Psychotherapy and Politics International

2022, VOL. *20*, NO. 4, 1–14
https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v20i4.05

Online ISSN: 1556-9195 Journal homepage: https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/psychotherapy-politics-international

NOTE FROM THE FRONT LINE

‘The war, with all of its brutality and nonsense, came to my house’: How invasion transformed our clinical psychology course

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ABSTRACT

This article—a collaboration between us as student and educator—shares an example of Freirean praxis in a clinical psychology course. We discuss how our course was transformed when, one day after our first class of the semester, Russian military forces invaded Ukraine and students were suddenly and unexpectedly called on to host and/or provide support for forcibly displaced people from Ukraine. This article is our attempt to describe how the complex political context in which we found ourselves shaped and transformed our clinical psychology course and our experience of our learning environment. We reflect together on how we responded to the immediate consequences of this event, share what we learned through this experience, and discuss the implications for anti-oppressive practitioner educational contexts.

KEYWORDS: anti-oppressive practice; praxis; privilege; teaching; trauma; psychotherapy; war

CONTENT NOTICE: As part of trauma-informed, anti-oppressive practice, we note that this article contains graphic descriptions of armed conflict, forcible displacement, institutional violence, and warfare that might be distressing for some readers. This includes some descriptions of the consequences of food deprivation that might be particularly distressing for some forcibly displaced people and their past hosts. We encourage readers to decide whether and under which circumstances to engage with this content.

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Influential Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970/1972) conceptualised education as an inherently political domain with the potential to catalyse action to challenge oppressive structures, societal inequities, and power dynamics. First published in Portuguese in 1968 and later translated into English, Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/1972) critiqued what he termed the 'banking model' of education, in which students are treated as passive containers or empty vessels into which educators place their knowledge. This banking model is a dominant approach to learning in colonialist and capitalist contexts. Instead, Freire envisioned a critical pedagogy in which learning can liberate students to take action in response to current events. His approach transcended mere theorising, emphasising the inextricable relation between theory and action, with each informing the other.

Praxis is a key component of Freire's approach. Freire (1972, p. 52) described praxis as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it'. Central to Freirean notions of praxis is the belief that it is inadequate for students merely to learn *about* the world, but that they also have an ethical duty to take *action* toward addressing injustice. For Freire, praxis was 'a central defining feature of human life and a necessary condition of freedom', because 'human nature is expressed through intentional, reflective, meaningful activity situated within dynamic historical and cultural contexts that shape and set limits on that activity' (Glass, 2001, p. 16). Freirean praxis is an ongoing process of synthesising theory and practice, so that theory informs practice, which in term informs theory, and so on in cycles that build on each other. Praxis is about immersion, a core aspect of the course we discuss in this article.

Given the international, geopolitical, and cultural diversity of our learning community, it was challenging to balance the limited time and space for each topic with content that would meet students' needs for content that facilitated praxis. In my course, I—the first author—supported students to share more about their social position and lived experiences, so that I could include sources that addressed the region-specific barriers to social and environmental justice and local manifestations of systemic oppression they were likely to encounter. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to explore praxis-based dilemmas in a broader historical context and their impact on students' contemporary praxis, we—both authors—hope to fill this gap in our future work.

When explaining a praxis-oriented approach to caring for young people in the Child and Youth Care (CYC) profession, White (2007) conceptualised praxis as being about 'ethical, self-aware, responsive, and accountable action' that 'involves knowing, doing and being' (p. 226). White conceptualised praxis as something that is highly sensitive to specific contexts. For this reason, it can 'never be proceduralised or specified in advance' (p. 226), asserting that knowledge is *made*, not 'discovered' (p. 232). This description of praxis contrasts with the institutional requirements of the clinical psychology course on which this article will focus. Whereas the official curriculum that I—the first author—was required to produce for approval by the Board of Studies was fixed in advance and reduced to a set of precise tasks

outlined in a formal syllabus, I shifted to a praxis-oriented approach in response to our specific political context.

OUR COURSE

From February through June 2022, we—the authors—were in the nominal roles of student and educator in an online course on psychotherapy with marginalised populations. The institutional hierarchy inherent in these roles contrasted with our shared experience as culturally humble learners co-creating a learning community together. In 2022, the course on Psychotherapy with Marginalised Populations that had been originally created and designed by the first author shifted from an optional elective to a required unit for final year students in the clinical psychology (psychotherapy and neuropsychology) specialisation tracks of the Warsaw International Studies in Psychology (WISP) Program. The WISP Program is a five-year international Master of Psychology degree program based in the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Warsaw in Warsaw, Poland. Taught in English, the course is a unified degree, which means it integrates undergraduate and postgraduate content to culminate in a postgraduate Master of Psychology degree.

English was not a primary language for most students, who joined class sessions on Zoom from rural, urban, and suburban areas across continents, including but not limited to the lands colonially known as Colombia and Turkey, and the unceded Sápmi lands of the Indigenous Sámi People in regions colonially known as Sweden, Norway, Finland, and the Russian Kola Peninsula. Although the original syllabus contained a unit on anti-oppressive practice with forcibly displaced people, this unit was initially scheduled to occur toward the end of the course. Sources listed in the formal syllabus were limited to peer-reviewed journal articles. However, I—the first author—curated additional course content in the online learning platform to provide multimedia resources that centred and prioritised content created by people with lived experience of each topic we explored. This included a range of publicly posted video clips, blog posts, and articles in students' primary languages. This strategic decision to include multimedia and user-generated content that are typically excluded from academic curricula made it possible for students to learn from a range of marginalised people and perspectives whose lives and insights have historically been excluded from, tokenised by, and marginalised in higher education, such as a video clip about the struggles and triumphs of Arsham, a man of trans experience from Afghanistan who had sought asylum and obtained refugee status in Germany (InfoMigrants, 2019), and documentary films about the unjust and abusive conditions faced around the world by people who are forcibly detained for seeking refuge (including but not limited to Arte.tv Documentary, 2021; Democracy Now!, 2022; Hello McSavage, 2017; The New Humanitarian, 2015; and Vice News, 2021).

The first session of our class was held on Wednesday, the 23rd of February 2022. One day later, on the 24th of February, Russian military forces invaded Ukraine. This article is our attempt to describe how the complex political context in which we found ourselves shaped and transformed our clinical psychology course. We reflect together on how we responded to the immediate consequences of this event and share what we learned through this experience.

Gávi (he/him): When I first began creating and teaching courses for the University of Warsaw in 2011, I did so in person for several consecutive weeks at a time. My three-to-four-week intensive modules gradually evolved into requests from my Program Director for semester-long content. Unfortunately, I was unable to accept these requests due to the public nationalist campaign against 'LGBT' people in Poland (Ayoub, 2014; Bielska, 2021; Chowaniec et al., 2021; Yermakova, 2021), as exemplified by the creation of public 'LGBT-free zones/strefy wolne od ideologii LGBT' in approximately 100 Polish cities and towns as part of the nationalist campaign to cast our existence as a danger to Polish society (Chowaniec et al., 2021). After this explicitly anti-'LGBT' campaign began, I taught by distance due to my increased risk of physical violence as an educator with lived experience of being targeted for my marginalised gender, body, kinship, and sexuality.

Back in 2011, I began my first course by sharing a handout with some ideas from Paulo Freire's critique of the 'banking model' of education and Freire's notion of education as a potential site for actions that could achieve liberation from societal injustice and oppression. I was hoping to initiate dialogue with students about how we wanted to create our learning environment and to build a collaborative, responsive space. Although I had some prior experience with teaching, I was a postgraduate student filled with idealistic notions of transformative learning that had yet to be tested under such immediate challenges as those I would later face when the consequences of war would come to my students' homes.

When I introduced these Freirean ideas and practices, some students expressed shock, while others eagerly adopted these new ways of being, knowing, and doing together beyond the autocratic approaches to teaching they had known. One Polish student informed me of an androcentric saying that was often repeated to me by students during subsequent years of teaching, which he translated into English as 'the lecturer is King'. He explained that, although our program was increasingly shifting toward collaborative and interactive learning environments, these newer approaches clashed with a well-established and deeply entrenched Polish tradition of educators who behaved as quasi-monarchs toward students, who were expected to behave as loyal, obedient subjects—a royalist iteration of Freire's (1970/1972) 'banking model'. This student explained that, according to this tradition, lecturers felt entitled to students' respect, adopted an expert position, and conceptualised

their roles as transmitters of knowledge rather than partners in the learning environment as my handout had proposed.

Over the years, I learned from students how to introduce these concepts and practices in a way that was more intelligible to them, as well as encountering students who were already familiar with this framework—particularly those from regions with greater geographic proximity to Freire's Brazilian place of origin or to the origins of leading liberation psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró in El Salvador (see Martín-Baró, 1994).

When the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces began in February 2022, due to the geographical proximity of Poland to Ukraine, students who had no prior training or experience in working with forcibly displaced people were suddenly expected to shift from source-based classroom learning to applying their practice to a situation for which many students told me they felt completely unprepared. Fortunately, my course already included the component of weekly written, audio, or video reflective journals in which students were expected to integrate course material with lived experience across the intersecting domains of their personal and professional contexts.

In their journal entries from those early weeks, many students recognised immediately that academic theories and streamlined clinical approaches were useless and irrelevant to meet the practical, emotional, and political needs of people who had been forcibly displaced by the invasion. Students with ancestral and/or personal ties to the region colonially known as South America and the regions of Northern Africa, Western Asia, Central Asia, Southern Asia, Eastern Asia, Southeastern Asia, and Northern Asia expressed their experiences of profound alienation and dehumanisation when witnessing the outpouring of support for Ukrainian people in situations similar to those to which their families, loved ones, and communities had been subjected without any corresponding public support. Multiple students from racialised backgrounds who self-identified as Black, Brown, Indigenous, First Nations, North African, South Asian, and/or Muslim people described the structural violence of forcible displacement, detention, discriminatory laws and policies, and public vilification to which they and communities with which they felt affinity had been subjected.

One student shared two pictures of a parent and child that had been circulated widely in mass media to elicit care and support for forcibly displaced people. The first image depicted a pale, lighter-skinned mother and child with stereotypically European-associated visual appearance. The second image, which was placed beside the first, depicted a mother and child in an almost identical pose, but the mother was darker-skinned and wearing a hijab (head-scarf). This student described the injustice of witnessing the near-unanimous outpouring of international support and empathy for people from Ukraine, in contrast to the suspicious, hostile, and even violent and homicidal responses to forcibly displaced people from Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, Palestine, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, and elsewhere. Similar concerns were echoed by a Jewish student whose relatives had been turned away

from multiple countries when seeking refuge from Nazi persecution following the Sho'ah (a Hebrew term for the Holocaust) in the 1940s and by international students who had recently hosted forcibly displaced Iraqi families and witnessed local hostilities against these families.

The immediacy of the 2022 invasion and its intimate impact on students—and our learning environment—were transformed into sites of political resistance and responsiveness. Instead of continuing to teach the pre-scheduled curriculum content in the order in which I had written the course, I would read student reflective journals and engage with breaking news throughout the week in order to determine our 'living curriculum'. Like many students turned unexpected practitioners, co-author Kasia (she/her), who was living in Warsaw during the semester, wrote about this experience in her reflective journal.

Kasia (she/her): Two weeks into the war, my roommate had to leave the country for three weeks. We both agreed that, given the situation, her room couldn't stay empty. First, we welcomed a family of four, a mother with two children and a grandmother. As we learned later, they left Ukraine on the first day of the war and had been staying in a hotel for those first two weeks.

Soon, the apartment started to be filled with noises, the sounds of children running around, Peppa Pig playing on a loop on TV, and the smell of food in the kitchen. Suddenly, our apartment, usually quiet and overly clean, became the centre of chaos.

For the first few days, I stayed in my room. I was waking up earlier than the family, and then going to the kitchen later in the evening when they would watch TV. Our interactions were restricted to saying hello in the morning. Partly because I wanted to give them a substitute for privacy, but also because I suddenly started to share an apartment with complete strangers with whom I do not speak the same language and I also needed time to adjust to the new situation. I remember one evening sitting at my desk, when through the wall I could hear that Eva (4-year-old) was talking with her dad. She was eating dinner and they started to sing a children's song, and somehow this was the symbolic moment of my realisation when the war, with all of its brutality and nonsense, came to my house. It was devastating to witness the innocence of this little girl and this intimate father–daughter moment juxtaposed with the global geopolitical situation in which they were caught.

Gávi: Within two weeks, forcibly displaced people were not merely a clinical topic for students to study through peer-reviewed sources. They were the people at students' kitchen tables, the children whose singing could be heard on the other side of the physical and metaphorical walls that separated learning from lived experience, theory from practice. With each kitchen table encounter, in each deeply personal moment, the war invaded the homes and lives of

students, demanding a personal response that transcended the simplistic and elitist conceptualisation of clinical boundaries they had been taught. Here was war, in all its gripping and tangible brutality, calling on all of us to take action.

Kasia: When talking about wars or other events of this magnitude—impossible to comprehend—the most transformative sources are individual stories. For us, as bystanders, personal stories are within the scope of our limited understanding. However, the fact that those individual stories are happening in your home, your kitchen, in generally shared spaces, that is a completely new kind of overwhelming experience that invokes a flood of emotions and existential questions rooted in the intimacy of this moment. It is without exaggeration that I say that I became a stranger in my home. The events and discussions that were taking place under my roof were beyond what I could imagine. In moments like that, due to the intimate circumstances, I was invited to glimpse more deeply into their individual stories.

When I was talking with S., a mother of two who escaped Ukraine when the war started, about how she looked for rooms, and apart from financial issues, she told me that it was important for her to find a place with a kitchen. She asked me several times before moving in if there was a kitchen available and if they could use it. She and her mother were happy that they could cook a proper meal for themselves and the kids. With the help of the food, they wanted to bring a bit of routine to the kids' lives—the tastes and smells that the kids knew, and the ritual of cooking that would bring them a moment of escape. I remember they were constantly cooking.

One time, I was alone with the grandma in the apartment, and as soon as she saw me, she invited me to eat with her. We ate together and talked. She talked a lot. However, I will never know what she said. Was she worried about her family back in Ukraine? Was she talking about the future? Or was she telling me how she said goodbye to her home, maybe her husband? Did she tell me something that everybody knew or was it a secret? I will never know now, but I remember that, in that moment, I was totally invested in our conversation. I tried to respond accurately beyond spoken words, to nod or smile at the right moment, to make her feel that she could talk as long as she wanted. At the end of our meal, she hugged me and said thank you. Somehow, I had a hunch that she meant thank you for our conversation.

S. and her family decided to move to Germany after a week and a half of staying with me. After they left, I could not get used to the silence in the apartment. The next day, I saw that there was a bus leaving from Mariupol, an eastern part of Ukraine. People were looking for temporary housing for a week until a local organisation would find them something more long-term.

When the next family arrived, this time a mother and a seventeen-year-old son, I gave them only simple instructions about the bathroom and where they would find the most necessary products. Then I left the apartment for a bit to give them privacy. Based on the traumatic nature of their travel and events before that, I knew that what they needed first was to take care of their basic physiological needs and that they cannot be overwhelmed with a lot of information at the beginning. I told them when I was coming back, and I returned promptly at that time. We drank coffee together, I showed them the food which I had prepared for them, and they went to sleep. They slept through the whole day and night; the food remained untouched.

I remember all of those details, because I was struck by how their behaviour corresponded with the advice and information (written by a psychotraumatologist) I received from the organisation which helped with their evacuation. I felt that the experience of hosting them would be different from my previous family, but as I was well-prepared, I felt that I had a map to navigate through this unknown situation, to protect both their comfort and mine. We spent more than two weeks together.

While this situation was taking place, I was sharing my experiences during our weekly classes. Sharing real-life examples and observations in class was not only beneficial for me personally, but I also felt that, through our class discussions, we were bringing our collaborative experiences of learning on different levels. We saw how theory could be instantly applied to real life situations. In these unpredictable times, acquiring knowledge about what was going on around me was comforting. I also felt that being taught a module which corresponded with my lived experiences in the moment resulted in my learning faster. As a psychologist who might be working with forcibly displaced people in the future, I know that this experience will have an impact on my work. It is one thing to know about what people in such situations can go through, but different to actually witness the intimacy of those moments.

Gávi: By the second week of class, I invited students to share their recent and ongoing experiences. Students began to share more in class and in their reflective journals about the contrast between their clinical psychology training and the real life needs of the forcibly displaced people who were now part of their everyday lives. The simplistic, reductionist notions of ‘professional boundaries’ they had been taught during their clinical psychology training were inadequate and inappropriate for addressing the dual imperative for political and therapeutic action with people whose lives and needs could not be confined to a therapeutic hour in a consultation room.

Students' concurrent personal experiences with forcibly displaced people also helped them to understand some of the content from our class better. For example, students who had expressed initial skepticism regarding the concept of privilege began to grasp the importance of examining their own privileges and their impact on students' capacity to identify and meet the needs of people who, for some students, were now part of their everyday lives and at their kitchen tables. In her journal on the second week of our class, Kasia began reflecting on privilege.

Kasia: In my reflective journal from week 2 of our course, I reflected on privilege in general and on my specific privilege in helping forcibly displaced people. During my previous course with Gávi, our class often discussed privilege and engaged in exercises to reflect on privilege. By the start of our course on psychotherapy with marginalised populations, it felt natural to think about what was going on and analyse it through the privilege lens. In my reflective journal, I wrote:

During the class, I have shared my experience of helping Ukrainian families by providing a temporary shelter for them. Talking about it made me examine and recognise my privilege in the context of helping. Of course, it is wonderful to help. I can tell that I feel more human than ever, that I am proud of myself, and that I feel that I act in accordance with my values. More importantly, we are all here in Poland in a situation in which we have never been before, and which is fuelled by emotions such as fear, sadness, and anger. It is not easy to find your place in a new world like that.

For the past three weeks, I was able to do so, by channelling all of those emotions into helping and caring for the families who stayed with me. However, I am aware that this is a sum of many of my privileges that I have in my life. I'm not helping because I care more, I am helping because I care *and* I have the means to do so, and those means are my privileges. Starting from the fact that I live in an apartment into which I could invite other people. I earn money and I have parents who are helping me financially, and they are in a good financial position to send me some additional money. I come from a wealthy family. Upper middle class allowed me to comfortably and carelessly slide through life. So when a laptop owned by the boy who was staying with me broke down over the weekend, I could help him. When it was clear to me and my friends that we could not fix it, we had to hurry up, because I., an eleven-year-old Ukrainian boy, was supposed to start online classes with his teachers from Ukraine, and then leave for Germany. Me and my friends and family (and my friends' friends) were able to chip in to buy him a brand-new computer. He could also start those classes on time, and his mum did not have to worry about that.

Of course, it was a very rewarding moment to see his smile and we have a really nice story to tell. However, I know that I wouldn't have been able to get him this new computer that fast if I had not had economically advantaged friends. However, the privilege is not only about money, it's also about being healthy, and not living with any chronic illness. Also, my mental health allowed me to invite strangers to my home, to make some adjustments to my daily routine, and open up and meet new people and listen and smile when they needed it. I have not survived any trauma, so I did not worry about being triggered by something. I felt that I could handle the situation. I'm also an allistic [non-Autistic] person, so I could easily make connections with the strangers who were my guests and adjust to the chaotic environment of my new (temporary) routine. I'm also not from any oppressed minoritised group in Poland. I'm a heterosexual, white woman of cisgender experience, and this social position means that, although I experience marginalisation as a woman, I do not have to face additional stressors due to multiple, intersecting restrictions of my fundamental human rights.

What I wanted to write in this entry is that I had the mental space to offer help, the space that is commonly occupied with daily struggles for less privileged people. Helping brings a lot of satisfaction, but I am aware that I owe it not only to my sensitivity.

Gávi: This recognition that the role of 'helper' constitutes a privileged position was a key theme we explored in our course. In one of the course sources, child psychiatrist Sami Timimi, who described growing up in a refugee family, challenged Eurocentric ideology that conceptualises human distress as psychopathology (Timimi, 1998). This pathologisation of forcibly displaced people's proportionate responses to state-sponsored violence functions to shield unjust institutions and public policies from vital scrutiny. As a mixed, polycultural person who grew up partly in rural and urban China, on the unceded Aboriginal lands of the Eora Nation in the region colonially known as Australia and elsewhere, and as someone with an intergenerational family history of forced displacement, I felt an intimate connection to this topic that was shared by some students and completely unfamiliar to other students. The reflective journal process helped me to meet the challenge of bringing all students into this topic in a way that integrated psychological theory with practice, as did the flexible 'choose your own adventure' approach I took to our curriculum. Despite the nominal roles of student and educator, I added student-recommended sources to the learning options for each week and curated these options into a menu of learning choices on a weekly basis in direct response to the content of students' reflective journals.

I was acutely aware of the moral responsibility to act and the political implications of teaching content on clinical psychology practice with forcibly displaced people while students were encountering demand both for their practitioner skills and for more practical resources such as food and a home. Had our curriculum remained static, had students not been able to

use class time for dialogue and reflection on the events taking place in Ukraine, at Polish train stations, and in their homes, we would have missed a crucial opportunity for learning.

Kasia: It is difficult to reflect critically on this experience, as it is still fresh, and the war is still going on for us here in Poland. It is now winter, and the Russian attacks on Ukraine's power infrastructure (e.g., Tobias, 2022) mean that we are likely to have a lot more forcibly displaced people coming from Ukraine to Poland this winter.

One reflection I already have on the experience of our course and the co-occurring invasion and forcible displacement of people from Ukraine is that, before these events, I was always interested in reading and writing about trauma, but also always somehow avoided content about war-related trauma. I naively thought that covering this content would not be practical for me. Ukrainians with whom I have communicated will correct people on the start date of the war between Russia and Ukraine, which began with the war in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (see Kirby, 2022), eight years before the February invasion of Ukraine. These events occurred in the eastern part of Ukraine, very far from Poland. Before the invasion, I denied the fact that the war zone could spread, and that I could see consequences of this magnitude in the place where I live. I did not think content about forcibly displaced people would ever be relevant to my work. After the invasion, I realised that this content was essential learning for me.

In Poland, our lives changed permanently in February. We are still dealing with the war and its ongoing escalation; even now, we do not have the privilege of emotional or physical distance from these events.

Gávi: This experience reinforced my understanding that the roles of educator and student can be malleable and shifting, as I learned so much from the students as we explored the new challenges they faced, together. Some students living in Poland expressed concerns that they would be next, that Russian military forces would invade Poland, too. In our second session of the course, students with family and loved ones in Ukraine shared a raw and immediate grief, fear, and anger as they described what had happened to those fleeing the invasion. Each week, despite the range of topics we explored, the impacts of the invasion and resultant forcible displacement of people from Ukraine—as well as the forcible displacement of people from many other regions—found their way into our discussions, into students' reflective journal entries, and into our curriculum.

Nestled far from this war in the office of my rented home on unceded Boonwurrung Country in the region colonially known as Australia, I found myself deeply moved and shaken by how close this war had come to me from several continents away. Being so close to war renewed my grappling with the complex combination of longstanding, emerging, and recovered histories of repeated forcible displacement and intergenerational trauma in my

family of origin. Throughout our course, I followed international news closely, responding to the new events and challenges identified each week in students' written, audio, and video reflective journals. Taking this learning journey in collaboration with students meant that I and *our* course (it no longer felt right to call it 'mine') were transformed together. We struggled together with the ethical conundra of how to integrate the acute suffering, loss, and grief of forcibly displaced people into clinical psychologists' teaching, clinical training, theory formation, and career development. How could we not merely *use* people's experiences but be *accountable* for them in ways that would actually improve the material conditions of people's everyday lives?

Throughout our course, I had frequent exchanges with students about the brutalities and banalities of this war: the deprivations and indignities, the triumphs and personal victories. Without realising it would become one of the most important parts of the unwritten curriculum for this course, through our connections across time zones and geographic space, the war had come to my home, too.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Madeline R. Young and Brian W. Kovacs for helpful feedback on earlier drafts, Coach Samantha Cooper for providing strategic support to the first author, Angie Strachan and Keith Tudor for encouraging our work, Wouter de Raad and Zofia Borska-Mądrzycka in the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Warsaw for their unwavering institutional support for our course, and all students in our Psychotherapy with Marginalised Populations course for contributing to our learning and transformation. We dedicate this article to the forcibly displaced people whose lives have shaped ours—including forcibly displaced people whom the international community continues to neglect and devalue. You are not forgotten. You are ever in our hearts, as is our duty to act.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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