



Interview with Bisi Lalemi

Psychodynamic Counsellor and Group Therapist

Talk Together: As a Group Therapist you organize Counselling Groups especially for Women. What problems do women face and what are the underlying causes of these problems?

Bisi: The main problems for many women, who seek the support in a group, are low self esteem and the feeling that they are not valued. These feelings are often connected to their childhood and their family situation. Another problem that occurs frequently is connected with the body image that is reflected by the society and can lead to eating problems like Bulimia. Many women also have problems with their role of motherhood, they feel that they don't do enough for their children and are often overprotective. Another common problem is depression; many women feel isolated and find no-one to talk to about their problems. They do not dare to talk about those issues with family members or people who are close to them, because they feel ashamed. Many of those women try to chase away the problems with medication, but this does not offer a real solution.

Talk Together: How do Counselling Groups work?

Bisi: By making the Unconscious conscious we are able to find an explanation for the ways we behave and relate. Many parts of the unconscious contain feelings and experiences that have been repressed, and many people are unwilling to let these "out of the Cellar". Counselling Groups are a safe place for the women to speak about their problems and their feelings. Others can relate, so they do not feel alone with their problems any longer. The journey one embarks on, as they become part of the dynamics of the group, can be a difficult one, but the group is able to hold, and work with the feelings that are aroused.

My job is mainly to listen and to encourage members to participate and to respect what others have to say. The group is like a container, in which all difficult feelings, expressions and emotions are held inside, and I guide the group to do this. Usually we have weekly sessions of one and a half hours, normally 12 weeks is the minimum. I met women in Salzburg who were looking for such a group but they did not find any. I suspect that in a small city like Salzburg people are afraid that they might meet people they know, and they don't want to talk about personal and confidential things in front of them. That's why they choose to go to a doctor and get medication. However, confidentiality is of prime importance, what is said in the group stays in the group.

Talk Together: What are women's needs and what does society give them?

Bisi: Women need to value themselves, but society undervalues them. Women's work is undervalued, women's work is less paid and they don't get enough support with their children, e.g. creches, where children are looked after in the workplace. In the Nigerian Culture for example children are raised by the extended family, and the responsibility is not put entirely on the mother. In Africa, they say, "it takes a whole village to raise a child". It is irrational to believe that one person (the mother) has the sole responsibility for a child. No wonder many women suffer with depression. Women also need a positive self image. The image communicated by Society is that women have to be thin and beautiful, and this causes many problems for women, who think they have to fulfill this ideal to be valued.

Talk Together: You were raised in Europe, but your roots are in Africa. How strong are your ties to Africa and to African Culture?

Bisi: Although I was raised in Europe, I was raised by Nigerian Parents. So my early childhood was dominated by African traditions. Although at present my ties to Africa are not very strong, because of my early experiences I stayed connected with African traditions and culture, like cooking or my attitude towards childrearing and Nigerian rituals.

Talk Together: Can you tell me something about the role of women in African Societies?

Bisi: Naturally I can only speak about my own experiences, about my Nigerian Culture. Although at the surface the Nigerian society is very male dominated, I think underneath women still have a lot of power in the family. In a Nigerian family women are mainly responsible for young children and the male plays a very secondary role in child rearing. The role of the mother is generally highly valued. Problems with body image or eating disorders are very new phenomena with African women, and ten years ago they were unknown. Looking well nourished is not considered bad in Africa, because food is more valued, and people are grateful to have it. But this also changes, because African people also get exposed to the same phenomenon that causes eating disorders with Western women.

Talk Together: How is the life of Black women in Europe? What problems do they face?

Bisi: Black women have double oppression, because of their gender and because of their skin colour. Nowadays black women in England get more into better jobs because of the anti-racist-discrimination laws. But in Austria it is very difficult for black women, there still is the stereotype, that black women should work as cleaners, that they are not well educated. In my example: I am a highly qualified professional, but in the 5 years I live in Austria, it was not possible for me to get an adequate job. But the situation in England is quite different. My parents came to England because Government needed citizens of the Commonwealth (former colonies) to build up society, because there were not enough workers who would perform low paid jobs as in the National Health System and Transport system. Many Africans came to England to work or to study, and not as Asylum seekers. In England still many black women work in lower paid jobs, many of them in social jobs like the care for elderly or mentally ill people. They have much experience with the elderly, because in African Culture the family network is much stronger and elderly people are more respected than in European Society. They are seen as wise and a usefull part of society who help bringing up children and giving

important advice in the family e.g. couple counselling.

Talk Together: How did you experience Racism in Europe and especially in Austria?

Bisi: The main difference between England and Austria in my experience of racism is the existence of Anti-Discrimination laws in England. In all public jobs they have to take a quota of black people. They even advertise that black people should apply. So it is easier to find a job there. But it was not like this when I was young. In that time it was very difficult for a black person to find a job in a white organization. But nevertheless, racism is still there, but it is more “under-cover”, more covert. In the 1960s African immigrants upheld the Public Health Service. But there was a lot of harrasment and bullying and, blacks were not promoted to higher positions. But in the meantime it was recognized that we have a multicultural society and need people more sensitive to issues of race. Many Cultural Awareness and Anti-Racist Courses and

Workshops

were organised for Employees and Employers in various professions and Workplaces. But here in Salzburg it has been difficult for me to get a job equivalent to my qualifications and my experiences. The AMS only offered jobs as “Küchenhilfe” and made no effort, to help me to find a job fitting to my career. For sure, there is a language problem. But still with jobs, where my English language skills and my knowledge of different cultures would be a great advantage (for example working with Asylum seekers) my applications were ignored. Some time ago I had a very bad experience with ticket controllers in the bus, who pushed me and pulled my arms. They treated me in a way they never would have dared to do with a white woman of my age, although I had committed no offence. I was trying to punch my ticket after 10 seconds of boarding the bus. An Austrian woman on the bus protested strongly. Luckily, I never had any troubles with police in Salzburg. This is quite different in Vienna. There I was with two black men just waiting for the bus at a stop, when a police car passed. When the police men saw us, they immediately stopped and started watching us. I was shocked. But one thing I have a problem with is the use of the word “Neger”, which is very common. People think that it is okay. Even friends sometimes don’t understand me when I argue, that the roots of the word came from slavery. However, they often justify its use. And there is another problem for me. I found out that many men in Austria see Black women as a sexual object, and on many occasions – for example in the fitness center or at the bus stop – I was offered money for sex. However, what helps me to survive in Austria is that I have met Austrians, who I consider to be “special” human beings – who have journeyed beyond skin colour and difference to me as another human being and shown a great humanity towards me. I was disappointed by the vote and the Racist Parties (FPÖ and BZÖ) increasing hold in the government and the fact that young people voted for them. However, where there is “extreme hate” (racism, nazism) there is also “great love” that I have experienced from my friends and sometimes even from strangers.

Talk Together: What are the structures that cause Racism in your opinion?

Bisi: I am convinced that society is racist in its roots – and that we have to unlearn racism. Racism has been enforced on us by the media, education, past governments, so we have to

learn to “get rid of it”. Nobody can say he or she is not racist; society has imprinted it on us. I think that the root of racism is the hating of ourselves. We hate the difference in ourselves, the shadowy side, the negative, difficult, uncomfortable feelings, and when we see someone looking different to us, we associate it with the negative things we want to hide, we project our negative feelings on the others we see as different to us: They are the ones who are uncivilized, who take away our jobs, our houses etc. It is like in a family system – as a child you hated your sister or your brother because you thought they got more from your mother or father than you, but in fact they were struggling just as much as you were.

The roots of racism lie in Slavery, the myths and lies served to justify that human beings could be treated like animals and these myths and lies stayed in the psyche. In Austria another factor is the Nazi past, which is not really discussed. In a psychotherapeutic sense there is the danger, when something so bad is not processed psychologically, it will be transferred unconsciously to the next generations. In my opinion, in Austria, there are a lot of difficult and painful issues connected to the past, that have not been processed. One of the symptoms of unprocessed material can be alcoholism. I think alcoholism is a big problem here. The youth are also drinking heavily.

In Austria, I have observed that there is a kind of “cellar mentality”. It is really interesting for me that two “cellar stories” appeared within a very short time: Amstetten and Natascha Kampusch. People live in a nice house, everything appears clean and perfect, but deep down in the cellar you find what is really going on. I have found (and friends have told me) that people in Austria usually don't like to talk about the ‘deep stuff’. It is an interesting fact that Sigmund Freud was Austrian and he wrote about the unconscious. Now I understand where he got the material for his theories. I think the “cellar” is a metaphor for the “unconscious”.

Talk Together: There are people who think Western Culture is superior to other cultures – and they argue that women are liberated here, whereas they are oppressed in other cultures. What do you think about such an attitude?

Bisi: Patriarchy dominates the world. I watched the inauguration of the new Austrian government on the TV news and what did I see: Hardly any Women! Only Men in grey suits with grey hair, who are ruling the country. There is still a long way to go to achieve equality for women. Certainly, women have the right to vote, they have the right to go to University and to work, and there are things I can do in Europe which I could not do in Africa. But in Africa people are involved in so many struggles, they have to fight the effects of colonialism, they have to fight for food and for wealth distribution, so women's issues may not be first priority. I think “feminist” movements in Africa are often overlooked by Western feminists. Western women look down on “poor” African women who are victims of FGM, but they ignore the fact that there are many women who fight to eradicate that practice in Africa. Also they forget that in Europe there have existed similar practices like the chastity belt in the Middle Ages, which caused much damage to the female sexual organs. In Africa there have always been strong women fighting and struggling against male dominance. Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, the mother of the famous Nigerian musician Fela Kuti is one prominent example. She built up women's groups in 1940, long before the rise of feminism in Europe, and she was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize, but she is hardly known outside of Africa.