

Author: Voytek Chelkowski

**Title: Finding safety within uncertainty- the role of curiosity and neutrality in rising above defensive walls**

**Abstract:**

*This interactive workshop will draw on findings and experiences from the 17<sup>th</sup> European Meeting of International Society for Psychoanalytic Studies of Organisations, with the theme 'Between Neutrality and Engagement', as well as from subsequent research on the psychodynamics of neutrality in the humanitarian context of the International Committee of the Red Cross and, a workshop on neutrality at the OPUS Annual Conference 2019. Drawing on concepts of object relations and organizational role analysis in combination with participants' reflections and interactions, we will explore both challenges as well as opportunities for neutrality as a means to rising above the internal walls which keep us and our clients from engaging with uncertainty and division within our societal, organizational and personal contexts.*

Nov 9, 2019 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Heralded as a new dawn, with hopes for new beginnings and greater global unity, the reality we face today is one of a more polarized and uncertain world. The global refugee crisis, reflecting challenges faced in post-colonial Africa and the complexities of conflicts in the Middle East; nationalist discourses, such as Brexit; America's societal splitting; the deepening rift between east and west in the EU; and debates surrounding global warming and the role of emerging technologies reflect some of this. In seeking an illusory defence against anxieties that these divisions and uncertainties evoke, some nations, organizations, leaders and followers erect external and internal walls, splitting the world into good and bad objects,

In having a state of mind in which we idealize things we love and despise those which we fear and hate, hiding behind walls of these psychic defences helps us to rid ourselves of intolerable feelings. Klein referred to this as the paranoid-schizoid position. However, the paranoid-schizoid state of mind is unlikely to contribute to progress and the defences it offers may be deceiving. Klein also believed that the mind experiences progress when it moves from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position- a state of mind in which, rising above the walls of internal defences, one is able to notice 'grey' in between 'black' and 'white'. For Klein, integrating black and white begins with good early care, allowing the child to experience *curiosity* in exploring the world. Building on Klein's work, Bion proposed that curiosity is a central part of the containing process (Cartwright, 2009, p.18), and connected such ability to Keat's concept of *negative capability* that is to "being safe in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats, 1899, p.277).

Inextricably, alongside negative capability exists neutrality- a frequently underappreciated and controversial concept, not least because of the array of meanings attached to it. Viewed through the lens of negative capability, neutrality embodies the capacity to suspend judgment, contain ambivalence, and tolerate guilt, shame, fear and other difficult emotions, and has been a potent means to pursue objectives amidst uncertainty in a variety of contexts. Psychoanalytic neutrality is one such example. By suspending judgment and containing irritable emotions the analyst is free to traverse the walls of the patients' defences and serve in the healing of their emotional pain. Similarly, humanitarian neutrality makes possible the delivery of aid to victims of military conflicts and has played a crucial role in attaining the humanitarian goal of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The feedback from interviews whilst carrying out research on the psychodynamics of neutrality at the ICRC demonstrated that the key personal quality of humanitarians who identify with neutrality in their professional roles was curiosity. And, that central to the 'curious' humanitarians' experience of 'oneness' with neutrality is the meaning they attach to, in relation to the organizational goal with which they had identified. In contradiction, interviewees described an inability or unwillingness to apply their capacity to practice neutrality in other contexts; contexts in which the meaning they had attached did not connect to the goal and/or for which the goal was not obviously apparent. For some, this came at the cost of interpersonal conflict and, in a few cases, of their professional careers. Although contextually different, relatively similar findings emerged in cases of analysts and consultants who participated in the symposium as well as in the further research carried out on neutrality.

If neutrality has a proven effectiveness in the humanitarian and analytic context, might it not be a valuable stance in the goal of 'depressing' our own and our clients' defensive walls in the uncertain world we live in today? Drawing on research findings on humanitarian and analytic neutrality in combination with concepts of object relations and organizational role analysis in the tradition of Grubb's Institute as well as participants' reflection and interaction, we will explore the 'inner experience' of 'neutrality' in relation to the goal of rising above the walls of defence which affect our societies, organizations, clients and selves.

## Hosts

### **Voytek Chelkowski**

An entrepreneur, consultant and coach, Voytek is presently based in Geneva, where he co-founded The Mind Alliance- a network of consultants committed to helping organizations and individuals navigate change and optimize their potential through an interdisciplinary, psychodynamic, systemic and holistic approach. Voytek applies psychodynamics to the areas of international relations, peacebuilding, international development and humanitarian aid, and coaches and mentors aspiring entrepreneurs.

Voytek was a chair of the Organizing Committee of the 17<sup>th</sup> European Meeting of the International Society for Psychoanalytic Studies of Organizations with the theme 'Between Neutrality and Engagement' which brought together practitioners from the UN, the ICRC and the psychoanalytic community. Drawing upon these experiences, he also carried out research on 'Importance of Curiosity: beneath the surface of the ICRC humanitarian neutrality and impartiality'.

Originally from Poland, before moving to Geneva, Voytek had lived 25 years between New York, San Francisco and Singapore, where much of his time was spent experiencing neutrality as a mediator and negotiator in the space of international shipping and trade. His work was concentrated on building consensus across economic and cultural divides among clients from India, Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, Australia, and the USA. He holds MS in Ocean Navigation, MS in Management, and completed the Executive Master's program in Organizational Psychology at INSEAD.

### **Arianna Rondos**

Arianna Rondos is a practicing psychotherapist, trainer, and consultant, specializing in refugee trauma and the burnout and vicarious trauma related to frontline work in the humanitarian field. With a BA in International Development and an MA in Human Rights Law as well as professional experience in both these sectors, she has worked for more than 15 years in the Middle East, Balkans and Europe for international organizations and local NGO's. During this time, she also trained as a psychotherapist in the UK, gaining an MSc in Gestalt Psychotherapy, whilst focusing her clinical work on refugees, Gender Based Violence, trauma and psychosocial support. Since the beginning of the migrant crisis in 2015, she has been working with a local Austrian NGO providing trauma therapy to asylum seekers and refugees. Since 2018 she is an associate with FD consultants, providing Psychosocial Support & Trauma Specialist Services to humanitarian and human rights organisations, internationally, as well as a consultant/trainer for organisations supporting the mental health/wellbeing of their staff through related duty of care policies.

Throughout this experience, whether traversing the intercultural dynamics of international humanitarian/human rights work or in the clinical setting, Arianna's curiosity in the nuances of the neutral stance has been both experiential as well as intellectual.

Arianna was a member of the Organizing Committee of the 17<sup>th</sup> European Meeting of the International Society for Psychoanalytic Studies of Organizations with the theme 'Between Neutrality and Engagement'. She is also a member of The Mind Alliance and has worked closely with Voytek on the concepts related to this workshop.