient insight, and a tradition with a promising future.

## INTERNATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

What is international psychotherapy? What does the extension of psychological and psychotherapeutic principles and practices into the international arena actually signify? The literal meaning of “international” is between or among nations, but international psychotherapy is also transnational: it is a psychotherapy that cuts across or moves beyond national borders. International psychotherapy is thus pluralistic and, as a discipline, implies both comparison and integration. As an intercultural discipline, international psychotherapy recognizes the limits of translation from one language to another language and from one culture to another culture, and seeks to develop a pluralistic psychotherapy of diversity and difference. As a cross-cultural discipline, international psychotherapy is a comparative psychotherapy that builds a library and practice of applied psychological similarities and differences. As a transcultural discipline, international psychotherapy aspires to be a genuinely integrative psychotherapy with worldwide relevance to human experience.

To conceptualize the task of international psychotherapy, we need to be able to think both convergently and divergently. No psychotherapy exists outside of or beyond culture. A body

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of knowledge such as psychotherapy is a set of tools in the hands of a particular group of people at a particular point in time. However persuasive we might believe our proposals for universal human experience to be, these are the intellectual property of the culture in which they are proposed. The pluralism demanded by international psychotherapy helps us resist the temptation to claim too much. National boundaries and borders may become increasingly arbitrary, irrelevant or even illusory, but in this new global world critical issues of cultural difference remain.

In this new global context, what becomes of traditional psychotherapy? To the question “What is international psychotherapy?” I propose four statements, the elaboration of which attempts to capture an important aspect of what I view as a new discipline. In each of these answers, psychotherapy itself is reconfigured and reconceptualized.

*1. International psychotherapy applies psychological principles and practices within a cultural context in order to work effectively with the unity and diversity of humanity.*

What is proposed here is a pluralistic conception of human experience and human life. We begin life as infants and grow up in families. Genetically we are all almost identical. The human race is one big family, separated at most by six degrees, and joined to each other by our shared past. The psychological meaning of the human life cycle, all these life experiences that repeat over and over again in every generation, however, depends on our cultural mindset. Cultural differences shape psychic differences. As a study of the human family, international psychotherapy has much in common with cultural anthropology, and ethnography and ethnographic research are important tools and techniques of such an approach. However, while we might conceive of the study of humanity as a form of naturalistic observation, like bird-watching, we ourselves are members of this family: it is our family. So, we are empirical scientists studying our field from the inside, not from the outside. As good scientists, we strive to design research protocols and conduct fieldwork that will rigorously test our preconceptions rather than simply confirming them. However, the “working distance” necessary for this task is achieved through self-awareness rather than through emotional detachment. It is a combination of empathy and empiricism that allows us to remain experience-near and be sensitive to the inter-subjective field yet also “objective” and dispassionate enough to observe, listen to and weigh the evidence carefully.

International psychotherapy seeks to synthesize similarity and difference, so our discipline requires that we be pluralistic in our thinking, recognize and respect diversity and difference, and remain integrative in our thinking. We are both participant–observers and interpreters of the data of our lives. For all these reasons, international psychotherapy requires high levels of cultural competence. Briefly, cultural competence requires self-knowledge as well as detailed and precise knowledge of the “other”. We have to know about “us” and “them”, where we are coming from, as well as where they are coming from.

*2. International psychotherapy is an applied science of intercultural understanding.*

Several things are worth noticing about this applied science. International psychotherapy is not a positivistic or “hard” science that allows us to predict and control the world through a gradual accumulation of verifiable facts but, rather, a hermeneutic/interpretive, “soft” science that

makes meaning of the signs and symbols of humankind in the context of our times. Practitioners of any applied science value pragmatism as well as empiricism. We are interested not only in what is and what that means, but also in what is useful. We seek understanding not only because we love to understand but also because it gets results. Concepts of culture, cultural understanding, and intercultural understanding are central to the theory and practice of international psychotherapy. The application of these understandings can produce positive outcomes for those for and with whom we work. Intercultural understanding tends to reduce intercultural tension. This averts violence, promotes harmony, builds goodwill, and helps to create efficient and effective teamwork. International psychotherapy can also assist other branches of psychotherapy to think about themselves in cultural terms.

3. *International psychotherapy is the art of using psychological principles and practices to facilitate constructive engagement amongst the world's peoples.*

As international psychotherapy practitioners, we are faced with the challenge and given the opportunity to facilitate empathic, authentic, truthful and non-violent communication between individuals within groups, communities, cultures, ethnicities, regions and nations. Whether engaged in advocacy, program design, curriculum development, consulting, teaching, or practicing various forms of direct clinical service, crisis intervention, counselling, or long-term psychotherapy, the international psychotherapy practitioner seeks to foster relationship and build communities of understanding. Of course, an exact science of constructive engagement does not exist. We must strive to use all of ourselves, and to register awareness at many levels: social and systemic, interpersonal, internal, and self. Our laboratory is the world as it is. For better or worse, our mistakes and failures provide some of our best learning. Our work is not only science and applied science but art and, like other art forms, it tends to evolve in a non-linear fashion, developing and changing over time, often unexpectedly, as a function of personal experience.

4. *International psychotherapy is a vocation that uses psychological principles and practices to care for members of the human species on a global scale.*

The ethical vision that underpins this vocation is simple but profound. Three basic, inalienable human rights demand recognition and realization worldwide: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness:

- The right to life is the right to physical safety and bodily integrity, including freedom from the threat of torture or death.
- The right to liberty is the right to exercise basic political, economic and religious choices. Thus, for example, the right to vote is not a basic human right; however, voting can be considered a possible means to this end and, therefore, a procedure by which the basic human right of political choice might be exercised.
- The right to pursue happiness is now widely misunderstood to refer to the pursuit of wealth, power, prestige, fame, glamour, luxury and comfort. It is none of those things. It actually refers to the fundamental right to livelihood at an entirely ordinary level of subsistence. We are all entitled to a little share of an unearned natural bounty whose flourishing both

requires and rewards our efforts. Equality is not an entitlement; equity is. All creatures are stakeholders in creation; this is their birthright as it is ours.

Each of these three basic rights needs to be extended across space, time, and species:

- (a) across space, to include all peoples everywhere;
- (b) across time, to include future generations who are as deserving of consideration as ourselves, the present generation; and
- (c) across species, to include non-human members of the Earth community and the natural resources of the Earth itself, who desperately require our ethical and legal care and protection (see Brown, 2008; Brown & Garver, 2010).

Global citizenship might be considered to be the awareness of the ethical obligation to work towards the worldwide recognition of and respect for these basic rights. Diversity awareness takes the inventory of our collective failure to offer this recognition and respect. Humanitarianism might be regarded as the immediate or acute project of restoring basic rights where they have been lost or have been put in jeopardy. Empowerment refers to the development of long-term strategies to remedy these same social inequities on a more permanent basis. The ethics of working with socially created disasters is even more ambiguous and complex than the ethics of working with natural disasters. Often those who employ us to clean up the mess are those who made the mess in the first place, spoiling our hopes of keeping our categories of good and bad neatly separated.

## **CULTURAL ECOLOGY—AND AN ECOLOGICAL THEORY OF CULTURE**

International psychologists are people who care for and about other people, people who hold humanistic and humanitarian values but, as the fate of humanity is linked to the fate of the Earth, interdependently and inextricably connected to that of the whole, caring for people implies caring for the other creatures with whom the human species shares the planet and caring for the Earth itself. The term “natural disaster” needs to be expanded to include loss of biodiversity, loss of natural habitat, and species extinction. Cultural ecology is part of this ecology as well. Indigenous peoples are under threat worldwide, so they too join the list of endangered species. Loss of cultural diversity is loss of adaptive capacity for humanity. Our ability as a civilization to manage the coming resource scarcity and energy descent may one day depend upon indigenous models and indigenous leadership. We seek to preserve diversity and to restore autonomy and self-determination for diverse peoples for our sake as well as theirs. Caring for others at both a local and a global level puts these values at the centre of our work.

The world is becoming smaller, increasingly interconnected and interdependent both in the virtual world of cyberspace and on a concrete physical level. We are now capable of linking vast numbers of people through instantaneous communication. We are now all subject to, and to varying degrees subjugated by, global economic and political forces. We witness the mass movement of people around the globe, through travel, migration and immigration on a vast scale. These forces have set in motion a process of human hybridization in which increasing varieties of cultural mix are being created. Psychotherapy must attempt to give a coherent

account of this process of globalization, particularly as it impacts the smallest of social units: individuals and their families.

Fortuitously, this recent historical development is woven with and into a much older and larger human process. We can now contextualize our current global civilization in the light of the pre-historic as well as the historic human story. We have recently learned something of the evolution and developmental history of the human family. We understand our psyche to derive in part from its primitive origins in Palaeolithic times through the Diaspora that took us “out of Africa” and into the 100,000-year “long walk” of small bands of indigenous hunter-gatherers dispersing slowly all over the globe. This psyche was modified and transformed by the development of more permanent settlements and social configurations as the nomadic, seasonal wanderings of local tribes were transformed by the simultaneous discovery of agriculture in several geographically remote parts of the world around 10,000 BC. When Neolithic village life finally began to produce surplus food, this supported more densely populated towns and cities and led to the formation of leisure, non-food-gathering class, which, in turn, made possible a variety of classical civilizations and eventually led to the Industrial Revolution and the transition from traditional villages to modern urban life. All this must be understood psychologically and psychotherapeutically as the wider context within which our lives operate today.

That wider context can be conceptualized in the present as a unified field theory of culture that moves seamlessly from the microculture within the self, to the miniculture of face-to-face interaction between selves, to the cultural transactions between groups, to the macroculture that unites us all as one superself. A unified field theory of culture closes the gap between public and private life—a distinction that is, in any case, vastly over-rated. The radical separation of public and private life tends to produce extremely detrimental social effects. Reintegrating these two allows us a vision of a life lived in community, within and across a range of “moments” with family, friends, workmates, in large group events, in solitude, and so forth. We politicize psychotherapy as soon as we stop depoliticizing it. Just as all acts, private as well as public, express a particular culture, so also they express a political dimension or aspect.

In the microculture of the individual psyche, cultural relations exist between parts of the self, between the “me” and the “I”, and between, as it were, the “me-ego” (“me-go”) and the “we-ego” (“we-go”). These relations may be colonizing or democratic, empowering, or alienating. The “me-go” and the “we-go” battle for control of the self at times, expressing both the individualistic and the collective tendencies of our human nature. The “I” threatens the “me” with excommunication. Secondly, in terms of interpersonal mini culture, intercultural relations are conducted within face-to-face, intimate groups: between individuals, between family members, between workmates, soul mates, and so forth. Group membership represents the collective aspect or dimension of self. In culture, as we ordinarily use that word, we engage and interact within groups: within subcultures, or tribes, within the local culture of our communities, and within the larger social configurations of people who may be like or unlike us, with people of similar or dissimilar background, ethnicity, geographic region, nationality, and so forth. Thirdly, when we refer to the global macro culture, we refer both to its hegemonic aspects as the dominant worldwide culture of money and power, and to those aspects which support liberation, i.e. an interconnected, interdependent global village in which it is possible to critique and challenge this hegemony.

International psychotherapy is necessarily a political or politicized psychotherapy that has the potential to value biodiversity and cultural diversity positively (or not), and to help preserve and

protect the biosphere, the sum total, unity and diversity of the lifeworld, and the noosphere, i.e. the sum total, unity and diversity of consciousness (or not). In the 21st century, psychotherapy need not remain reductionistic or politically indifferent. Psychotherapy can learn to think widely and deeply about living systems, wholes that are always more than the sum of their parts. All psychological beings, animals as well as human beings, have their personal worlds or, more precisely, *are* their personal worlds. These are always more than the sum of their psychological parts and functions.

## **A DIFFERENT VIEW OF SELF AND WORLD**

International psychotherapy proposes a significantly different view of self and world to that of the prevailing assumptions of globalism, the dominant ideology of the modern worldview or macroculture. Here are some examples of this difference.

### *1. International psychotherapy practitioners maintain scepticism.*

This scepticism is towards the salvation theology of mainstream materialism, the unholy trinity of capitalism, consumerism, and environmental degradation. We tend to believe that human well-being is not measured by economic growth alone. Any psychological conception of human well-being and the good life requires a variety of non-economic measures: work that has meaning and purpose; opportunities for play, recreation and relaxation, fun and laughter; spiritual fulfilment; social engagement; sexual satisfaction; intimacy that can withstand the test of time; family support; a sense of belonging; community involvement; political freedom; autonomy and self-determination with regard to fundamental life choices; The list of requirements for the good life covers diverse sources of human satisfaction. Econometrics measures only a small corner of this territory. Even as a gateway to opportunities for other, non-economic satisfactions, economic well-being is a fickle mistress. The truism that money, beyond a basic minimum, cannot buy happiness is supported by extensive empirical evidence.

### *2. International psychotherapy practitioners recognize that human beings are social beings.*

Human beings are mammals, i.e. creatures whose guidance systems operate primarily at a feeling level in relation to significant others. We are social beings and, more specifically, family beings. Recently, we have begun to recognize the degree to which all species live in families and extended kinship networks, but this is particularly true of mammals. Any view of humankind that emphasizes our intellectual capabilities in isolation from our emotional nature tends to underrepresent and underrate our mammalian nature and the centrality of relationship and of attachment relationships in particular. This also implies that we are not an isolated and lonely species with a unique moral place in the universe. It is not only human good that counts. Human beings share their ecological niche and moral and ethical position and status in the universe with other sentient beings. The more we learn about the animal mind and heart the more we realize that animals, particularly other mammals, are more similar than dissimilar to us. Animals experience attachment, love and loyalty, grief at loss, depression in confinement, anxiety in the face of loss of control, pleasure in the comforts

of the familiar, relief at being home. Just as we do, animals seek to preserve their own lives and the lives of their family. They feel pain, suffer, and desire relief from suffering. The moral entitlement of animals to humane treatment is nearly as compelling as our own.

3. *International psychotherapy practitioners are primarily concerned with human beings but in the context of the earth and universe.*

We do this without assuming that human preoccupations are the only things that have value and meaning. We take a professional interest in the human tendency to self-centredness, self-deception and wishful thinking. We emphasize the need for humility and caution in the face of all we do not know about the universe and about ourselves. Human arrogance, or hubris as it was once known, has a long and inglorious history. The fable of Icarus, the story of the *Titanic*, even the very recent tragic events at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, suggest we must plan for disaster if we wish to avoid disaster. It is safer to assume that we do not know than that we do, and to act with humility, caution and care, particularly when we are attempting to operate on a large scale.

4. *International psychotherapy embraces a humanistic orientation.*

We do this in a global context in which nation states are seen as arbitrary geographical entities—abstract constellations of institutional power that ought to be less privileged rather than more privileged than human beings. The privilege of power is nothing new, but it is one of the great evils of the modern world, a scandal of conscience that requires us to work to rebalance this inevitable inequity through the establishment and maintenance of a humane civil society that protects the vulnerable and elevates the downtrodden. Unfortunately, market-driven economies and democratic societies are not mutually reinforcing; the empirical evidence is that they actually work against each other. Unfettered market rule is as arbitrary and autocratic as any tyrant. However, the State bureaucracy that is theorized as the means of redistributing society's wealth is all too easily diverted into serving its own self-interest and the vested interests of its political masters. State power is as undemocratic as the power of the market. The State is an organism expressly designed for the purpose of obtaining and holding power, just as the corporation is an institution expressly designed to externalize responsibility and maximize profit. It is of some considerable concern that, within the modern nation State, the power of the markets and the power of the State have joined forces, significantly eroding democratic process and democratic rights worldwide. International psychotherapy is or can become a critical psychotherapy that challenges dominant ideologies of both the political Right and the political Left. We can advocate for a robust civil society at every level of society, for only this will provide the intermediary influence necessary to set boundaries and impose limits, legal and extralegal, to market-driven commercial self-interest and governmental authority and power.

## **CRISIS, CONSEQUENCES, AND VISION**

A brief exposure to the 6 o'clock news on any given day convinces us that the human family is in crisis. We live today, whether we know it or not, as members of a global dysfunctional family. The problematic consequences of our current short-term, exclusively human-centred

operating manual for life on this planet have become almost too numerous to mention. Never have our urgent social problems seemed a more immediate, intimate and appalling part of the human experience. We are hurtling towards the limits of our current way of life, still addicted to consumption, still dependent upon oil and upon an oil-based food supply. Much of the motivation for this seemingly unstoppable, lemming-like march towards crisis and catastrophe can be attributed to the lopsided emphasis on economic security for individuals and economic growth for nations. Instead of the human economy taking its proper place as a subsidiary part of the Earth economy for the benefit and well-being of all, economic activity has become an end in itself. It has also, and not coincidentally, become the means by which a numerically small but very privileged elite can continue to hold power over the vast majority of people of the world.

In previous papers I have noted the juvenile characteristics of our culture and likened our civilization to a teenager in a fast car with no seatbelt (Fay, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2008). Now, like teens who have suddenly become parents, humanity finds itself thrust into the position of having to care for a great many dependants when the plan was simply to have fun and be free. Will humanity manage to survive its own adolescence, develop its maturity, and begin to transform itself into a functional human family? What opportunities will the future offer to create what the Pachamama Alliance (2011) calls “an environmentally sustainable, socially just, spiritually fulfilling human co-presence on this planet”? The realization of this vision will require a general raising of human consciousness. To challenge and overcome the impediments to a just and sustainable world will not be easy. Were we reliant solely upon individualistic, lone-ranger efforts, the task would prove far too daunting. But necessity is the mother of invention. A collective, grassroots movement for change will arise and will eventually prove effective. We can take heart from the fact that there are already in existence today more than a million different local-level community groups and coalitions working worldwide to achieve the vision of a caring society and a more sustainable human presence on Earth.

The dream of a unified human community may still be beyond our grasp, but it is no longer beyond our reach. Equipped with the ability to dream and imagine this unity, we can work towards it. Global communication has transformed us and grown our awareness of human diversity. Local, regional and national identities have expanded to include species-wide identification as fellow human beings. Most importantly, people throughout the world are becoming aware of what indigenous people have never forgotten: that we are part of a greater whole, not superior to nature but utterly dependent upon it for our lives, our livelihood, and our future. This growing awareness might quite conceivably form the nucleus of an alternative blueprint for the future.

International psychotherapy is born as a new discipline in the context of this “great turning”, this struggle for a human future worthy of the name. If humanity is to survive its own self-destructive tendencies and find its unity, its “cooperacy”, the science of the 21st century must become a science of wholes, and not merely a science of parts of the whole. It must become like the many branches of a single tree—a tree that we might designate general ecology, which is the study of differentiated, functional, living systems. One branch of general ecology is cultural ecology, and it is here, as a department of cultural ecology, that we might choose to locate the theory and practice of international psychotherapy. International psychotherapy can choose to operate according to this new paradigm; one that seeks to integrate indigenous, holistic, and scientific psychologies, and to work with the dreams and aspirations of diverse micro-cultural



groups while remaining mindful of the emerging macroculture of our global interdependence. By combining critical psychotherapy with humanistic values, international psychotherapy can intentionally steer away from a psychotherapy that exalts the individual self to the detriment of the common good, and instead embrace the interconnectedness of the global Earth community. It can join the struggle to combat the causes and consequences of racism, classism, colonialism, and other forms of social and cultural domination and hegemony. It may even find creative ways to address at a psychological level the instrumental and materialistic worldview that objectifies nature. By helping us make connections between the macroculture and its impact at a personal level, facilitating intercultural communication, and developing a diversity of shared aspirations for the future, the international psychotherapy practitioner has a small but vital role to play in building the communities of understanding on which our species survival may in future depend.

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